

2025

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KERSNOUSKAYA**

**CENSORSHIP AND TOLERANCE IN
CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC PRACTICE: A
COMPARATIVE APPROACH**

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Dissertation submitted to IADE — Faculty of Design,
Technology and Communication of Universidade Europeia,
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master in Design and Visual Culture, under the scientific
supervision of Assistant Professor Maria Joana Vilela.

This work is dedicated to all those who were forced to leave their homes and their homeland under the weight of dictatorship and violence, to those who have endured or are enduring its consequences, and to those who, in search of truth, have been misled by false idols. May these pages offer, in some measure, recognition and reflection.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my younger brother, at the beginning of his path into adulthood, with the hope that he may see the world clearly and walk it with strength. And to my beloved Igor, whose presence and unwavering support have carried me through the darkest and most difficult moments of my life.

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Palavras-chave censura; tolerância; cultura visual; autocensura; artes; resistência simbólica; plataformas digitais; liberdade de expressão.

Resumo Este trabalho analisa a relação entre censura, tolerância e criação artística no contexto da cultura visual contemporânea, comparando dinâmicas em regimes autoritários e em sociedades democráticas. Procura compreender de que forma as práticas de censura — explícitas ou subtis — moldam a produção artística não apenas como força repressiva, mas também como mecanismo produtivo que define normas de visibilidade, aceitabilidade e reconhecimento cultural.

Através de uma abordagem multidisciplinar, a dissertação articula os enquadramentos teóricos de autores como Michel Foucault, Judith Butler e Pierre Bourdieu, relacionando-os com casos concretos da Bielorrússia, do espaço pós-soviético e de contextos europeus, nomeadamente Portugal. A análise integra entrevistas a artistas, questionários a profissionais de diferentes áreas e estudos de casos visuais, permitindo mapear padrões de autocensura e de resistência simbólica.

Os resultados demonstram que a censura contemporânea não se restringe ao poder estatal: emerge igualmente de pressões sociais, lógicas institucionais, políticas de financiamento e algoritmos das plataformas digitais. O fenómeno da autocensura revela-se transversal, manifestando-se tanto em regimes autoritários como em democracias liberais, embora através de mecanismos distintos. Em ambos os contextos, os artistas enfrentam dilemas entre responsabilidade social, liberdade criativa e sobrevivência profissional.

A dissertação conclui que a censura, entendida como uma rede difusa de limitações, contribui paradoxalmente para a inovação estética, incentivando formas alternativas de expressão e práticas de resistência. Contudo, levanta também questões éticas e políticas sobre os limites da liberdade de expressão e sobre o papel das artes na preservação da memória coletiva, na criação de espaços de pertença e na construção de comunidades alternativas.

Keywords

censorship; tolerance; visual culture; self-censorship; arts; symbolic resistance; digital platforms; freedom of expression

Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between censorship, tolerance, and artistic creation within the context of contemporary visual culture, comparing dynamics in authoritarian regimes and democratic societies. It seeks to understand how practices of censorship — explicit or subtle — shape artistic production not only as a repressive force but also as a productive mechanism that defines norms of visibility, acceptability, and cultural recognition.

Through a multidisciplinary approach, the dissertation articulates theoretical frameworks from authors such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Pierre Bourdieu, and relates them to concrete cases from Belarus, the post-Soviet sphere, and European contexts, namely Portugal. The analysis integrates interviews with artists, questionnaires addressed to professionals from different fields, and visual case studies, mapping patterns of self-censorship and symbolic resistance.

The findings demonstrate that contemporary censorship is not restricted to state power: it also emerges from social pressures, institutional logics, funding policies, and the algorithms of digital platforms. Self-censorship proves to be a transversal phenomenon, manifesting in both authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies, albeit through distinct mechanisms. In both contexts, artists face dilemmas between social responsibility, creative freedom, and professional survival.

The dissertation concludes that censorship, understood as a diffuse network of limitations, paradoxically contributes to aesthetic innovation, encouraging alternative forms of

expression and practices of resistance. At the same time, it raises ethical and political questions regarding the limits of freedom of expression and the role of the arts in preserving collective memory, creating spaces of belonging, and constructing alternative communities.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Justification and Literature Review

The object of this study is the mutually entwined connection between censorship and tolerance in visual culture and how these two elements intersect and influence one another in various sociopolitical contexts. The study draws on some key questions: How do tolerance and censorship shape the work of art? To what extent do they instigate or restrict creativity? What are the long-term implications of this dynamic for visual culture, particularly in Belarus and Portugal? By an exploration of these questions, this research aims to uncover the intricate dynamic between suppression and openness in cultural and artistic creativity.

In the broader twenty-first-century context, these forces assume increased pertinence. The embattlement of populist regimes across Europe, the increased prominence of "memory wars," and the politicization of cultural institutions demonstrate that freedom of expression is not a static achievement but rather a continually evolving process of renegotiation. Global communications technologies magnify and limit this process at the same time: they enable new solidarities across frontiers, yet make new room for unparalleled surveillance, manipulation, and disinformation. Therefore, censorship and tolerance must be conceived in relation to the broader geopolitical transformations that shape how societies envision their cultural identity and the limits of their pluralism.

The object of this study is the interdependent relationship between censorship and tolerance in visual culture and how these two elements converge and inform one another in various sociopolitical environments. Censorship and tolerance are not peripheral concepts, on any measure. They are two of the most influential forces that mold art practice, institutions, and popular debate in the twenty-first century. Contemporary societies are defined by heightened tensions between the promise of openness and the persistence of restriction: there is, in one sense, a worldwide dissemination of discourses of freedom of expression, inclusion, and cultural diversity; and, conversely, new regimes of control are being established through state power, institutional policies, market dependencies, and algorithmic infrastructures. In this way, censorship is no longer solely the prerogative of dictatorial regimes but occurs in democratic societies in the guise of tolerance, political correctness, or control of the internet. This study then situates censorship as a roots category of analysis for the terms of modern cultural production, arguing that it cannot be reduced to prohibition per se but instead must be theorized as a continuum of acts from overt repression through subtle modulation of expression.

The worth of this study is not only its theoretical imperative but also its civic and practical applicability. In an era where pictures and information travel with unprecedented speed, cultural brokers — from artists and curators to institutions and platforms — are being forced to navigate increasingly large boundaries of acceptability. The visual domain is particularly sensitive terrain here because pictures are at once symbolic, emotional, and political. From the bans on politically charged murals in authoritarian regimes to the censorship of "unsafe" content from social media, visual culture illuminates how censorship and tolerance dictate not just what is visible but also what is thinkable. As Guriev and Treisman (2022) argue in their inquiry into "spin dictators," contemporary authoritarianism often employs less coercion

than manipulating information and visibility, substantiating the need to reconsider censorship in its present forms. Similarly, Zuboff (2019) emphasizes how surveillance capitalism has made visibility something to be governed, commodified, and restrained, thereby situating cultural expression within economic designs of domination.

This dissertation therefore accepts as its premise the belief that censorship and tolerance are not opposing categories but rather complementary forces that structure the landscape of art and expression. It is based on the understanding that censorship is at once repressive and productive: repressive, meaning that it limits speech and representational possibilities; productive, meaning that it pressures new forms of creativity, coded signification, and aesthetic innovation. The study explores this paradox by a comparative analysis of two intensely opposing contexts: Belarus, with its explicit, political, and at times violent censorship, and Portugal, with its more subtle and insidious forms of censorship facilitated by institutional sensibilities, social convention, and politics of tolerance. By putting these cases side by side, the study not only brings into view the richness of censorship practices but also reflects on how their shared logic functions as technologies of cultural regulation.

Finally, the relevance of this question extends to broader academic debate regarding freedom of expression, democracy, and cultural production. The sudden transformation of global communication systems, the rise of populist politics, and the intensification of cultural wars of identity and representation all make censorship and tolerance key categories of inquiry. This chapter thus establishes the theoretical and empirical at stake in the subject, positioning visual culture as an insider's terrain for investigation of how societies negotiate the boundaries of openness and restriction.

This topic is not only of academic relevance but also of relevance to me. As a designer, I resided and worked in Belarus and saw firsthand how censorship affected professional practice and everyday life. Even depoliticized visual codes such as the use of white and red were deemed politically insurgent and hence prohibited. Public artworks and murals were bulldozed for their color scheme, while Nobel prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich's books or contemporary authors such as Alhierd Baharevich and Uladzimir Arlou were taken out of public circulation for politicized marking within history and identity. Even where we avoided outrightly political subject matter, we were always under duress: for instance, a simple design in red and white geometric shapes was taken up and had to be entirely reworked, instilling such a climate of fear that we couldn't be inventive.

When I arrived in Portugal, I thought I was leaving censorship behind as an unhappy memory. Instead, what I discovered was not deregulation, but another type. Freedom of expression in such a setting is unambiguously defended, and transgressive works are not just accepted but celebrated. Artists such as Joana Vasconcelos have produced difficult art — such as *The Bride* (Appendix 5.1, Figure A2), a chandelier comprised fully of tampons, or the enormous textile sculpture *Valkyrie* — that explicitly addresses gender, identity, and consumerism, and is placed in prominent museums. Writers such as José Saramago broke political and religious boundaries with books such as *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, controversial though they undoubtedly were, and remain widely popular, recognized as part of the national literary heritage. At the cinema, directors such as Pedro Costa and João Pedro Rodrigues tackle topics of immigration, poverty, spirituality, and queerness — films such as

Costa's *Vitalina Varela* or Rodrigues's *The Ornithologist* are greeted with international success instead of censorship. This contrast between these two environments highlights the importance of contrasting the cultural contexts in which censorship is overt and managerial with those in which openness generates new spheres of negotiation and subtle restriction.

The study of censorship has traditionally been framed by conventional theoretical paradigms that emphasized the repressive form of power and its ability to curtail expression. Conventional accounts, particularly Enlightenment-influenced ones, have explained censorship as an extrinsic institution exercised over independent individuals that stifled intellectual and creative potential. From this perspective, censorship was conceived chiefly as prohibition: a manifest and generally state-oriented system that blocked the circulation of ideas deemed dangerous to power, morality, or religion. These understandings are still operative in contemporary debates but have been undermined and complicated by more advanced theories of power.

One of the most perceptive analyses is that of Michel Foucault (1978), whose theories of power and discourse totally overhauled our understanding of censorship. Rather than envisioning power as inherently repressive, Foucault described power as productive, dispersed, and embedded in institutions and social practices. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), censorship emerges not merely through the penal apparatus and surveillance but also through disciplinary apparatuses that produce docile bodies. Similarly, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault argued that discourses around sexuality were not only repressed but also actively produced and constructed by mechanisms of regulation. His work helps to make censorship more visible as a constitutive power, one that produces regimes of knowledge and conditions of visibility as well as constrains them.

Other critical theorists from the Frankfurt School also provided definitive assessments of the dynamics between censorship, culture, and power. Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) condemned the culture industry as a system of mass deception in which cultural goods are standardized, commodified, and stripped of possibilities for criticism. Although not necessarily in censorship terms, their objections to the manipulation of culture by capitalist and authoritarian forces illustrate how control occurs not only through banning but also through the conditioning of taste and desire. Herbert Marcuse (1969) then elaborated the theory of "repressive tolerance," explaining how societies can permit oppositional voices and silence their potential for revolution through commodification and containment. Tolerance thereby is a form of censorship insofar as it absorbs and deflects instead of empowering criticism to revolutionize social relations.

Public sphere theory elaborated by Habermas (1989) added yet another dimension to traditional debates. He described the creation of a bourgeois public sphere in which free speech and rational-critical discussion were idealized but actually mediated by exclusion and hierarchy. The theme of "structural transformation" highlighted how visibility and speech were unevenly accessed and abruptly terminated by state and market power. For Habermas, censorship was not merely legal prohibition but also structural inequality of participation, and he poses questions that remain central to our own era's debates about voice, representation, and legitimacy.

Drawing on these views, other theorists like Chomsky and Herman (1988) redescribed censorship in the context of media influence and propaganda. Their propaganda model proposed that structural constraints like ownership, advertising, sourcing, and ideological filters systematically narrow the range of viewpoints available to the public. While applied specifically to journalism, their observations highlight how censorship can work unnoticed by way of systemic pressures, as opposed to explicit prohibitions.

Collectively, the classical theories of censorship and power map a conceptual evolution: from prohibition as the explicit act of silence, to increasingly implicit and systematic models which introduce repression, production, commodification, and inequality. They constitute theory bases for analyzing how censorship works in both authoritarian and democratic environments.

Although these classical theories are priceless starting points, they also reveal their weaknesses in explaining dynamics now. The advent of digital infrastructures, algorithmic governmentality, and new modes of self-censorship demands censorship not only to be thought of as prohibition or commodification but also as a continuum of practices inscribed in the fabric of everyday life. The following section therefore takes up recent debates in censorship on the theme of tolerance, charting the way in which recent scholarship recovers the limits of expression and highlights the paradoxical productivity of constraint.

Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020) in scholarly literature argue that censorship in post-socialist cultures emerges out of the intersection of state authority and market power, disturbing the binary vision of censorship as state- or market-led. Their concept of *adekvatnost'* identifies self-censorship as a strategic act of balance between imagination and accommodation within repressive contexts. Mavrodieva (2021) highlights visual culture as a powerful instrument in resistance, particularly during the 2020 Belarusian protests. Symbolic acts, such as white-clad women standing before Stalinist architecture, were poignant statements of opposition to authoritarian governments. The red-and-white flag (Appendix 5.1, Figure A1), in its historic significance, once again points to how visual culture functions as a means of expression for national identity and the rejection of oppressive discourses.

Online environments have emerged as one of the most contested domains of contemporary censorship. Myers West (2018) highlights how social media sites are battlefields upon which visibility is managed discreetly through practices such as shadow banning. These forms of restriction are not always conspicuous; instead, they restrict the dissemination of content short of elimination, rendering artists vulnerable to algorithmic invisibility. For artists whose livelihood depends on Instagram or TikTok, these actions are profoundly destabilizing, affecting not only audience reach but also artistic choice.

To this, Suzor et al. (2019) describe platform governance as a normative order that disciplines cultural participation just as well as formal legal regimes. Gorwa, Binns, and Katzenbach (2020) extend this perspective by casting algorithmic moderation in terms of infrastructural power. Rather than censor expression outright, algorithms manage the very conditions of visibility, legitimacy, and circulation. Caplan and boyd (2018) also emphasize the politics of content moderation, noting that moderation disproportionately affects marginalized communities and experimental cultural forms. This implies that algorithmic rule functions simultaneously with governance, infrastructure, and cultural curation.

Current scholarship has put bite into this criticism by revealing the discriminatory biases programmed into algorithmic systems. Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) documents how search engines and content filters reproduce social discriminations against racial minorities and women. The observation is directly applicable to visual culture; wherein algorithmic invisibility not only censors oppositional voices but also solidifies the hegemonic norms of representation. The discrimination is not incidental but systemic, showing how digital infrastructures amplify current hierarchies rather than neutralize them.

Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) place these dynamics in the context of what they call the platform society. In this society, platforms are new cultural intermediaries that impact both what is circulated and how value and legitimacy are determined. Instagram, for instance, privileges bright, saturated, and immediately legible images, and TikTok rewards speed and affective intensity. The logic of algorithmic visibility pushes creators into generating platform-compliant aesthetic grammar at the expense of complexity, ambiguity, or nuance. Censorship, in the era of digital media, therefore, does not silence through coercion but governs through preference, circulation, and amplification.

The most recent contribution to this debate is Riccio, Almeida, and Moreira (2024), who argue that algorithmic moderation is a form of cultural regulation itself. Their empirical study illustrates how platform policies on nudity, political symbols, or sensitive content become actualized in the shape of anticipatory self-censorship, wherein artists actively modify their work to avert demonetization or removal. This anticipatory logic is echoed in the interviews conducted for this dissertation: as one Portuguese artist noted, "Freedom exists, but there is always a fear of being misunderstood, so sometimes one prefers not to speak," and a Belarusian respondent emphasized, "Even the wrong color might be interpreted as a provocation and endanger you."

Concrete examples illustrate how this dynamic works. Instagram's repeated deletion of images containing nudity — even when placed in a classical or educational context — has led institutions such as the Vienna Tourist Board to host campaigns expressly denouncing algorithmic prudishness. On TikTok, politically charged performances are downranked or deleted under vague "community guidelines," with creators resorting to irony, humor, or coded symbolism as a method of censorship evasion. These examples recall earlier tactics of resistance under authoritarian regimes (see Chapters 2.4 and 3.2), but their displacement onto digital infrastructures highlights how censorship in the twenty-first century is becoming increasingly infrastructural and preemptive.

Beyond anecdotal instances of content removal, scholars highlight how digital infrastructures are ever more shaping the rhythms and forms of cultural life. Gillespie (2018) mentions that content moderation is not only about what stays online but also about calibrating circulation through ranking and recommendation algorithms. The very visibility of a work could then be dependent on technical determinations outside the control of the artist. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) also observes that online protest movements, despite being originally supported by social media, are the most vulnerable to such stealth mechanisms: algorithmic down-ranking or the sudden shift of platform policy can shut down dissent without overt repression. This new control mechanism is an indication that censorship is no longer fundamentally a legal or political concern but has been embedded into the technical design of communication systems

themselves. In the visual culture, such infrastructures decide not only what is silenced, but also how fast and how far cultural expressions spread, thereby deciding both the politics and the aesthetics of art production.

Together, these perspectives illustrate that digital censorship is at the intersection of governance, infrastructure, and aesthetics. It is not only a deprivation of freedom but a remapping of the visible, desirable, and legitimate on a platform economy. The implications for visual culture are profound: artists conform their productions to algorithmic taste, thereby compounding homogenization, while also inventing novel strategies — memes, participatory culture, coded imagery — to resist and work around these constraints.

While censorship is generally conceived of as an outside force, most researchers emphasize that it also operates internally through psychological and social processes. Self-censorship is not only a survival strategy in authoritarian regimes but also a hidden form of social control within liberal democracies. Recognizing such processes is key to locating artistic practice in the broader sphere of control and tolerance.

Bar-Tal (2017) conceives of self-censorship as a double-edged process. It suppresses transparency, creativity, and openness on the one hand, and promotes collective identity and solidarity among groups on the other, especially in societies under the threat of authoritarianism. The paradox accounts for the fact that self-censorship should not be described simply as repressive: it is likely to sustain poor social orders by preventing people from crossing perceived political or cultural frontiers. Fear — of being punished, ostracized, or damaged in reputation — is thus internalized, structuring the terms of creative production itself.

Social processes double back upon this psychological process. Farkas and Schou (2020) argue that contemporary cultural producers frequently reference self-censorship as a preemptive reaction to amorphous pressures: the expectations of funders, the sensitivities of audiences, and the dangers of misreading. Within their European media culture, artists described feeling what one of them called an "invisible wall," an atmosphere in which expression is officially unfettered but de facto constrained. This reminds one of the interviews conducted within this dissertation, when one of the Belarusian artists said, "Even choosing the wrong color might be seen as a provocation and land you in trouble." Similarly, one of the Portuguese respondents speculated, "Freedom is there, yet always there's fear of misunderstanding." These quotations point out that censorship nowadays operates less by way of active prohibition and more by self-regulation.

The concept of "toleration and its discontents," as discussed by Galeotti (2018), also captures this tension. While toleration is embraced as a democratic promise, in a perverse inversion, it also sets new boundaries of expression through the staging of certain ideas as "barely tolerable." Artists would therefore avoid sensitive issues not out of fear of illegality but out of fear of crossing unmarked boundaries of cultural acceptability. This is an expression of Judith Butler (1997) insight into the performativity of norms: self-censorship perpetuates social norms because individuals perform in anticipation of them.

Psychologically, self-censorship is constant negotiation between creativity and danger. For Belarusian artists, this danger is existential: jail, exile, or professional devastation. For Portuguese artists, this danger is reputational and financial: loss of institutional patronage, funding, or exposure on the platform. But the outcome is often the same — restraint, hesitation,

and generation of ambiguity. Interviews confirm that metaphor, irony, and coded symbolism are the favourite tactics not because they can circumvent repression but because they allow artists to maintain dignity and solidarity and protect themselves.

These observations suggest that self-censorship functions both as an instrument of constraint and as a vehicle of social affiliation. It bridges psychological space of fear with public space of cultural togetherness. This dependence is the reason censorship cannot be reduced to the polarity of "freedom" and "repression." Instead, it must be seen as a process of fluid action of negotiation, in which the artist is both receiver of exterior power and active participant of reproducing — or resistantly going around — normative horizons.

These operations emphasize that censorship today cannot be understood as official repression by itself but has to be understood as an internalized, socially distributed phenomenon. This preludes to the following discussion of contemporary disputes about censorship and tolerance, where classical theoretical paradigms converge with emerging empirical needs of globalization, internet governance, and diversity.

Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that tolerance and censorship are not antonyms but complementary forces that shape arts and social narratives. Recent scholarship highlights structure, symbol, psyche, and the digital as elements of control. Comparative approaches lag behind. This dissertation attempts to level this discrepancy by conceptualizing censorship as a continuum and not a polarity and by examining how artists negotiate these forces within both authoritarian and democratic contexts.

Standing on these foundations, newer scholarship has broadened the understanding of censorship to encompass institutional, market, and algorithmic ones that coexist in contemporary societies. Suzor et al. (2019) have most recently researched how governance on digital platforms creates normative norms that serve as *de facto* regulatory mechanisms that prescribe the limits of permissible expression. Gorwa, Binns, and Katzenbach (2020) also emphasize that algorithmic content moderation is a form of infrastructural power, and there are implications of visibility, legitimacy, and cultural diversity.

There are studies that have explored how art practice is rearranged under these conditions. Caplan and boyd (2018) discuss the politics of "content governance" and note how moderation policies tend to harm marginal groups and experimental forms of cultural production. Current European artist surveys (Farkas & Schou, 2020; Santini, 2022) also highlight in what ways self-censorship comes more from diffuse pressures: funders' demands, risk aversion to reputation damage, and dependence on algorithmic visibility. These findings show that censorship has moved past being something exclusive to state repression but is integrated into larger social, institutional, and technological systems.

While Belarus and Portugal are the primary case studies for this dissertation, censorship of the arts must also be situated within broader international contexts. The cases below demonstrate how censorship functions not only under authoritarian regimes but also within democratic nations, often under the cover of institutional sensitivity or "soft censorship." These cases point to the global and multilayered character of censorship and bring localized phenomena into connection with the broader theoretical questions.

One of the largest controversies in Portugal was when, in 2015, the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art canceled an exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe's work because of fears about

sexually explicit content. The curator of the museum, João Ribas, resigned in protest, stating that the move discredited artistic freedom and was excessive institutional caution. The case illustrates how censorship in democratic settings is not by legal prohibition but by curatorially driven choices derived from public sensibilities, institutional reputation, and dependence on subsidy (Público, 2018; Harris, 2020).

More recently, there was the Porto Photography Biennial of 2023. Vento (A)mar presented panels by Paulo Pinto and Dori Nigro that forcefully challenged colonial history and Portugal's involvement in slavery. These artworks were removed by host institution Misericórdia do Porto, which led to public outcry and widespread debate about censorship, memory, and colonial responsibility. After the backlash, the panels were eventually reinstated, but the experience showed how institution players continue to exert immense power in defining the boundaries of expression (Artnet News, 2023; Bienal de Fotografia do Porto, 2023; Esquerda.net, 2023).

Such examples highlight how institutions act not merely as neutral exhibition spaces but as active political actors that negotiate legitimacy, morality, and public memory. As Gray (2020) notes, museums and biennials increasingly operate under the dual pressure of cultural representation and political accountability. Their decisions about what to exhibit or withdraw, often made in the name of public sensitivity or institutional reputation, constitute forms of what Marstine and Mintcheva (2020) term "curatorial censorship." This does not always take the form of outright prohibition but frequently manifests in risk-averse choices, the anticipation of backlash, or the careful management of "acceptable controversy." Consequently, cultural institutions become key intermediaries in shaping the space between tolerance and restriction.

These Portuguese cases also reveal the central role that cultural institutions have as intermediaries of expression and as conduits of so-called "soft censorship." As Gray (2007) discusses in *The Politics of Museums*, institutions are not tranquil domains but politically situated buildings perpetually having to juggle artistic freedom, public sensitivities, and government or fiscal demands. Marstine (2017) also brings to the forefront the idea that working under pressure is about defending and limiting contentious works, illustrating the way in which museums and biennials are at the center of regulating visibility. Here, cultural institutions become locations where censorship and tolerance meet, they can be spaces of dissent, but they also determine the conditions under which dissent can manifest. This doubleness resounds specifically for the Mapplethorpe and Porto cases, locating them within the broader politics of cultural mediation debates.

Globally, high-profile cases also illustrate the diversity of censorship methods. Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has faced extended repression for his politically critical work, from imprisonment to exile to the destruction of his studio. His memoir *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* (2021) and interviews (The Guardian, 2020) are testimony to how authoritarian regimes combine surveillance with repression to silence dissenting voices. In Cuba, Tania Bruguera was persistently detained under Decree 349, which restricts independent artistic expression. Her works have become subjects of censorship and sites of resistance, illustrating the precarious position of politically engaged art within state control (Bruguera, 2018; Marstine & Mintcheva, 2020). In Russia, Pussy Riot's performance in 2012 within Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior sent several of its members to jail. Their case shows how state-funded,

feminist, and politically active performance art can create oppressive state repression while simultaneously achieving symbolic international solidarity (Freemuse, 2023; PEN America, 2022).

All together, these cases show how censorship works on a spectrum between political regimes. In democratic societies, it takes the shape of soft censorship, where institutions serve as reputation and sensitivity mediators, such as in the cases of Serralves and Porto Biennial. In totalitarian contexts, censorship is exercised by direct repression, imprisonment, or banishment, like that suffered by Ai Weiwei, Bruguera, and Pussy Riot. The above differences notwithstanding, artists in all contexts employ identical methods of resistance: irony, anonymity, coded symbolism, and reappropriation of cultural memory. As Harris (2020) and Marstine & Mintcheva (2020) point out, censorship today must no longer be understood as prohibition but must be viewed as a global phenomenon which transcends institutional, social, and political domains.

Though earlier research has made a valuable contribution to the comprehension of authoritarian censorship (Wilson, 2011; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020), digital regulation (Gillespie, 2018; Suzor et al., 2019; Gorwa et al., 2020; Noble, 2018), and psychological and social processes of self-censorship (Bar-Tal, 2017; Farkas & Schou, 2020; Galeotti, 2018), further issues need to be resolved. There is a tendency in existing work to wall off these fields, dealing with political repression, digital moderation, and social tolerance as discrete fields of study. Lacking in general is academic inquiry into how censorship and tolerance are intersubjective forces shaping visual culture. In particular, there is limited comparative work on how these forces operate in both authoritarian and democratic regimes, such as Belarus and Portugal. This dissertation bridges this gap by imagining censorship and tolerance on a spectrum rather than as an opposition and illustrating how artists in both these vastly different locations negotiate, resist, and remake creative work under shifting boundaries of visibility and legitimacy.

Besides identifying the conceptual and empirical gaps within the literature, it is also important to highlight how this review shapes the methodology of the present dissertation. Since prior research has been prone to segmenting authoritarian repression, digital regulation, or social tolerance into their respective spheres, there was a requirement for an interdisciplinary and comparative approach. To this end, the dissertation applies a qualitative methodology that combines semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and visual content analysis of artwork. This methods triangulation directly responds to gaps highlighted in the literature by placing individual practice and creative experience in dialogue with broader theoretical contexts. As Creswell (2017) argues in *Research Design*, qualitative research is particularly suited to the task of capturing vibrant social phenomena in context, with Silverman (2020) noting qualitative research to be most powerful at revealing meaning-making processes rather than statistical generalizations. Such methodological anchorage ensures that the analysis is theoretically informed and empirically grounded in the day-to-day life of Belarusian and Portuguese artists.

At the same time, these controversies highlight dangers for cultural producers who increasingly work across borders and in hybrid media spaces. An artist producing in Lisbon today may be simultaneously vulnerable to gatekeeping by institutions, local cultural norms, and algorithmic filtering on transnational platforms. This hybridity makes censorship and

tolerance inseparably linked phenomena, in which limits of expression are hammered out in overlapping political, social, and technical spheres. It is precisely this interdependence which remains underresearched in the literature: while there are many works examining authoritarian repression, digital governance, or institutional curatorship separately, few studies have examined systematically their intersections. The present dissertation situates itself in this gap, arguing that only a comparative and interdisciplinary investigation can grasp how artistic freedom is negotiated in practice.

This literature review has traced the core conceptual, psychological, and institutional frameworks of censorship and tolerance from early power and repression theories to contemporary discourses on self-censorship, network infrastructure, and international case studies. Together, these frameworks do not just reveal the multivalenced character of censorship but also its productive paradox in constituting creativity and collective identity. At the same time, the research indicated a gap in the literature regarding how tolerance and censorship exist together in visual culture, specifically within the comparative contexts of Belarus and Portugal. The lacuna is addressed through the principal contribution of the present dissertation. The following chapters therefore shift from theory to practice: Chapter 2 sets up a conceptual and historical model for reading censorship as both repressive and productive, and Chapter 3 draws on empirical evidence from interview, survey, and case study to analyze how artists navigate these dynamics within their practice. By so doing, not only does the review provide the intellectual foundation, but also the template for the arguments that encompass the rest of the dissertation.

By doing so, this review also puts in the center the methodological stakes of the thesis. By bringing together theoretical debates, psychological insights, and concrete case studies, it reveals the necessity of a comparative strategy that is both historically aware and responsive to new challenges. The inability to undertake systematic analysis of the collaborative role of censorship and tolerance in visual culture testifies to the innovative nature of this project. Chapters 2 and 3 will therefore build directly upon the ideas set here, showing how artists, institutions, and publics themselves negotiate these forces. The literature review is therefore not only a review of scholarship but also an outline of the contribution of the dissertation to debates in cultural practice and theory today.

Taken together, these recent developments complement conventional assumptions by articulating the forms in which censorship in the contemporary period acts through both explicit prohibition and implicit conditioning of what may be seen, circulated, or valued. This provides an essential framework for comprehending how visual culture is traversed in the contemporary era and sets the stage for a discussion of the experiential implications that follow.

1.2. Research Objectives

The main goal of this dissertation is to investigate how censorship and tolerance in visual culture correlate with each other and how they affect creativity and cultural production. To this end, the research is structured according to the following objectives:

1. To investigate the ways censorship and tolerance intersect in visual culture, setting out the terms upon which art is produced, disseminated, and viewed, not only official bans but also unofficial coercing and social custom.
2. To examine the role of censorship as both a restrictive and potentially creative force, weighing whether to constrain can be a goad to creativity as much as a measure of constraint.
3. To engage in a comparative analysis of different cultural and political environments, ranging from democratic to authoritarian regimes, with a view to examining contrasts and unexpected similarities in negotiating censorship and tolerance.
4. To assess the long-term influence of these dynamics on visual culture, their influence on aesthetics, institutions, and public discourse.
5. To explore possible means of balancing artistic freedom with cultural diversity and social responsibility, considering how creative negotiation can minimize the negative impacts of censorship without permitting less meaningful forms of cultural expression.

1.3. Methodological Framework

This dissertation follows an exploratory and qualitative-comparative research design, aimed at examining how censorship and tolerance function in varying cultural and political contexts. Instead of striving for statistical representativeness, the research pursues a detailed and interpretive understanding of artistic practice, founded on chosen cases expressing wider tendencies.

The methodological design is based on triangulation, integrating three complementary sources of evidence:

1. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with artists and cultural practitioners, providing rich narratives of first-hand experience with censorship, self-censorship, and creative negotiation. These interviews elicit individual strategies of adaptation and resistance.
2. A small questionnaire circulated among cultural professionals, with the objective of mapping common practices of self-censorship and general perceptions of constraint. Despite the small sample, responses indicate patterns across disciplines and help to put the interview data into context.
3. Close analysis of case studies, i.e., artworks, posters, performances, and institutional materials. This dimension grounds the research in the very visual cultural forms under consideration, allowing for a connection between abstract theoretical concepts and concrete artistic strategies.

The choice of Portugal and Belarus as comparative environments is an expression of the research's aspiration to compare political environments: one democratic, where regulation is less overt and is negotiated through social, institutional, or algorithmic pressures, and one authoritarian, where censorship is overt and repressive. This comparison permits both an exploration of divergence and also unforeseen convergence in the ways artistic freedom is conditioned.

As with all exploratory qualitative research, there are limitations to this study. The small sample size does not provide for generalizability, though the variety of evidence — combining

interview, questionnaire, and visual analysis — provides a good grasp of the mechanisms through which censorship and tolerance impact visual culture.

2. The Study

2.1. Historical and contemporary examples of censorship in art and visual media

Censorship in the realm of visual culture is a complex and historically contingent system of control over meaning, representation, and public discourse. In this dissertation, censorship is understood not merely as legal prohibition, but as a multifaceted concept encompassing symbolic, institutional, algorithmic, and internalized forms of control over visibility and discourse. Historically associated with state-imposed prohibitions, contemporary scholarship recognizes censorship today as operating on multiple levels: institutional, social, algorithmic, and internal. It is not a straightforward external suppression of thought but often appears as a subtle and diffuse power that shapes artistic intention and audience reception.

Visual art has long been subjected to various forms of censorship, largely due to its capacity to engage with delicate political, social, and ethical issues in compelling and direct ways. From the suppression of modernist art under Nazi Germany to the policing of protest posters in contemporary demonstrations, control over visual culture has long reflected deeper ideological tensions. Whether through religious iconoclasm or political propaganda and ranging from the prohibition of modernist works under totalitarian regimes to the removal of content on social media platforms within democratic contexts, the visual medium perpetually reassesses its limits. As Susan Sontag has noted, “photographs cannot establish a moral standpoint, but they can reinforce one,” which underscores the essentially political and persuasive character of visual images (Sontag, 2003). The processes of producing, displaying, or disseminating visual content are therefore inseparable from ideological contestations over visibility, memory, and truth.

While Sontag underlines the moral force and interpretive ambiguity of visual images, theorists like Michel Foucault shift the focus from reception to production, analyzing how systems of power shape the very conditions of visibility and discourse. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault explains how surveillance systems and normalization practices create “regimes of visibility” — defining which subjects, identities, and narratives can emerge in the public sphere. Pierre Bourdieu continues this line of thought through his theory of the cultural field, arguing that art is always embedded in power structures that determine what is considered legitimate or subversive. These theoretical perspectives allow us to understand censorship not merely as an obstacle to art, but as a shaping force within artistic production itself.

In the 21st century, the conversation around censorship in visual culture must also consider new modes of mediation and visibility. Digital media, powered by opaque algorithms and vague community guidelines, have emerged as powerful forces in drawing the boundaries of expression. While some removals are framed as protective moderation, many artists and activists have found their content shadow banned, deplatformed, or deprioritized for addressing controversial or politically charged topics.

Simultaneously, self-censorship — driven by fear of public backlash, political reprisal, or institutional exclusion — has become a routine mechanism in both authoritarian states and liberal democracies. The prevalence of cancel culture, economic precarity in the cultural sector, and heightened sensitivity to social issues all contribute to an environment where artists may

preemptively edit themselves. This kind of “soft censorship” is harder to detect but arguably more insidious, as it reframes creative freedom as compliance.

Throughout recent history, authoritarian governments have employed censorship as a central mechanism in shaping public awareness, silencing opposition, and disseminating official ideologies. This reminds us, what Susan Sontag (2003) tells us about photographs, that they never remain indifferent: they “traffic in meaning” and thus become a battlefield of power, especially when the state seeks to monopolize discourses. Similarly, Michel Foucault (1977) theorized censorship not as merely prohibition but as a disciplining apparatus of discourse, controlling what can be gazed at, spoken, and fantasized. Visual culture — by its very nature more immediate and affective than written communication — has therefore been a major locus of regulation. Through censorship of artworks, artist persecution, and strategic enforcement of aesthetic norms, regimes have disciplined visual representation to consolidate authority and exclude oppositional accounts.

One of the most prominent examples of state-sponsored censorship in the arts is found in Nazi Germany, particularly through the regime’s campaign against so-called “degenerate art” (*Entartete Kunst*). Modernist, abstract, and expressionist art movements — which diverged from the idealized aesthetics of strength, beauty, and racial purity promoted by the regime — were condemned as morally corrupt, mentally deviant, and racially impure. In 1937, the infamous Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich presented over 600 confiscated works in a deliberately chaotic and disparaging manner, accompanied by derogatory labels and commentary. Renowned artists such as Kandinsky, Klee, and Otto Dix were banned from producing work, and their art was either destroyed, sold abroad, or hidden from public view. This campaign was not simply a matter of aesthetic preference; it served as a political mechanism for eliminating worldviews incompatible with fascist ideology.

A parallel form of visual censorship took place in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, where Socialist Realism was declared the only acceptable artistic style. From the 1930s onward, artists were expected to depict an idealized version of Soviet life, including images of productive workers, benevolent leaders, and harmonious collectives. Any deviation from this ideological script was labeled “formalist,” “bourgeois,” or “anti-Soviet.” Nonconforming artists were denied the right to exhibit their work, excluded from professional associations, and, in many cases, subjected to surveillance, imprisonment, or exile. The aesthetic uniformity enforced under Socialist Realism functioned not only as a propaganda tool but also to inhibit critical thinking and independent creativity.

A similarly rigorous form of cultural control emerged during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), where art was systematically repurposed to reinforce ideological purity. Traditional Chinese art, Western influences, and individual styles were all actively repressed in favor of so-called “revolutionary art,” which glorified Mao Tsé-Tung, proletarian struggle, and Communist Party values. Posters, murals, and public sculptures were transformed into tools of political indoctrination. The act of individual artistic expression itself became suspect, and the creative process was subjected to intense scrutiny and ideological oversight.

Across these examples, a consistent pattern of governmental control over visual culture becomes apparent:

- The suppression of modernism and abstraction, which were often viewed as elitist or subversive.
- The promotion of officially sanctioned aesthetic norms centered on realism, nationalism, and ideological clarity.
- The instrumentalization of visual art for propaganda purposes, leaving minimal room for ambiguity, critique, or dissent.
- The marginalization or persecution of artists through mechanisms such as censorship, public shaming, exile, or criminal prosecution.

Taken together, these tendencies reveal how authoritarian regimes shaped artistic production. Modernist and abstract currents were systematically undermined, branded as elitist or politically dangerous. In contrast, cultural authorities favored aesthetics that foregrounded realism, nationalist themes, and ideological transparency, ensuring art communicated state-approved messages with clarity. Visual culture thus became a functional extension of propaganda, its critical or interpretive openness deliberately constrained. To consolidate this framework, regimes deployed punitive measures against dissenting artists, ranging from subtle censorship and reputational attacks to forced exile and outright criminalization.

These historical instances illustrate that censorship is not solely concerned with silencing content but also with producing a controlled visual vocabulary that reinforces power hierarchies and legitimizes official ideologies. The state does not merely prohibit expression; it replaces it with a prescribed lexicon of visibility, one that sustains its authority through repetition and aesthetic conformity.

Importantly, the impact of such repressive regimes has extended well beyond their immediate political contexts. Many censored or exiled artists continued to create in diasporic settings, thereby contributing to the internationalization of modern art. For example, Marc Chagall, forced to leave the Soviet Union, carried his visual language into the Western avant-garde and helped to globalize modernist idioms. Similarly, Ilya Kabakov, later associated with Moscow Conceptualism, emigrated and achieved international recognition, shaping how Soviet underground art was perceived abroad. Others, like Oskar Rabin, persecuted after the Bulldozer Exhibition of 1974, sustained the visibility of nonconformist art in exile. At the same time, artists who remained within oppressive systems often worked covertly, giving rise to underground movements and alternative visual cultures — from the unofficial art circles of late Soviet Moscow to Belarusian dissident designers of the 2020s — that only later gained prominence in both scholarly and public domains.

These examples reveal that while state censorship restricts creative freedom, it also stimulates the emergence of alternative artistic strategies. Acts of censorship often provoke resistance, subversion, and innovation — fostering new modes of expression that negotiate, circumvent, or confront the very structures that seek to suppress them. This dual dynamic of repression and creativity remains central to understanding the role of censorship in shaping modern visual culture.

Although state censorship in the 20th century was often overt, institutional, and enforced through violence, contemporary authoritarian regimes have developed more nuanced and systematic methods of managing visual representation. These regimes maintain control over cultural production not only through explicit censorship but also by fostering climates of fear,

issuing implicit threats, and employing bureaucratic oversight that shapes artists' decisions before any overt suppression occurs.

A notable contemporary example is the Republic of Belarus under the rule of Alexander Lukashenko. Following the disputed presidential election in 2020 and the widespread civilian protests that followed, Belarus witnessed a resurgence of politically charged visual culture. Protest posters, digital graphics, graffiti, and iconographic materials proliferated across both physical and digital platforms (Appendix 5.1, Figure A3).

However, cultural producers — including graphic designers, illustrators, and artists — quickly became targets of state repression. The government suppressed not only overt political activists but also those whose visual language implied dissent or symbolic resistance. In this context, even design choices such as color palettes, iconography, or typography took on political significance. For example, the historically recognized white-red-white flag of Belarus, which became a central symbol of the protest movement, was formally banned by authorities. Individuals displaying the flag in any form — whether in social media avatars, posters, or clothing — risked administrative or criminal penalties, including fines, arrest, or imprisonment.

Seemingly neutral visual elements — raised hands, peace signs, or stylized representations of women — were also deemed subversive and subjected to censorship. Many artists were forced to anonymize their work, distribute it via underground channels, or seek exile abroad. One striking example is designer and visual artist Artur Wakarow, whose project "30 Posters about 30 Years of Dictatorship" (Appendix 5.1, Figure A4) was exhibited in Poland and received international recognition. Each poster in the series symbolically addressed one year of Lukashenko's rule, incorporating minimalist but potent imagery such as surveillance cameras, gagged mouths, and censored speech bubbles.

Alongside named figures like Wakarow, a multitude of anonymous designers contributed to a decentralized visual protest movement. Hundreds of posters were disseminated via encrypted platforms such as Telegram, with authors intentionally omitting signatures to preserve their anonymity. This strategy not only ensured safety but also promoted a form of collective authorship, reinforcing the idea that repression and resistance are shared experiences. Visual language drew inspiration from global protest imagery, referencing movements in Hong Kong, Iran (Appendix 5.1, Figure A5 and Figure A6)

Authoritarian censorship in the digital age increasingly extends to online spaces, where regimes combine traditional surveillance methods with algorithmic monitoring. In Belarus, state agencies monitored Telegram channels and used public camera footage to identify and prosecute individuals involved in protest-related visual expression.

Even beyond Belarus's borders, protest art often faces content takedown on platforms like Instagram or Facebook. This suppression is typically enforced not by the regime directly, but by platform moderation systems responding to ambiguous community standards or government takedown requests. This creates a dual-layered censorship mechanism: one visible (official repression, arrests, blacklists), and one invisible (algorithmic deletion, shadow-banning, and the psychological toll of continuous surveillance).

Consequently, artists increasingly engage in self-censorship, not because of direct bans, but due to internalized fear. They preemptively avoid potentially "problematic" themes or visual

markers. This silent form of suppression narrows the space for creative ambiguity and metaphor.

And yet, within this oppressive environment, creativity adapts and transforms. Subtlety becomes a survival strategy, and design turns into a coded language of defiance. In such contexts, visual production is not merely aesthetic but deeply political — an act of resistance, a claim to visibility, and a declaration of presence.

In contrast to overt censorship imposed by authoritarian regimes, liberal democracies are often marked by more subtle forms of control. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as soft censorship, is characterized not by state bans but by indirect pressures from social, cultural, and market forces. Artists may experience a constraint of expression not due to legal prohibitions but because of ideological expectations, institutional gatekeeping, or fear of public backlash.

One of the key drivers of soft censorship is social conformity, tied to evolving cultural norms, particularly in relation to identity politics, inclusivity, and political correctness. While these values aim to promote respect and equality, their institutionalization can lead to implicit expectations about which narratives are acceptable, and which may be deemed controversial or offensive. Judith Butler's (1997) concept of performativity helps illuminate how certain identities or expressions become "intelligible" within public discourse, while others are excluded or rendered illegitimate through social processes of normalization.

This creates an environment in which artists, curators, and publishers may self-police, avoiding potentially contentious content to secure institutional support, avoid reputational damage, or maintain funding eligibility. As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) argued in *Manufacturing Consent*, media systems in liberal democracies often internalize dominant ideologies, producing a culture of alignment without overt coercion — a notion that also applies to the visual arts ecosystem. Similarly, Jacques Rancière's (2004) idea of dissensus suggests that true political art challenges the "distribution of the sensible" by making visible what is typically excluded. Within this framework, soft censorship functions as a force that narrows the spectrum of visible and sayable content.

Publicly funded art institutions and festivals, for example, often self-regulate to align with state-supported inclusion policies. While this can empower underrepresented voices, it may also marginalize artists whose work is perceived as ambiguous, difficult, or insufficiently aligned with prevailing ideological currents. High-profile cases in which works are withdrawn due to community or social media backlash — absent any legal intervention — reveal how cultural fear and reputational risk can replicate the effects of state censorship.

Additionally, cancel culture and online shaming campaigns heighten this pressure. As Zeynep Tufekci (2017) has noted, digital platforms create "attention economies" in which outrage and moral judgment are amplified. In such contexts, artists may face swift reputational or economic penalties for works or statements perceived as misaligned with dominant cultural codes — even when those works are open to interpretation. The distinction between formal and informal censorship becomes increasingly blurred in this atmosphere of constant visibility and potential virality.

As such, soft censorship not only redefines the boundaries of what can be shown or said but also reshapes the internal compass of the artist — prompting new ethical dilemmas, modes of expression, and forms of coded dissent within liberal societies.

The rise of digital technologies has transformed the visibility, distribution, and reception of artistic works. However, these same technologies have introduced new and often opaque mechanisms of control. Algorithmic censorship — the restriction of content through automated moderation systems — has become a critical issue for contemporary visual artists.

Unlike state-imposed censorship, algorithmic filtering operates silently. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube apply automatic content moderation based on AI-trained algorithms designed to detect and remove "harmful" or "inappropriate" materials. However, these definitions are often vague, culturally biased, and lack contextual understanding. Artworks containing nudity, political symbols, or protest visuals are frequently removed, demonetized, or downranked — even when they do not violate platform policies.

For visual artists who rely on these platforms for visibility, this form of control is particularly damaging. A censored or "shadow-banned" post can mean the loss of professional exposure, audience reach, or income. Moreover, artists often have no recourse or transparent explanation for takedowns. The aesthetic qualities of art — metaphor, ambiguity, provocation — are frequently incompatible with the binary logic of platform moderation.

Digital media theorists have increasingly analyzed this phenomenon. Tarleton Gillespie (2018) argues that platforms act as *de facto* regulators, shaping public discourse through opaque moderation rules and automated systems. Sarah T. Roberts (2019) reveals how behind-the-scenes commercial content moderators, often outsourced and poorly trained, remove creative content in ways that mirror industrial censorship. Safiya Umoja Noble (2018), in her analysis of algorithmic bias, warns that search engines and filtering systems replicate social inequalities and marginalize dissenting perspectives. These insights are critical to understanding how digital infrastructures silently reinforce dominant ideologies while appearing neutral or technical.

This algorithmic bias not only affects individual artists but also shapes broader visual culture. As creators adapt to "what performs" or "what is allowed," the space for complexity and discomfort narrows. In such environments, the incentive to produce sanitized, uncontroversial content becomes structural.

As a result, algorithmic censorship not only polices the margins of acceptability but actively shapes the evolving visual lexicon of the digital age — a lexicon increasingly cleansed of ambiguity, dissent, and nuance.

This chapter has examined a broad spectrum of censorship mechanisms — from overt political repression to subtle algorithmic interventions — and their impact on visual culture. While authoritarian regimes like Belarus impose direct limitations on color, form, and content, liberal democracies present more elusive, yet equally potent, pressures through social norms, institutional caution, and economic risk.

What unites these varied forms of control is their cumulative influence on creative autonomy. Whether through fear of legal repercussions or social disapproval, artists across systems face incentives to moderate, conceal, or silence aspects of their practice. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Noam Chomsky's idea of manufactured consent, and Tarleton Gillespie's theory of algorithmic governance, this chapter has shown how censorship

functions not merely as suppression, but as an active agent in shaping public discourse and aesthetic boundaries.

This layered view complicates traditional binaries of "free" and "unfree" societies. As demonstrated by examples ranging from the censorship of modernist art under Nazism to anonymous protest posters disseminated via Telegram in Belarus, and from soft censorship in cultural institutions to algorithmic filtering on Instagram, the lines between external repression and internalized constraint have become increasingly blurred. Censorship today is as much about what is not said — or not even imagined — as it is about prohibition.

In an era of global media and heightened identity awareness, visual artists must navigate a complex matrix of visibility, risk, and responsibility. These dynamics do not merely restrict expression — they fundamentally reshape the conditions under which culture is produced, shared, and interpreted. Artists are not only subjected to censorship but actively respond to it — through ethical consideration, acts of resistance, and affirmations of being. In this sense, censorship is not just a force of negation, but also a generative framework — one that silently scripts the aesthetics, politics, and imaginaries of the visual culture we inhabit.

2.2. The impact of censorship on artistic production

The intersection of censorship and creativity has been a longstanding concern of scholars and practitioners in the study of visual culture. Censorship, classically understood as a top-down limitation on expression, is today acknowledged as a multi-layered phenomenon that reaches beyond authoritarian states and into the realm of democratic societies, mediated by institutions, algorithms, and public opinion. In this chapter, Various manifestations of censorship — ranging from explicit state regulation to more subtle forms of social pressure and self-censorship — influence both the psychological well-being of artists and the aesthetic development of their practices. In the wake of Michel Foucault's work, this critique understands censorship not merely as a juridical repression, but as a grid of discursive power that disciplines what is visible, audible, and conceivable. Foucault's definition of power as productive, rather than repressive, enables us to analyze how censorship positively manufactures the conditions of artistic making. To that degree, norms don't just prohibit certain topics or material; they also articulate hegemonic visual languages, aesthetic hierarchies, and the symbolic boundaries within which art is to operate. These processes set out, for instance, what formal styles are celebrated as being culturally appropriate and what ones are excluded as being politically incorrect, aesthetically "unrefined," or socially repugnant. By preferring some idiom of pictures — either by policy, budget priorities within institutions, or dominant curatorial models — power silently limits the scope of imagination available to artists.

In oppressive cultures, this may mean the encouragement of monumental realism, national iconography, or state-sanctioned symbols as the "proper" face of culture, along with suppression of experimental or abstract forms likely to challenge ideological coherence. This type of shaping of the art field happens in Belarus through the promotion of state-approved visual histories of stability and unity, and even minor deviations — such as the use of the historically charged white-red-white color scheme — being seen as subversive and then

punished accordingly. At the same time, in liberal democracies like Portugal, productive power will seem less as a rigid stylistic dogma and more as a benign conditioning: institutions and funding agencies may prefer works that are comfortable with progressive, inclusive, and socially "safe" subjects, while riskier, ambiguous, or ideologically contentious projects find fewer platforms or allies.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity also helps us understand this dynamic by illustrating how norms are not only in effect by explicit rules, but by their constant performance and reiteration in practice (Butler, 2006). What is deemed "legitimate" art becomes sedimented through reiterative institutional validation — in exhibitions, grant giving, curricula, and criticism — that, in turn, occasions artists' own anticipatory judgments. It creates a feedback loop where certain styles, aesthetics, and stories are made visible and authoritative simply because they operate within dominant modes of intelligibility, while others are marginalized or erased. Censorship thus, in its discursive function, not only marks out what art can be, but also channels it into specific aesthetic streams, setting the very contours of what can be imagined, produced, and finally, viewed as art.

For others, the consequences of non-compliance with censorship legislation were severe: prohibited performances, threats of violence, arrest, or enforced exile. But beyond such overt sanctions exists a more subtle landscape — one which invites the question of where censorship starts and stops. Is it only the explicit prohibition delivered by some authority, or is it also the implicit, too-often internalized limits artists place upon themselves?

In authoritarian regimes, like that of Belarus, self-censorship is usually a survival strategy in the short term. Artists internalize the risk of state reprisal, leading to anticipatory modification of their work — excluding politically sensitive colors, redesigning symbols, or using intentionally vague visual codes. This aligns with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's analysis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where structural pressures shape cultural production so thoroughly that conformity appears as spontaneous choice rather than imposed constraint (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). In this case, the difference between "choosing" and "being forced" is effaced: circumvention is second nature, and censorship operates as much through prevention as through punishment.

Things are more complicated in liberal democracies. Most artists account for mechanisms of self-censorship motivated not by fear of legal retaliation, but by the aspiration to be culturally sensitive, not to upset audiences, or to gain institutional backing. Nancy Fraser's understanding of the public sphere is applicable in this regard: communication in a collective cultural arena is regulated by the current discursive conventions, such that expressions that are offensive, inappropriate, or excessively transgressive can be excluded or delegitimized (Fraser, 1990). Here, self-censorship becomes entangled in what artists see as ethical accountability — for example, avoiding the use of imagery that reinforces negative stereotypes, even if such self-constraint handicaps artistic spontaneity.

Such tension resonates in contemporary debates on the "freedom to offend" versus "cultural respect." Advocates of unfettered expression insist that art needs to maintain its ability to disturb, provoke, and even offend if it is to serve its critical role. Others argue that ethical responsibility — particularly in multicultural, pluralistic societies — calls for a sensitivity to the possibility of harm and an openness to revising one's work accordingly. For artists, the

ground to be walked is one of mediating between personal belief, social expectation, and the urge to maintain interpretive openness without compromising one's own ethical positions.

So, the prevalence of censorship in contemporary art practice is not a matter of either/or. It is on a continuum — from explicit legal suppression to the more subtle, internalized regulation of what is sayable, showable, or even thinkable. This continuum runs across contexts as varied as Belarusian state repression and democratic cultural discourse's soft, if no less powerful, pressures, recalling that the forces constituting artistic expression are as concerned with defining the possible as with interdicting the impermissible.

In the Portuguese context, the analysis is based on interviews with local artists. While none reported direct instances of legal or governmental censorship, many pointed instead to more subtle mechanisms of cultural regulation. Several referred to prevailing 'ideological expectations' — often associated with social justice, political correctness, or the priorities of cultural institutions.

One participant indicated: 'I don't think I'd call that censorship, but I do steer away from certain subjects — not out of fear of the government, but out of fear of being misconstrued, or worse, canceled.'

Another one reflected that seeking public funding entailed conformity to progressive storylines: 'If your work doesn't address inclusion, climate, or gender, your prospects are reduced. It's not a policy — but it's a fact.'

Artists expressed concern that criticism on social media, public backlash, or damage to their reputation had a chilling impact on their thematic investigation. This is not to intimate that such influences are inherently repressive — most acknowledged the need for social responsibility — but they agreed that such influences made it more difficult to explore politically or morally controversial themes.

Notwithstanding the variations in political environments, artists from both Belarus and Portugal articulated strategies of self-regulation: meticulously selecting language, modifying visual symbols, or changing their focus. The principal distinction resides in the motivations behind these decisions — state-sanctioned violence as opposed to reputational economies.

Thematic avoidance, careful abstraction, or use of metaphor were common tools. Across both groups, a pattern emerged: censorship, whether overt or ambient, recalibrates artistic intention.

As one Belarusian artist encapsulated: 'I don't know if I still design what I want or just design what is possible.'

This chapter highlights that censorship is not always an external limit; instead, it can be internalized, affecting not just the character of artistic production but also the attitudes that artists have toward their work, their audiences, and their own identity.

Complementary to in-depth interviews with artists, a questionnaire was sent to a wider population to examine perceptions of censorship, self-censorship, and freedom of expression among individuals in varied professional and cultural environments. With a modest sample size (7 participants), the data nonetheless provide suggestive insights into how social pressure as well as political atmosphere impact creativity and expressive behavior, in visual communication and in public speech.

Six out of seven respondents reported practicing self-censorship — ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ — in avoiding certain words, subjects, or views in public or professional communication. This suggests that self-censorship is not confined to authoritarian contexts but can also emerge in liberal settings, shaped by social expectations or the perceived risk of judgment.

When questioned whether they believed self-expression had no limits, 57.1% answered “only in some cases” and 42.9% answered “yes,” demonstrating a fine nuance of understanding of free speech. Respondents seem not to deny limits in principle but conditionally tolerate them when in agreement with societal values (e.g., protecting minority rights, avoiding hate speech). This can create internalized confusion as to what is “safe” or “proper” to express.

According to these responses, censorship is not always imposed but often negotiated. Respondents seem to embrace partial constraint as a form of social responsibility, while simultaneously acknowledging its costs. The boundary between responsibility and censorship thus appears fine and contingent. Social responsibility suggests a voluntary correlation of one's work with ethical or communal standards — for instance, refraining from visual stereotypes that are prejudiced, or refusing to present graphic violence as a gesture of respect towards the audience. Censorship, on the other hand, entails restriction through pressure from outside, whether from the state, institutions, or pressure of public opinion, in ways that can be contrary to the principles of the artist himself. But the line is seldom neat: within democratic environments, institutional or audience pressure can be cast as “responsibility” when it is in fact censorship; within authoritarian environments, self-censorship for safety may afterwards be internalized and reinterpreted as professional judgment.

In Belarus, for example, an artist can leave out the white-red-white scheme on a poster to prevent arrest and subsequently rationalize the exclusion on artistic grounds — blurring the line between survival tactic and artistic choice. In Portugal as well, the same dynamics are at work in curatorial practice. In 2018, João Ribas was in the middle of considerable controversy at the Serralves Museum over censoring Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, boosting stakes around artistic freedom and institutional responsibility. In 2021, curator Nuno Crespo was severely criticized after he objected to artist Grada Kilomba's shortlisting to represent Portugal at the Venice Biennale on allegations that the action was racially motivated. These cases illustrate how decisions couched in the language of ethical obligation or institutional neutrality can also constrain political debate about the arts. These choices — whether to make politically dangerous work, whether to censor oneself to secure funding, or how to present public opinion to maintain trust with the audience — suggest in which way responsibility and censorship are more often one of negotiation with the social and political circumstances of the moment than one of principle.

Among the questions posed to the artists was: ‘Who do you think most often limits freedom of expression today?’

- 71.4% indicated society/public opinion
- 42.9% selected government
- 28.6% cited social media platforms

This triangulation points to a widespread belief that censorship today is no longer monopolized by the state. It operates through diffuse social mechanisms — digital platforms, online audiences, and institutional policies. This perception aligns with Judith Butler’s (1997) argument that norms are performatively enforced, and with Noam Chomsky’s (1988) framing of “manufactured consent” within liberal democracies.

Furthermore, asked whether any sort of pressure is most risky, 42.9% again opted for government censorship, with 28.6% identifying social media pressure, while 14.3% identified cancel culture and economic pressure. That suggests while explicit repression is still dreaded, newer modes of digital and reputational control appear regarded as equally damaging.

When asked how strongly they would rate the potential damage caused to creativity by censorship or social pressure, 85.8% of them rated it as high (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale). They also mostly concurred in as saying that society had in recent years become increasingly sensitive to opinions and words, with 57.1% of them giving a 4 out of 5 ranking on a scale of sensitivity.

This data echoes many of the sentiments expressed in artist interviews: the awareness of being watched — not by a regime, but by an audience — often inhibits experimentation and provocation.

4. Demographics and Results

- Countries represented: Portugal (6), Poland (1)
- Age groups: Primarily 18–25 and 26–35
- Fields of profession: 43% of arts/culture, rest of tech, business, and educational fields

Despite non-generalizability, this sample verifies a multi-disciplinary understanding of censorship, validating concerns of expression as not exclusive among artists but present throughout everyday life as well as in working spaces.

These observations indicate that self-censorship is not an exceptional act but an ordinary, everyday practice. Social and digital pressures increasingly rival government censorship in perceived risk, conditioning creative and professional self-expression through public judgment, algorithmic bias, and institutional funding norms. In this environment, ambiguity — rather than fear — emerges as the prevailing emotional response, as artists remain uncertain about what may constitute ‘too much’ or ‘not enough’ politically.

This section therefore sets out a larger sociocultural framework within which artistic processes (Section 2) operate. Together, they reveal that censorship today is not imposed top-down — it arises bottom-up, commonly in transparently.

Censorship is not only a structural imposition; it is a lived psychological condition that permeates the artist’s inner world, influencing how creative decisions are made, what themes are chosen, and how they are visually articulated. Whether operating through institutional enforcement or diffuse social pressures, censorship produces emotional responses that ripple across the creative process. The emotional burden manifests in various ways: fear, hesitation, self-doubt, strategic avoidance, and even withdrawal. These feelings are not exclusive to artists in authoritarian regimes, though their intensity and visibility are often more pronounced under such conditions.

Belarusian artists interviewed for this research described an ever-present anxiety that guided their creative choices. One artist noted that over time they developed the habit of

censoring themselves not out of overt fear of punishment, but because of a pervasive sense of vulnerability. “I stopped trusting my own instincts,” they explained. “Even when I thought a piece was neutral, I would second-guess: is this too risky? Could someone see a message I didn’t intend?” Such internal questioning illustrates how censorship infiltrates not just what is produced, but the very mental space in which creativity takes shape.

This anticipatory form of censorship is not confined to authoritarian states. Portuguese artists also described emotional fatigue connected to navigating social expectations and reputational risks. While they did not fear arrest or exile, several respondents emphasized the exhaustion of calibrating their language and aesthetics to avoid backlash, particularly on social media platforms. The fear of misinterpretation, misalignment with ideological trends, or being “canceled” prompted many to self-edit or abandon works entirely. This confirms that the line between external censorship and internal inhibition is increasingly blurred — a finding also supported by the questionnaire, in which 71.4% of participants reported experiencing criticism or social pressure for things they had expressed, and 85.8% agreed that such pressure restricts creativity.

In response to these pressures, many artists do not withdraw but rather adapt. Aesthetic strategies such as abstraction, metaphor, symbolism, and irony become essential tools. In contexts like Belarus, where visual dissent can have severe consequences, minimalist or coded imagery allows for communication beneath the surface. A recurring example is the discreet use of two red dots and a line — an allusion to the banned white-red-white protest flag — which artists incorporate into visual compositions or online avatars. This kind of encoded design transforms visual art into a form of stealth resistance. It is not a dilution of message, but a recalibration — a way of speaking through suggestion rather than declaration.

In democratic settings, the adaptations are different but conceptually similar. Artists shift their focus toward themes that are seen as institutionally safe or socially endorsed, while others embrace ambiguity, allowing their work to remain open-ended and less immediately confrontational. This is not necessarily experienced as a compromise. Some artists expressed that working within boundaries sharpened their inventiveness — what they called a kind of “aesthetic negotiation.” In this framework, constraint becomes an invitation to find new paths, new codes, and more layered modes of communication.

In fact, some of the interviewees contended that censorship, however deleterious, can spur creativity. Quoting Michel Foucault's perception of power as productive, some artists explained how constraints spurred on the creation of fresh modes of visual expression. “Perhaps if we had absolute freedom, we would be idle,” one Belarusian artist replied. “At times, you must have walls to press against.” This is not a position everyone accepts, but it does complicate simplistic arguments on censorship as wholly bad. It implies that limitation can stimulate deeper self-reflection, official experiment, or astute symbolism of a political kind.

But this idea of “innovation under oppression” also presents some disquieting questions. Is such creativity necessarily desirable, or is it merely a form of sublimated accommodation to repressive regimes? Herbert Marcuse's theory of sublimated repression implies that creativity formed under constraint can internalize the very forms of domination it wishes to escape, changing adaptation into a survival strategy instead of an act of liberation (Marcuse, 1966). From a different perspective, Jacques Rancière's theory of the politics of

aesthetics reminds us that those art forms which appear in the shadow of censorship are determined not just by opposition but also by the redefinition of the "distribution of the sensible" — the very limits of what may be perceived, uttered, or conceived (Rancière, 2004). In this light, the inventive strategies forged under restriction are still bounded by the limits that generated them, and their subversive charge may be conditioned — or even neutralized — by the system they confront.

Therefore, as much as the adaptive creativity of artists under restrictive conditions is certain, it is also inseparable from the apparatus of control. The contradiction is that what is perceived to be aesthetic innovation is, at the same time, an expression of the persistence of repression, leaving one wondering if such circumstances allow for real creative freedom or only engender its best available camouflage.

Ultimately, the psychological and creative impact of censorship is double-edged. On one side, it can generate silence, retreat, and fear; on the other, it can catalyze invention, resilience, and coded resistance. The artist becomes not only a creator but also a strategist — navigating visibility, interpreting boundaries, and transforming limits into material. Censorship, in this sense, is not only a force that limits what is said, but one that shapes how it is said — producing new grammars of resistance, subversion, and survival within contemporary visual culture.

The analysis shows that censorship does not simply act on art as an outside force. Instead, it impacts the conditions under which artistic work is imagined, created, and shared. Whether through authoritarian control or democratic self-regulation, censorship reshapes both the visible aspects of visual culture and the underlying motivations, risks, and responsibilities of artists.

Interviews and survey responses confirm that the experience of censorship is rarely clear-cut. It does not just forbid or permit; instead, it often blurs these categories. Artists must navigate a range of choices between self-protection and expression, as well as ideological alignment and aesthetic independence. The situation in Belarus illustrates how direct political repression influences not only the content but also the form and distribution of artwork. However, artists don't just resist; they also change their approaches. They turn to abstraction, hide meaning in visual codes, and seek support in collective anonymity.

In contrast, accounts from Portuguese creators show that even where there is legal freedom of expression, artists deal with unspoken expectations, risks to their reputations, and limits on themes. Here, censorship does not come from above; rather, it arises from within institutions, digital platforms, and public conversations. This indicates that the idea of freedom in art needs scrutiny. It is not an automatic state; instead, it must be actively defended, negotiated, and redefined.

The emotional reactions to censorship—such as fear, silence, and strategic self-restraint—coexist with artistic innovation. Some artists see limitations as wounds, while others view them as sources of creativity. This duality is important. Censorship can stifle but it can also inspire. It can simplify discussions but also deepen symbolic expression. The real question is not just whether censorship stifles creativity, but how it changes it. The responses, as shown in this chapter, differ across contexts, but one theme remains consistent: artists do not stay passive. They respond and resist, often finding new ways to think about the role of art in society.

As this dissertation moves on to more general comparisons and theory, this chapter sets the stage for understanding how censorship in all its senses directly affects artistic production. It contends against the false dualities of "free" and "unfree" expression and insists that creativity now arises under the condition of a web of overt and covert restrictions. To research censorship is to not merely analyze what art is prevented from speaking, but to consider how art evolves and seeks out new ways of speaking back.

2.3. How do more open societies deal with controversial works?

This chapter explores how institutions and artists deal with such situations. By means of interviews with Portuguese cultural workers and case studies, it looks at how freedom is discursively constructed, how boundaries are drawn, and how artists abide or resist when confronted with "freedom with conditions." Ultimately, it asks: in open societies, what makes it possible to show — and not show?

Free expression is often framed as a core value of liberal democracies. Yet this chapter challenges that assumption by examining how freedom of speech is shaped, constrained, and continually negotiated — even within so-called open societies. While authoritarian regimes, with censorship openly repressive and legislatively codified, create an image based on tolerance, diversity, and receptivity to opposition, liberal democracies have a myth that sustains their moral legitimacy. Yet, as will be discussed in this chapter, reality is quite different. Even in cases of seemingly casual legal prohibitions within communities of offending art, the space for expression is structured by less visible architectures of control: institutional gatekeeping, social sanctioning, self-regulation of public funds, and algorithmic filtering in cyberspace. As Chantal Mouffe reminds us (Mouffe, 2000), liberal democracy's consensus often arises not from true pluralism, but from the silencing of inconvenient voices — in the interest of unity and civility. Nancy Fraser's (Fraser, 1990) critique of the public sphere also illustrates how hegemonic norms assign privilege to certain cultural and political forms at the exclusion of other forms, pushing them to illegitimacy or unintelligibility. Therefore, the mythical "freedom of expression" in open societies works more as a controlled privilege than a universal right — a privilege continually negotiated through a network of stated and unstated bans.

This paradox — that the very societies most committed to freedom of speech can in practice continue to constrain it — lies behind a chain of debates today over art, controversy, and public discussion. No artist in Portugal is likely to be jailed for his or her work, but he or she will risk damage to reputation, institutional estrangement, or web tirades if his or her work diverges from conventional norms. These pressures are not always overt. Instead, they serve as soft constraints, affecting what kinds of artworks are exhibited, funded, and released.

One of the ways in which this soft censorship happens is through escalating institutionalization of values such as representation, inclusivity, and harm avoidance. Values that are essential to ethical cultural production, these values also have expectations regarding what is possible and impossible to tell — and what is perceived to be too risky or provocatively controversial. As Judith Butler (1997) has maintained in her performativity theory, norms not only function by prohibiting what one should not do but also specify what can be meaningfully

said out loud. Artists are not censored in this sense directly, but by less public dance of expectation, accommodation, and internalized censorship.

For this process, it is helpful to make a distinction between normative expectation and strategic self-censorship. The first is one of internalized prejudice against the "acceptable," wherein prevailing norms have been internally absorbed so thoroughly by the artist that they guide artistic decisions nearly reflexively. The second is one of pragmatically calculated strategy: the conscious altering, excluding, or redefining of work to eschew controversy, gain institutional patronage, or protect audience faith. Both mechanisms suppress expression but vary with awareness, intentionality, and the degree to which the artist considers them self-initiated as opposed to cause by outside forces.

There have been some recent examples from Portugal and other European democracies on how this soft regulation operates in practice. From pre-emptive museum exhibitions that relocate installations to avoid controversy, to theater productions removed from the boards after online outcry, contest between artistic autonomy and popular acceptability is openly in evidence. And add to this the agency of algorithmic gatekeepers — i.e., Instagram's content moderation algorithms — and we can observe that even so-called "open" digital spaces have become intensely curatorial sites for cultural production.

Censorship in open societies is less about formal proscription than about showing up in the spaces between audiences, institutions, and media platforms. Freedom of art is caught in a nuanced place of expectations, ethics, and reputational economies. The next section provides some chosen case studies on how controversial works of art are managed — not by the state, but through decentralized forms of social negotiation.

Loosely, in general usage, these events are collectively referred to as "cancel culture" — an extremely widely used but extremely loosely defined term throughout journalistic and social media venues describing withdrawal of endorsement of public figures, institutions, or works in response to perceived moral or political offenses. In scholarly usage, the term is more narrowly defined. Nagle (2020) sees it as a "collective practice of public criticism and social sanction" inherent in networked digital cultures, while Nagle (2018) places it within wider regimes of online shaming and policing ideological boundaries. Analytically, this trend must be separated from official state censorship: although both constrain expression, so-called cancel culture engages decentralized social pressure, reputational risk, and institutional self-defense instead of legal prohibition.

The Teatro Dona Maria II case therefore shows how cultural institutions can resist public contest by withdrawing pre-emptively — not juridically, but as part of a wider ecology of informal, socially enforced constraint. Therefore, it is a pure case of soft censorship: restraint due to cultural and reputation requirements, coming from decision-making within institutions, and backed by the instrument of public opinion rather than the power of legislation.

Such occurrences mark that cultural institutions in liberal democracies will be engaging in anticipatory censorship: decisions are being taken not according to what has been legally challenged, but according to what might offend, injure, or incite a backlash. The logic is strategic and not coercive: out of fear for controversy, risk, or political repercussions.

There is a third kind of soft restriction to be found in online environments. In Portugal, several visual artists — particularly women — have publicly complained that their images of

the nude body were removed or algorithmically de-prioritized on platforms such as Instagram. International cases reinforce this broader pattern: numerous artworks have been censored by Instagram despite its stated allowance for artistic nudity (Hyperallergic, 2021), and commentators have argued that such practices are reshaping artistic expression itself (The Art Newspaper, 2022). This is not due to intentional editorial choice by human moderators, but to what Tarleton Gillespie (2018) calls algorithmic governance: programmatic filtering and automated moderation to impose platform regulations and determine what gets seen.

Here, the "regulations" governing permitted expression are encoded in the algorithms themselves — usually reflecting obscure community guidelines, cultural bias, and risk-averse ideals of goodness. Thus, legally and artistically acceptable content is invisible to the viewer, reserved for approval, or out of sight in recommendation flows. The result is a species of platform-level censorship in which power is exercised less through deliberate editorial decision than through the technical infrastructures that govern what is visible, ranked, or silently repressed. Platform-based curation is therefore a new kind of censorship: not by the explicit issuing of bans, but by quietly playing on the levers of visibility which stand between us.

These take-downs are not imposed through human moderations but through machine-learning systems that have been trained on high-level rules regarding "explicit content." While artists will sometimes appeal, the moderation process is necessarily secretive and is not culturally nuanced, operating to make legitimate works of art all but imperceptible. For instance, in 2021 Vienna's tourist authority set up an OnlyFans account upon which they published publicly available naked art — like Egon Schiele's expressionist nudes, Rubens works, and Venus of Willendorf sculptures — that were repeatedly censored or deemed "pornographic" by Facebook and Instagram despite being artistic masterpieces and works of cultural importance. The works were automatically censored by the platforms in disregard of their own artistic-friendly policies, forcing museums to look elsewhere.

Likewise, Manchester Art Gallery in England took down Waterhouse's painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* from display in 2018 amid public debate over whether it depicted inappropriate eroticism. While it was later returned to the walls, the takedown illustrates how institutional self-censorship based on public opinion — rather than policy by curators — can look like censorship.

The cases establish how reputational risk and algorithmic rule function as soft censorship in liberal zones. In action through public pressure and automated blocking, institutions and platforms quietly stage what is seen. These events establish how technical systems and cultural mores function as contemporary boundaries on expression—without explicit legal constraint, but with powerful impacts on what is visible and disseminated in the visual culture of democratic nations. In question here is not merely visibility, but also professional sustainability — specifically among up-and-coming artists who rely on social media for visibility and opportunity.

A better example comes from Pedro G. Romero, a Spanish artist renowned for his subversive employment of Catholic iconography. His ARCO Madrid 2023 installation (Appendix 5.1, Figure A7) deconstructed a Marian icon through geometric shapes triggered outrage among conservative critics. Even though the painting was not removed, the scandal highlights the persistent tension between religious sensitivity and artistic autonomy in European

democracies. Romero's situation is significant because it suggests that while institutions will defend provocative art, the artist himself/herself bears the emotional and symbolic cost of provocation.

Overall, these case studies outline a strange form of regulation in open societies: one which occurs not through punishment but cultural calibration. Both institutions and artists must anticipate likely offense, manage political sensitivities, and mitigate reputational risk. The boundaries of what can be said or represented are not set by law code but by ephemeral social opinion — an opinion that is necessarily volatile, contested, and frequently policed by social media argument.

Compared to authoritarian regimes, where censorship is predictable and imposed from above, in democratic countries it is pervasive — diffuse, responsive, and affective. Artists are not told what they cannot do but learn what will probably be approved — through silence, indignation, or marginalization from institutional existence. In this context, ambiguity, irony, and subtlety become not just aesthetic strategies but survival techniques.

This raises fundamental questions to the next section: How do artists themselves perceive these dynamics? Do they see soft censorship as limiting, or as moral obligation? Do they police themselves — and why?

Whereas institutions and sites carry out the overt work of cultural regulation, artists are most immediately affected by its professional and psychological repercussions. Through a series of interviews with Portuguese designers and visual artists, the same recurring notion arises that freedom of expression, while guaranteed by law, was practiced with caution. As one of the respondents expressed it, "The freedom is real — but it has invisible walls." The irony is one that is consonant with so-called conditioned freedom: a situation in which there is the formal right to speak or produce but is defined by unarticulated rules, institutionalized norms, and the unstated limits of public acceptability. Based on Jacques Rancière's theory of the 'distribution of the sensible,' these boundaries determine what may be heard as genuine expression (Rancière, 2004). Chantal Mouffe's theories of agonistic democracy further remind us that even within plural societies certain positions are systematically excluded in the name of consensus (Mouffe, 2000). Artistic freedom in this case can presumably be conceived as negotiated freedom — an ongoing process of calibration between authorial intent, institutional structure, and the cultural reception environment.

They were questioned as to whether they felt they were able to convey any idea or aesthetic in what they did. Most of the respondents hesitated with their response. Nobody had complained of state or art institution level open censorship. But all of them did acknowledge the presence of an implied set of expectations — one artist described it as a "code of acceptability" rooted in social discourse and institutionally derived values. This code is not written or articulated but felt. "There are things I don't do," one artist admitted, "not because I'm against them, but because I'm not certain how they will be received."

A chronic problem was the desire to enable progressive causes to be feasible or fundable. They did not disagree with such causes — diversity, sustainability, social justice — but felt that institutional support is biased towards works that explicitly portray such agendas. In the words of one designer: "It's not that I'm being told what to do, but I know what sells — or gets programmed. That informs what I propose."

Certain artists noted that with the era of hypervisibility and internet fragility, a single misread work can be provoking overreaction. Public and, especially, online backlash fear led some to change their approach or tone in advance. One interviewee described excising a section of a zine before release because a friend warned it might be "taken out of context." Another mentioned a title change on a project so that they would not become "misread politically."

Still, the artists were no more similar in their reaction to such pressures than are their art. For some, the cultural push toward inclusion and sensitivity does not appear as censorship but as moral growth. They view these conventions as a necessary corrective to culture — an overdue reckoning with histories of hurt and exclusion. To them, boundaries on the imagination are not simply tolerable but beneficial, as they encourage critique, conversation, and compassion. One participant noted that unintended offense should prompt reflection, as this is part of belonging to a community.

Others were worried, however, that such an ethic of responsibility had developed into a system of surveillance — not governmental, but peer, follower, and audience. Some referred to their filtering process as "auto-censure" — the self-aware pre-emptive sense of what might be misunderstood, criticized, or rejected. As one artist put it: "It's like there's a jury in your head before you even start sketching."

What is revealed in these interviews is a profile of artistic practice informed not by outside repression, but by insidious and inward negotiations. Portuguese artists are not censored in the classical sense. But they are felt to be watched, and that watching informs the way and what they make. Some accommodate. Some rebel. Most just attempt to reconcile artistic truth with public readability — a task often perilous, but never static.

In liberal democracies, platforms and institutions have a two-edged function as protectors and gatekeepers of artistic freedom. While they do not decide individually to order formal prohibitions, they increasingly operate as filters, mediating whether art is seen, funded, or circulated — typically in accordance with perceived social sensitivities. Here, boundaries of expression are not determined by law, but by an evolving mix of audience reaction, platform policy, and institutional self-regulation.

Art institutions, particularly the publicly funded ones, strive to walk a tightrope between defending creative liberty and defending public trust. To the many interviewees' observation, Portuguese festivals and museums will pre-screen artworks beforehand for potential controversy. This is almost never directly conceded. Instead, curatorial choices function on an internal risk-aversion logic that is predicated upon dominant sociopolitical discourses. One artist described their experience of submitting to a municipal gallery: "No one said to me that it was too political, but when they saw what I was doing, they stopped responding to my emails. That. silence. spoke more loudly than a no."

Those encounters raise the following question: who decides what is "too much"? The response more points to a. convergence of institutional values and social media discourse. Audience response — most notably web-based — has become a de facto censor. Institutions fear viral indignation or reputational damage and shift, withdraw, or refuse to show works likely to cause controversy. This is less actual censorship in the traditional model; instead, institutional jitters at work through silence rather than ban.

This dread is exacerbated by the structural imperatives of web sites. Social media algorithms don't capture nuance, metaphor, or art context. They follow content rules intended to serve user safety and advertiser acceptability — which has a bias to police uncertainty. "Edgy" art offending in the form of nudity, politics, or protest is frequently flagged, shadow-banned, or removed. As Nick Srnicek (2017) contends in his critique of platform capitalism, they are not infrastructures but economic actors whose model for business is to maximize participation and keep advertiser-friendly environments. This economic interest establishes moderation procedures, to some extent, since creatively provocative, ambiguous, or politically controversial forms are outside what is commercially acceptable. Therefore, the reasoning of platform capitalism is a type of economy-driven cultural government, restraining the degree to which types of art can move openly through the digital public sphere. Most frequently, this is automated, with few opportunities for appeal, leaving artists little redress.

For visual creatives, this online space creates a new kind of gatekeeping. While Instagram or TikTok is necessary for visibility and connection, these platforms also dictate what kinds of work thrive. Work that is muted, critical, or disturbing struggles to get seen, whereas look-at-me or ideologically right-wing material is facilitated with engagement rates. This constructs what some commentators have termed an "aesthetic algorithm" — a desire for similarity, politeness, and shareability at the expense of depth, complexity, or criticism.

Audience polarization further complicates this picture. As interviewees described, public responses to art have become more reactive and moralized. Social media empower audiences to mount campaigns, issue public criticism, and make artists "accountable" in real time. While this democratizes cultural critique, it places more onus on artists to attempt to anticipate and pre-empt offense — generally by dumbing-down or sanitizing what they do. For some, this leads to defensive editing, for others, to conscious reworking of irony or coded language.

In total, the institutions, platforms, and public reception create a diffuse web of control that dictates what can be visual culture. No one forbids content, but as a group they create a space where vagueness is perilous, provocation is wearying, and security is strategic. As one Portuguese designer testified: "Sometimes I wonder if I'm designing for people — or for algorithms."

These pressures do not eliminate creative freedom but re-tune it. In the absence of official censorship, there is informal governance that is equally potent but much harder to pinpoint.

This chapter has traced the experience of freedom of expression — and its constant reconfiguring — in liberal cultures. There may be legal protection, but the actual boundaries of creative freedom are bargained through a matrix of institutional hesitance, algorithmic filtering, and public attitudes. Censorship takes no form of prohibition there but as suggestion, hesitation, and silence.

Portuguese case studies and interviews attest that artists are not gagged but shaped — by expectation, sponsorship structures, and audience reaction. What is produced is a system of freedom, if conditional. Freedom for whom? on what terms? and at what cost? must increasingly be asked.

At the center of this haggling is the tension between responsibility and restriction. Others see new standards of social sensitivity and inclusivity as a step toward ethical culture-making. Others see them as limiting the expressive field — sacrificing provocation for safety, ambiguity for clarity. In each instance, the effect is clear: artists conform. Sometimes out of fear. Sometimes out of care. Occasionally to survive professionally in an environment where one's visibility is mediated, not just by curators, but by comment sections and content algorithms.

The paradox of the open society is not one of muzzling speech, but of managing it — subtly, calculatingly, and frequently imperceptibly. This leads to a cultural atmosphere in which self-censorship and aesthetic adjustment are neither strange nor surprising but the norm. And as previous chapters have illustrated, this is not categorically different from censorship in authoritarianism — but different in form, internalization, and rationale.

Finally, this chapter reveals that democratic cultures do not eliminate censorship; they redeploy it. They reallocate the power to censor to networks of institutions, audiences, and technologies. And in doing so, they produce a new kind of artist: one who must be politically savvy, media smart, and ethically watchful — working in an expressive landscape defined as much by what is not sayable as by what is.

2.4. Cases of repression and artistic resistance.

Art has ever been a resistance — a way of speaking out against, denouncing as unjust, and constructing other worlds in the face of repression. When the normal pathways of political dissent close off or are muzzled, visual culture becomes a militant ground for the expression of the unutterable. Through political and historical contexts, artists have struggled to overthrow hegemonic narratives, resist authoritarian states, and revive the memory of people. Through prison paintings to protest bills tacked high on city streets, visual practice negotiates a space of beauty and transgression.

How that resistance occurs can be traced along a set of intersecting axes. Resistance as aesthetic practice involves the production of artworks whose content and form challenge prevailing cultural codes, offering new ways of knowing and reading the world. Resistance as invisibility strategy involves the conscious deployment of metaphor, abstraction, or coded imagery with the goal of avoiding censorship without losing the subversive content. Resistance as memory work keeps repressed histories and shared experiences under wraps, guaranteeing their permanent presence in the cultural consciousness against efforts to erase them.

Jacques Rancière's "sharing of the sensible" can account for these practices: art, by reconfiguring what is visible, thinkable, and sayable in the public arena, recomposes the regime of visibility (Rancière, 2004). It is through it that artistic resistance resists not only the current order but forms the horizons of political imagination.

This chapter analyzes the intersection of repression and visual resistance using Belarus as a recent case study. Following the presidential election of 2020 and the violent crackdown on protest movements, Belarus saw a tremendous burst of visual protest — not only in the streets, but everywhere in the online sphere. Amidst an environment of fear and surveillance,

artists responded with anonymity, coded symbolism, and intentional use of color and repetition. Their effort was not merely criticism, but survival — upholding identity, solidarity, and truth in the presence of sheer threat.

Belarus is not, however, an isolated incident. From the anti-Pinochet Street murals of Chile — with their stark depictions of the desaparecidos (disappeared persons) and clenched-fist iconography — to the women’s graffiti during Iran’s recent uprisings, featuring slogans such as “Women, Life, Freedom” and images of unveiled female figures, rebellion in art has manifested itself in many guises and crossed borders. In Belarus, the August 2020 mass protests brought together an estimated 100,000 people in Minsk, with demonstrators carrying white-red-white flags, chanting slogans, and holding anti-government banners such as “Dictator Go Away”. These mass gatherings themselves became powerful visual statements, where national symbols and protest language merged into acts of public art and collective performance.

Common to these works is not a single political message or aesthetic style, but a shared resolve to render visible that which power seeks to repress. Aesthetic resistance relies on a repertoire of tactics: metaphor, irony, recycling of iconic cultural figures, large-scale public participation, and the strategic occupation of public space — tactics that become especially urgent in authoritarian regimes.

Recurring Artistic Tactics in Visual Resistance:

Country/Context	Representative Works/Imagery	Recurring Tactics
Belarus	2020 mass protest in Minsk: white-red-white flags, anti-government banners (“Dictator Go Away”)	Use of national symbols, protest slogans, large-scale public gatherings
Chile	Anti-Pinochet murals: portraits of disappeared persons (The Disappeared / Los Desaparecidos)	Public murals, memorialisation, human rights iconography
Iran	Women’s graffiti: unveiled figures, feminist slogans (“Women, Life, Freedom”)	Feminist symbolism, street graffiti, direct sloganism
Hong Kong	First Lennon Wall (2014): colourful sticky notes with messages of democracy and protest	Participatory public art, collective authorship, ephemeral materials

Note. For visual examples of works discussed in this table, see Appendix 5.2 Graphics (G1–G6).

What follows in this chapter is an exploration of how visual art functions as resistance: initially through a close reading of images from Belarusian protests, then through the words of artists

themselves, and lastly through a theoretical framework in which art is not merely representation, but political practice. Drawing on theorists like Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, and Michel Foucault, the question is raised: what makes an image resistant? What does it mean to fight with form, symbol, or silence? And can art cause real political change — or is it only a sign of the limits of what can be imagined?

Belarusian 2020 protests marked the turning point of contemporary resistance art. In response to Alexander Lukashenko's fraudulent re-election and brutal suppression of opposition, artists across the nation united to produce a wave of protest imagery that was both live and symbolic. Posters, graphic images published online, street murals, and temporary interventions — often anonymous — began appearing at high speed, especially on encrypted media like Telegram. Under observation and criminal charges, these photos became powerful tools of mass identification and coded communication.

One of the most striking features of protest art in Belarus is its symbolism and minimalism. Rather than overt slogans, artists employed color, repetition, and abstraction to make dissent. The white-red-white flag, traditionally associated with the pre-Soviet Belarusian People's Republic, became the archetypal visual symbol of the opposition. Officially banned by the government, the flag was reproduced countless times in covert form: as a stripe of red and white line, as ribbons, as trim on clothing, or inset inside more complex drawings. Color then became language — a form of resistant visibility that provided protestors an opportunity to speak without words.

Maybe the most powerful expression of this symbolic method is Belarusian designer Artur Wakarow's 30 Posters about 30 Years of Dictatorship, produced in exile and exhibited in Poland. A poster for each year of Lukashenko's rule, each relying on stark, simple imagery: the outline of a spy camera, a muzzled mouth, smudges of blood-like brushwork, and censored speech bubbles. The absence of overt text on most posters makes their visual tension and universality maximum. The art is resistant not by nature, but by implication — allowing for interpretation on the part of the viewer while keeping trauma and protest firmly in place.

Wakarow's work is not just aesthetically pleasing in its visuality, but also transnationally readable. By avoiding wording, he created images that can speak across cultural and linguistic boundaries. The series, though, is also well rooted in Belarusian memory: the political trial, missing persons, and police violence allusions are at once legible for those familiar with the context. This dual legibility — both local and global — is a beautiful demonstration of the power of visual resistance within a globalized world.

Anonymity is another defining feature of Belarusian protest art. Fear of persecution forced many artists to remain anonymous, and paintings were spread without signatures or credits. It was not merely a defensive choice but also a political one: it enforced the communal nature of the movement. Instead of casting individual voices, protest imagery acquired a shared visual vocabulary — one in which every image stood for the many in place of the many. This approach also borrows from previous models of underground culture: from Soviet samizdat of the past to Latin American guerrilla street art.

Also important is visual code recycling and smuggling. Artists would typically recycle state iconography — police uniforms, national symbols, propaganda posters — and subvert them. Thus, for example, some of the pictures of riot police were represented in distorted

proportions, their batons melting into ink, or their helmets full of flowers — neutralizing their authority over the medium of contradiction. Such gestures appeal to a history of dissident art that doesn't work by preventing power but by cutting through its iconography and reversing its meaning.

The aesthetics of the Belarusian resistance also find echoes in global visual protest movements. Parallel has also been drawn between the umbrella protests of Hong Kong, when yellow was the color of protest, and Iranian protest posters, which employ stylized female figures and floral motifs as symbols of dissent. This cross-over is a sign that in the era of globalized visual culture, protest art is at once context-specific and transnationally readable. The repetition of symbols — fists, flowers, blindfolded faces — is a kind of international protest grammar.

Overall, then, the protest visual rhetoric of Belarus is marked not by conflict, but by tactful cunning. In a system where posture and color can be constituted as crimes, protest must be converted into visual intelligence — an act of seeing and displaying otherwise. These works of art do not shriek; they signal. They contain dissent in form, color, and gesture, constructing a field of meaning that avoids censorship as much as it openly resists power.

Outside of visual study, artist interviews in Belarus and Portugal reveal the intricate way in which resistance is integrated into contemporary creative practice. While situations differ — from explicit authoritarian repression to more subtle liberal demands — the forms of resistance include universal themes: anonymity, irony, visual metaphor, and aesthetic displacement. Across both settings, artists describe not only the risks they face but also the creative compromises that result from working under pressure.

Belarusian artists emphasize the urgency of discretion. Many describe the use of pseudonyms, encrypted channels, and anonymous publication not merely as survival tactics, but as conceptual choices. One interviewee stated, “We don’t sign our names anymore — not because we’re afraid, but because the name doesn’t matter. The message does.” In this context, resistance becomes a collective act, and anonymity a form of solidarity. The erasure of personal authorship is a response to the regime's obsession with control and accountability.

Symbolism matters. Artists employ coded images — flowers instead of blood, empty chairs instead of prisoners, silhouettes instead of faces — to represent suffering and resistance without risking legal backlash. One of the designers explained overlaying protest slogans with the image of a megaphone, so that the symbol can “speak for itself.” Such multi-layered significance allows artists to tell something to multiple audiences at once: to the insiders who understand the allusions, and to outsiders who recognize the emotional valence.

In Portugal, there is a different risk — but not zero. Artists refer to a less overt type of restraint: the fear of being misread, accused of insensitivity, or hurting their reputation. In response, some employ irony and ambiguity as tools of resistance. A respondent described inserting double meaning into their work “so that it can't be attacked from either side easily.” Another described switching mediums — from illustration to textile — to escape the expectations that attend political art.

Humor also emerges as a steady fallback. As one cartoonist in Belarus explained, “When they prohibit you from speaking clearly, you master laughing in symbols.” Satire through exaggeration — police officers with animal heads, government officials as empty suits —

allows for criticism that disarms rather than provokes. This would be paralleling Susan Sontag's (2003) suggestion that images may convey not only suffering but absurdity, challenging authority by satirizing its rituals and appearances.

Importantly, the interviews reveal that resistance is not only an act of defiance but also an act of self-preservation. Artists speak of fear, yes — but also of agency. “I’m not brave,” one participant said, “but I’m stubborn. And I will not be silenced.” Some think about the psychic toll of constant repression — fear, paranoia, fatigue — but insist on creating as a function of survival, as a refusal to be obliterated. For them, resistance is not a heroic gesture but an act of everyday life: drawing, painting, designing, not because it is safe, but because it must be done.

Their visual and emotional labor cannot be separated. Where there is power, there is resistance — and that resistance most often begins with visibility: making visible what is intended to be made invisible, voicing what is intended to be quiet. The artists included in this project take this principle to heart in their choices — not only what they create, but how, where, and for whom.

Collectively, their reports inform us that resistance is not necessarily on the boom. Occasionally it is soft, occasionally it is strategic, occasionally it is coded, and occasionally it is beautiful. It does not necessarily aim to topple over; occasionally it merely wants to survive. In that soft survival lies a profound form of cultural resistance — one that this chapter aspires to know not only as reaction, but as creation.

Clarity about what constitutes artistic resistance calls for more than a panoramic survey of visual strategies or biographical narratives. It calls for a conceptual vocabulary that can explain how resistance works within, alongside, and sometimes through power. Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Susan Sontag provide key frameworks for reading the place of art in contested political and cultural terrain.

Michel Foucault's understanding of power is central to this. In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), he argues that power is not only repressive but also productive — it makes up what can be thought, said, and seen. On this view, resistance is not external to power but internal to how it functions. It occurs wherever power functions, indeed frequently in precisely those discursive and visual sites. Artistic resistance, then, is not merely opposition; it is a re-mapping of what constitutes legitimate expression. Visual practices that alter the configuration of images, symbols, and bodies in public space become acts of resistance not because they are beyond power, but because they recode its practice.

Judith Butler elaborates this in her theory of performativity and vulnerability. In *Frames of War* (2009), she explores how some lives are considered worthy of mourning, and others are not. Here, visibility is political: to expose a body, a face, or a wound is to avow its value in the public. Butler also contends that vulnerability itself is a form of resistance — not in the sense that it suggests weakness, but in the sense that it negates the state's monopoly over violence and representation. Artists who place themselves in danger of exposure — even at risk of being harmed — reinforce the political visibility of marginalized or silenced groups. Their works do not simply depict resistance; they stage it.

Susan Sontag, particularly in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), challenges the aesthetics and ethics of representing suffering. She criticizes political image voyeurism but also

has it that images can be disturbing, provocative, and demanding ethical response. Most importantly, she has it that what is represented — and how — is never indifferent. Under repressive conditions, even minimal imagery (a blindfold, an empty chair, an unrepresented face) can be invested with immense subversive power, precisely because they refuse narrative resolution and summon critical reading.

Such paradigms help us to understand why protest art repeatedly relies on ambiguity, symbolism, and dismemberment. Rather than delivering a clear message, oppositional images tend to leave space for interpretation. This hermeneutic openness is also a tactic: it protects the artist, invites in the audience, and avoids the reductionism of propaganda. As a Belarusian artist explained in the interview: "Well, if I say too much, I vanish. If I say too little, nobody hears. So, I say it slant."

Besides, resistance isn't necessarily about opposition. It acts also by presence: the time of beauty forms, gestures, and memory that regimes attempt to conceal. A repeated motif, an off-limits color, a recycled slogan — these are not design choices but acts of refusal. Refusal to forget, to be quiet, or to comply. Scholars like Foucault and Butler allow us to acknowledge these actions not as politicized offshoots, but as politics in itself — carried out through the symbolic material of culture.

Here, art is not just a reflection of social facts, but it works on them. Counter-art re-defines the public story, re-defines what and can and may be seen or said, and opens space for counter-histories and other imaginaries. Its power is not founded on clarity, but on its ability to make things discontent, to trouble ease, and to deny — often softly — that another meaning, another world, is possible.

While this chapter has focused on the Belarusian situation, visual resistance is a global phenomenon. Everywhere, artists working under repressive regimes — or in unstable political situations — have developed specific but powerful aesthetic tactics. Comparing Belarusian protest art to that of, say, Iran, Russia, and Chile, we see the ways in which cultural, historical, and technological forces shape the visual grammar of protest.

In Iran, artists have worked under conditions of moral policing and censorship for a long time. In the 2022–23 protests that erupted over the killing of Mahsa Amini, Iranian women and artists deployed visual culture as their go-to instrument of opposition. The figure of a woman shaving her hair became an international icon, replicated in sketches, posters, and performance art. Artists employed stylized, anonymous figures — faceless women in motion, blazing scarves, raised fists in muteness — to hide identities but multiply protest. Like Belarus, colors (notably black and red) and abstracted forms assumed symbolic status. Despite heavy repression, imagery traveled globally, aided by diasporic networks and social media.

In Russia, visual protest has taken a different turn — again and again through satire, subversive humor, and surrealism. Concentration of political opposition has been responded to by cruel repression, and artists have countered with absurdity and metaphor. The collective Chto Delat, for example, uses video installation and poster art grounded in Soviet aesthetics but transformed into bewildering, polemical stories (Appendix 5.1, Figure A8). Pussy Riot's performance art — blending punk rock, color-coded balaclavas, and staged disruptions — is an embodied, performative, media-aware act of resistance (Appendix 5.1, Figure A9). These interventions bare state power's performativity and reclaim public space as a site of resistance.

In Chile, protest art is saturated in a deep history, from 1980s anti-Pinochet propaganda posters to contemporary feminist street murals. The "Las Tesis" masked women chant performance against patriarchy and state violence went viral as a method of resistance — repeated in plazas everywhere (Appendix 5.1, Figure A10). Chilean resistance art is characterized by its use of the street as a medium, its collective authorship, and its use of bodies in space as the principal medium. This is contrasted with Belarusian anonymity: while Belarusians retreat behind symbolic camouflage, Chileans prefer physical presence.

Despite contextual and strategic differences among these movements, their practices reveal recurring tactics. They often rely on symbolic strategies, especially where language is perilous or censored. Visual motifs are repeated and transposed across media — from posters to graffiti, textiles, and performance — to reinforce recognition and continuity. Humor, irony, and visual contradiction are deployed to deflect or undermine state narratives. Finally, authorship itself becomes a tactic: either anonymous, as in Belarus, or collective, as in Chile, to challenge repression and foster solidarity.

These transnational analogies suggest that aesthetics of resistance is not universal but transferable. Local visual vocabularies are a response to specific conditions — religion, gender rules, surveillance, media infrastructure — but speak across borders because they address shared human experiences: fear, injustice, defiance, and hope.

In a globalized visual culture, these protest images circulate, ignite, and transform. Belarusian posters are remembered by Hong Kong flags; Iranian graphics gain fresh meanings in zines from Europe. This visual feedback system allows resistance to become mobile even when bodies cannot. It creates a distributed memory of revolt — a space where photographs bear witness, connect struggles, and remind us that the fight for visibility is not a national one, but etched across numerous ones.

The case studies examined in this chapter — ranging from Belarusian anonymous posters to Iranian feminist interventions, to Russian performance satire — demonstrate that visual art does not only depict political repression; it actively resists it. In the face of censorship, surveillance, and cultural silencing, art is a counter-speech, a means of taking space, insisting on presence, and prefiguring alternatives. It is precisely when speech becomes dangerous that images scream the loudest.

What all these different utterances share is not a single aesthetic or political message, but a shared strategy of insistence — a determination not to disappear. With subtle metaphor, irony, anonymity, or collaborative authorship, artists develop languages of resistance that operate both below and against structures of control. These image-based initiatives are not always revolutionary in the traditional sense, but they are deeply political: they challenge what is visible, what is sayable, and who may speak.

Yet, resistance is rarely risk-free. As these interviews throughout this chapter bear witness, artists must constantly weigh the risk of repression against the need for expression. Some adopt tactics of retreat or self-censorship; others flirt with confrontation. Short of defiance or fear, there is no single approach — only creative negotiation. Art, in these contexts, is a site of ethical tension, where beauty and danger coexist, and every decision — color, form, site — carries potential consequences.

At the same time, though, the potential of visual art to create political change must be imagined in modest terms. A poster does not usually overthrow a regime, but visual art does something more subtle and, perhaps, durable. It preserves memory. It creates solidarity. It opens emotional and imaginative space that is not available to politics by itself. As Judith Butler reminds us, resistance is not only a question of refusal, but also of being — of making oneself visible, audible, and sensible within systems that seek to erase.

This way, artistic resistance is not ancillary to protest; it is protest. It operates not at the edges of political life but at its very heart — shaping how we consider power, visibility, and collective action. And it reminds us that even in the most repressive circumstances, the act of making — and of showing — is one of the most potent affirmations of life and agency.

Overall, the case studies represent both collaborative and oppositional art-based tactics of resistance. Everywhere, artists have recourse to metaphor, coded symbolism, repetition, anonymity, and collective authorship, but each context has interpreted these tactics differently in terms of the dominant political and cultural forces. The dialectic between repression and creativity is found to be self-contradictory: restriction does not stifle expression but tends to induce new vocabularies of aesthetics. Finally, these practices attest that resistance art is not just a cultural response but a political and social movement — one that sustains memory, forms solidarity, and generates new images of community even in contexts of violence and censorship.

2.5. Can censorship drive new forms of expression? Example: dissident art under totalitarian regimes

The general conception of censorship in art is that it operates only as a repressive force — an instrument of silencing, erasure, and intimidation. This is certainly grounded in historical and contemporary reality, but it does not hold the rich, nuanced dynamic of artistic production and conditions of constraint. Ironically, censorship has served not only to limit expression but also to provoke it — forcing artists to create new visual tactics, competing codes, and symbolic languages to get noticed and outmaneuver the repression imposed against them.

During the 20th and 21st centuries, totalitarian regimes have attempted to control cultural production by deciding what art will look like, what it will signify, and where it will be found. But still, in such conditions, artists have always refused, not only in overt protest, but through innovation of art. Rather than dying out under coercion, many came to develop instruments of ambiguity, irony, allegory, and abstraction. On one level, this means that censorship is not merely something to be circumvented, but a structural space that remaps the field of possibility — compelling the artist to be more imaginative, more tactical, and more attuned to the political force of form.

This chapter follows this paradox with a series of case studies: formal imposition of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union and dissident reactions by artists; experimental means of East German designers and photographers working under the constraints of ideology; and the Belarusian case today, where visual artists — suppressed and monitored — have developed a whole new grammar of protest. Creativity in each of these contexts does not vanish under constraint. Instead, it develops, changes, and typically grows.

The interrogative for this chapter is: Is it possible that censorship — in its effort to suppress — can also be an impulse toward creative metamorphosis? In examining the means whereby art languages get formed within restrictive environments, the chapter aims to reconsider censorship not simply as a suppression of expression, but as a productive force in the fashioning of politicized and aesthetically innovative visual culture.

To understand how censorship can operate not only as an agency of repression but of artistic provocation, we must have recourse to theoretical frameworks which account for the dynamics between power, resistance, and aesthetics. The work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, and Theodor Adorno (and Ernst Fischer) provides preliminary paradigms by which to re-imagine censorship not merely as impediment to artmaking, but as a productive tension in which art places itself — sometimes thriving.

In *Power and Resistance*, Foucault famously argued that power is not only repressive, but productive. In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), he asserted that wherever there is power, there is always resistance — and that resistance exists immanently in power, rather than outside it. Applied to art, what this would suggest is that censorship does not simply repress expression, but remaps the terrain upon which it is exercised. Censorship establishes the boundaries of the sayable and the visible; artists, as such, respond by extending these boundaries, often by means of coded language, displaced meaning, or visual metaphor.

To Foucault, the presence of power — including institutional censorship — offers means of strategic resistance. Artistic strategies such as irony, abstraction, and fragmentation are not only aesthetic choices; they are survival and subversive modes that emerge from the same structures that would repress them.

In a different perspective, in the text *Dissensus and the Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière offers another inciting model of how art entwines with control systems. In his book *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), he theorizes the concept of "dissensus" — a rupture in the sensible order that renders previously invisible subjects, discourses, or experiences visible. Art is political, according to Rancière, not because it is bearing a political message, but because it reallocates the visible, rendering visible what the hegemonic system seeks to conceal.

Censorship, in this sense, is not merely prohibiting certain content but preserving a consensus — a shared horizon of what is intelligible or acceptable. Artists that labor under censorship produce dissensus by introducing vagueness, tension, and rupture into this consensus. Censorship is, therefore, a state of possibility for revolutionary aesthetics: it forces the artist to find indirect, symbolic, or disruptive modes of speaking that circumvent formal prohibition.

Theodor Adorno and Ernst Fischer also reflected on the relationship between repression and art, particularly in the context of fascist regimes and mass culture, framing art as a potential form of resistance. Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), speculated that authentic art resists domination by not being totally assimilated into instrumental rationality. To Adorno, the autonomy of art — its opposition to being annexed by utility or ideology — is a struggle. Particularly under totalitarianism, where officially approved art (e.g., Socialist Realism) attempts to co-opt aesthetics for propaganda, modernist fragmentation, quietness, and obscurity are acts of subversion.

Similarly, Ernst Fischer asserted that pressure would not weaken art's role as a critic by keeping contradiction and ambiguity intact. He believed that art form could be political even where direct criticism was impossible. In totalitarian circumstances, such "indirect speech" is no failure, but a strategy: a way of speaking in silence, of saying without saying.

Toward a Framework Together, these writers present a composite theory of the relation between censorship and creativity. Foucault understands power as productive; Rancière demands the aporetic value of aesthetics; Adorno and Fischer stress the power of form to resist ideological co-optation. What is produced is not an idealization of censorship, but an acknowledgment of its dialectical role: it imposes limits, but in doing so, it makes the artist more sensitive to form, to strategy, and to subversion.

This theoretical construction allows us to understand the following case studies as something greater than histories of oppression, but as sites of aesthetic experimentation — moments in which constraint gave rise to innovation, and prohibition generated new forms of perception, production, and resistance.

The Soviet Union provides one of the most graphic historical examples of centralized arts control. During the 1930s under Joseph Stalin, the aesthetic ideology of Socialist Realism was declared to be the state style of Soviet art, literature, cinema, and design. Artists were instructed to glorify labor, depict idealized images of workers and leaders, and advance the ideological goals of the state. This compulsory manner left little space for ambiguity, irony, or experimentation — at least outwardly.

But within this highly constrained structure, artists devised subversive strategies that subverted the ideological straitjacket of Socialist Realism while appearing to comply with its formal dictates. These strategies produced a rich, if hidden, culture of dissidence — often manifesting in coded visual codes, double meanings, or altogether separate unofficial art worlds.

The most celebrated manifestation of overt resistance was in 1974 when the "Bulldozer Exhibition" occurred in Moscow. A group of nonconformist artists, including Oscar Rabin and Evgeny Rukhin, staged an unauthorized outdoor art exhibition of their expressionist and abstract paintings (Appendix 5.1, Figure A11). The Soviet regime responded by literally bulldozing the site, destroying the paintings and savagely dispersing the crowd. Ironically, the very act of censorship had mobilized international condemnation and inspired renewed resistance. The incident became a rallying point for underground art and an emblem of the repressive farce of Soviet cultural policy.

Another resistance took the form of Moscow Conceptualism, a loosely affiliated movement that emerged in the 1970s as a tongue-in-cheek counter-language to Socialist Realism. Artists such as Ilya Kabakov, Komar and Melamid, and Andrei Monastyrsky used conceptual forms, installation, and pseudo-bureaucratic appearances to uncover the ideological contradictions of the regime. The work of Kabakov (Appendix 5.1, Figure A12), for example, often copied official Soviet environments — communal flats, schoolrooms, factory halls — but introduced surreal, melancholic, or absurd elements that destroyed their coherence. These works occupied a contradictory location: both inside and outside Soviet visual culture, and familiar yet estranged.

The unofficial art world thrived in apartment shows and individual studios, wherein pieces that were not allowed to be publicly shown circulated within intimate, self-organized circles. This activity offered the possibility of alternate aesthetic values without official sanction. Artists explored abstraction, expressionism, and metaphysical subject matter here — forms of art proscribed or debarred from official ideology. By withholding visibility, these works gained subversive power: their very existence challenged the state's hegemony over beauty and truth.

Censorship here did not stifle imagination, but redirected it into forms less overt, more indirect, and often more intellectually rich than those permitted by the government. The necessity of working indirectly — through allegory, pictorial metaphor, or coded wit — sensitized the artist more to form and signification. It created a kind of aesthetic smartness, as well, because the art vocabulary had to evolve in adversity.

What is most strikingly unusual about the Soviet model is that even under the constraints of Socialist Realism, there were painters who were able to insert complexity. Artists like Alexander Deineka, even working within approved subjects, tended to insert quiet formal innovation, tension, or self-examination into their works (Appendix 5.1, Figure A13). The boundary between conformism and critique was sometimes tenuous — and that is where subversion could potentially happen.

So, the Soviet case illustrates that, even in one of the most ideologically disciplined visual cultures of the 20th century, art was not entirely suppressed. Rather, censorship worked both as a repression and a creative force — defining not just what was excluded, but also what was enabled, and forcing artists to invent new visual grammars of resistance.

The German Democratic Republic (GDR), like the Soviet Union, tightly controlled cultural production ideologically. Visual culture — and particularly design, illustration, and photography — was supposed to reflect the ideals of socialism, promote state identity, and express the optimism of the working class. Official aesthetics were derived from a utilitarian model, founded upon clarity, reason, and didacticism. Yet beneath this state-run framework, East German artists and designers developed oblique modes of subversion — seizing minimalism, irony, and abstraction as targeted instruments of critique.

Unlike in the Soviet Union, where Socialist Realism was the official state doctrine, the GDR was more pragmatic in its policies towards design and visual communication. The need to modernize infrastructure, educate the citizenry, and improve public health created a robust visual language founded on functionality and clarity, especially in typography, signage, and state-sponsored graphic design. However, it also created the space for visual innovation, as designers could work "under the radar" of overt censorship by embedding meaning in structure and style rather than content.

A compelling field of quiet dissidence was photography. Officially, GDR photography was used to glorify state institutions, memorialize socialist achievement, and document workers' lives. Yet a generation of photographers — including Sibylle Bergemann, Evelyn Richter, and Ursula Arnold — developed a documentary aesthetic that subtly challenged the boundaries of state expectation. Their photographs often focused on ordinary people, muted interiors, aging bodies, and the subdued textures of everyday life (Appendix 5.1, Figure A14). These photos did not confront the system in an active way, but nor would they play along with

its hopeful, forward-looking story. Their affective reserve and insistence on personal life revealed aspects of East German reality that were overlooked by state propaganda.

Bergemann's series of the Berlin Marx-Engels monument under construction, for instance, not only records the monument itself, but workers, scaffolding, and in-between stages — highlighting the tension between monumental ideology and everyday life. Richter's photographs of factory workers, typically shown in contemplative or exhausted attitudes, quietly contradicted the myth of the heroic proletariat. These photographers did not undermine the regulations — they distorted them, using composition, tone, and mood to create photographs that were politically ambiguous, and therefore resistant.

In graphic design as well, there was space for subtle resistance. East German designers worked within a highly rationalist visual tradition — clean lines, geometric forms, sans-serif fonts — but some designers began to experiment with collage, surrealism, and symbolic visual metaphors. In poster design, for instance, metaphorical content would be introduced to produce ambivalence: a broken façade, an empty stage, a displaced object. Such gestures created spaces for critical interpretation without violating explicit rules.

Even in official cultural products such as book covers, magazine layout, and film posters, artists were able to express muted irony or emotional depth. Magazines such as *Sibylle* — an East German fashion magazine — offered a venue for both aesthetic sophistication and implied social criticism. Its sleek photo spreads, often shot in urban detritus or empty natural landscapes, contradicted the celebratory tenor of state media and introduced ambiguous modernity into visual culture (Appendix 5.1, Figure A15).

As in the Soviet example, abstraction was one of the key strategies. Abstract painting was not directly forbidden in the GDR, but it was suspected and barely exhibited in official institutions. Moreover, the material austerity of socialist existence also shaped visual innovation. Shortages of pigment, paper, and machinery led artists to develop hybrid practices — combining print processes, recycling materials, or creating ephemeral installations. Such practical restrictions fostered a culture of improvisational resourcefulness, which was a way of defying ideological as well as material control.

East German visual culture under censorship was marked overall less by confrontation than by ambiguity. In contrast to more overt dissident movements, opposition in the GDR also operated through tone, atmosphere, and judicious staging. Artists developed a visual rhetoric of the oblique — not because they were unpolitical, but because indirection was the most cautious and effective critique available. Their example reminds us that resistance does not always have to assume the form of revolt; it can also exist in silence, hesitation, and unresolved tension.

The contemporary history of Belarus offers a lively example of how, even in its most repressive forms, censorship stimulates new ways of visual communication. Throughout the prolonged years of Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian rule, particularly since the 2020 presidential election and the record-breaking campaign of peaceful protests, artists, designers, and illustrators took center stage in a non-hierarchical protest movement based strongly on visual imagery. Operating under conditions of surveillance, fear, and criminalization, they developed forms of expression that were understated, symbolic, and highly creative — making censorship a necessary condition for aesthetic innovation.

Censorship and Symbolism in the Belarusian Experience Belarusian state censorship following the 2020 election was much more than prohibiting slogans or political speech. Visual symbols — such as the classic white-red-white Belarusian flag — were prohibited and heavily enforced. This once-national icon had been taken over by demonstrators and was thus re-coded as a visual protest symbol. Carrying the flag in any form — on a t-shirt, sticker, or cyber avatar — would lead to detention or imprisonment. The same applied to movements such as an upraised hand, the victory sign, or red and white motifs, which were interpreted by authorities as political opposition signs.

This opened a realm where even composition and color had been politicized. Artists resisted by fashioning non-linguistic, metaphorical languages of opposition — one where meaning was not in statement, but in suggestion, silence, or structure. Visual codes were distributed in the guise of posters, illustrations, street art, fashion design, and digital memes, shared across encrypted spaces like Telegram. The underground nature of this system allowed for immediate circulation and visual coherence among creators, even when authorship was anonymous.

The need to hide identities led many artists to produce unsigned and anonymous pieces of work, creating a form of collective authorship. Apart from hiding people from persecution, this brought the universality of repression and collective ownership of the act of resistance. Unlike protest art with heroic subjects or static messages, Belarusian visual dissent glorified anonymity, repetition, and symbolic abstraction — elements that made it harder to censor and easier to replicate.

Artur Wakarow and The Aesthetics of Protest the most widely known example of Belarusian dissident graphics abroad is probably Artur Wakarow's series 30 Posters about 30 Years of Dictatorship, exhibited in Poland in 2023. The 30 posters of the series represent one year each of Lukashenko's rule, by minimalist but eloquent imagery: tape-covered mouths, pencils tied with chains, abstract surveillance motifs, national symbols broken into pieces. The posters appropriate international visual languages (constructivism, modernist typography, protest design) but are situated in the local politics of censorship, fear, and resistance.

Wakarow's work shows us the ways in which design during times of stress becomes not just political but poetic. Rather than screaming, his posters whisper — through metaphor, composition, and absence. One poster, for instance, features only a white silhouette and red lines striking its mouth and eyes. Another features a calendar page filled with all the dates filled in with identical red cross, symbolizing years of authoritarian dogma.

By minimizing political trauma to formal gestures, Wakarow creates a language that is at once intimate and public. His posters are open-ended, move emotional bases, and can travel easily across borders — both geographic and cultural. In doing so, his work not only challenges censorship, but uses it as a structuring force, organizing the content, tone, and delivery of the message.

Telegram and Anonymous Visual Culture Other than well-documented individuals like Wakarow, most of the Belarusian protest visual culture has been designed by anonymous artists, who collaborate through Telegram channels including Беларускі дызайн супраціву (Belarusian Design of Resistance). These channels gather and distribute images from protest posters to pedagogic infographics to digital stickers. It is created quickly, distributed at no cost,

and edited collaboratively — creating sustainable and fluid visual protest symbols that cannot be suppressed by institutions.

These pieces also play with visual metaphor and global protest iconography. For example, images of women in red dresses standing in silence in chains as a reference to feminist protests, or computer screen reinterpretations of Kazimir Malevich's Black Square as a screen of silence (Appendix 5.1, Figure A16). The imagery borrows from world sources (Chilean posters, Iranian silhouettes, Hong Kong umbrellas) and combines and recombines these with local Belarusian iconography to form a transnational protest language.

Here, the empty space where a flag could be, the blurred face, the implied slogan — all are brought to the forefront of the visual message. It's the responsibility of the viewer to complete the blanks, to interpret between the lines, and through it to become involved in the act of protest. This tactic allows artists to avoid official sanctions while still being able to express subversive messages — a kind of activity deeply guided by the logic of repression.

The Belarusian example shows how censorship invigorates creativity, not as resistance but as improvisation. Artists become used to utilizing what they have: fragments, silence, suggestion, and emptiness. They test new materials, platforms, and methodologies — not out of choice, but out of necessity. This creativity produces an aesthetic that is light, mobile, coded, and layered. It blurs the boundary between politics and art, between image and deed.

In the example of Belarus, censorship has paradoxically generated a rich and resilient visual culture, one that is born of silence but that speaks loudly. A culture of survival, rather than despair — and one that supports the main thesis of this chapter: that within restriction, there is adaptability of creativity.

The case studies in question here, from the Soviet-era strict visual controls to the East German photographers' encoded critique, and to the contemporary creativity of Belarusian protest graphics, indicate that censorship, far from eradicating creativity, will instead rechanneled its paths. Far from stifling expression, censorship is a structural constraint artists navigate, resist, and at times incorporate into the very act of creation.

The one common theme that runs through each of these cases is that repression does not produce simply fear or silence but a restructuring of form. When words are banned, artists resort to metaphor. When colors are banned, they mean by their absence. When there is surveillance, anonymity works both as a disguise and an instrument. In each case, censorship compels artists to experimentation in medium, producing new visual vocabularies that are indirect, metaphorical, or subversively simple. Restriction is the condition for innovation.

This redescribes our notion of censorship not merely as a means of control but as a productive agency, one that unwittingly provokes changes in artistic vocabulary, aesthetic strategies, and cultural codes. Although it is still crucial to refuse and condemn political repression, it is equally vital to see that the reaction it incites is seldom passive. Rather, artists convert the ground of limitation into a field of resistance, ambivalence, and change.

The Belarusian case is very illustrative as regards this process. Here, state violence and visual bans generated a new kind of protest: decentralized, symbolic, anonymous, and affective. This mode would not have been in sight in an openly permissive environment. To that extent, censorship, while violence-based, surprisingly amplified the expressive potential of dissident graphics.

This paradox of visibility — a power vector and a force of danger — poses the fundamental question: how far can strategic obscurity itself be regarded as an aesthetic language of resistance in the present day? In the Belarusian example, visual uncertainty does not merely occur as a defense but as a compositional strategy. Metaphor, encoded color schemes, and context-based symbolism are initiator and visual signs that enable the piece to work in the background but still be effective. Opaque in strategy, this act of concealment transforms concealing into writing and introduces between-ness as a unitary grammar of political speech to the urban and digital realms of our era.

But let us remember that all of this cannot be romanticized. All these artists characteristically suffer exile, imprisonment, or death. We derive the artistic works we enjoy because of danger and suppression, not freedom. Nevertheless, their mere existence is testament to an undeniable reality: that art does not disappear under torture — it mutates, it adapts, and in doing so, testifies to the limitations of power.

Thus, censorship is not only a negating force but a provocation — one that, in limiting, gives rise to new modes and forms of aesthetics. Artists find ways of going beyond the limits within which they work. And in the transgression, something new is created. But the "effectiveness" of such art is not to be gauged by its capacity to induce direct political change alone. In most situations, and especially where repression is total, the artwork does other things that are crucial.

One is the preservation of collective memory — an insistence on keeping records of injustice, resistance, and survival in view even when power tries to eradicate them. The image here works as an affective archive, keeping links across generations tense through what Marianne Hirsch has described as post memory (Hirsch, 2012). This is how the memories and traumas of a generation are passed on to the next, indirectly, through mediated forms — narratives, rituals, and most of all images. In the Belarusian example, protest posters, graffiti in the streets, and even tiny, coded symbols are vectors of post memory: they transmit the experience of repression and resistance in a way that does not fall into silence, but is transmitted into collective cultural heritage.

A second is the formation of affective spaces of belonging, where collective symbols and visual codes spin a web of solidarity. No matter how fleeting or virtual, such works instantiate moments of shared acknowledgment — visual gestures that say, "you are not alone." In this way, the image can perform alternative models of community, a kind of visual "communing": making and sharing images in common beyond the official channels, creating a common of dissent for which the act of participation is itself an act of resistance.

It is in this way that the photograph is not merely a tool of critique but a practice of care. Ariella Azoulay's theory of the civil contract of photography is useful to describe this: a photograph contracts the viewer to the photographed in a common ethical space, wherein there is responsibility on both sides to act according to what it makes visible (Azoulay, 2008). Even if the photograph is coded or ambiguous, it can still call for recognition, solidarity, and the refusal to avert one's head.

It is at this point that the tactics of soft survival come into their own. They include not only survival, but the development of cultural and emotional life in repression. At this level, the repressed continuity of visual culture — its coded representations, its domestic archives, its

collective acts of making — is an act of radicality. It is the potential for transformation not just in its direct confrontation with authority, but in keeping memory, sustaining belonging, and extending the networks of care through which future resistance becomes viable.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated that the creative practices inherent in censorship are on numerous levels — from political dissent to memory keeping, from creating solidarity to disciplinary ethics of care. These strategies not only endure constraint but transform it into an aesthetic and social power. The following chapters examine how such dynamics are comparable across different cultural and political contexts, and how they illuminate broader debates on artistic freedom, tolerance, and the changing function of visual culture in society.

Those instances analyzed here demonstrate that repression and creativity are closely linked. In differing situations, artists have employed shared strategies such as metaphor, abstraction, coded symbolism, and collective ownership, varying these in non-corresponding ways depending on specific political and cultural environments. Repression is not merely a process of constraint, but also a stimulus that necessitates the production of new vocabularies of the aesthetic. Furthermore, dissident art works beyond the cultural sphere to affect political and societal procedures by building public discourse, keeping collective memory, and reaffirming solidarity under conditions of oppression.

2.6. Self-censorship as a modern phenomenon (social media, political correctness, economic pressure)

Self-censorship would thus be defined as the self-imposed restriction of one's own voice, done not because of official legal exclusion but in fear of adverse outcomes. Unlike formal censorship, which comes from the outside in the form of a publicly bounded checking power like the state, self-censorship works internally. It is anticipatory: a speech act in which an individual withholds, adjusts, or excludes something that otherwise would be published, stated, or created lest — or in anticipation of — adverse reaction. The anticipated sanctions can be outrage from the public, damage to reputation, professional exclusion, loss of income, or institutional sanction.

Self-censorship in visual culture is most difficult to identify and investigate. It usually does not leave material trace: the unposted photograph, the unpainted canvas, the discarded idea. These silences do not usually come into public discussion, but they define the cultural landscape just as much as pieces that do come into existence. Some artists will quietly steer around subjects they suspect will invite hostility, ridicule, or public outcry; others will intentionally craft their work to perceived limits of social acceptability or market demand.

Above all, self-censorship is no figment of nondemocratic political settings. It happens among authoritarian regimes' citizens because they are genuinely at risk of state monitoring, detention, or judicial punishment. In liberal democracies, however, it takes more diffuse forms. The artist becomes deterred by cyberbullying, professional reputational damage, or cutoffs in access to funds and exhibition venues. Even without formal prohibitions, social convention, institutional policy, and the unspoken coercion of public opinion can have a strong impact on what is produced and offered. Social media has amplified these powers: sites operate in tandem

as both spaces of unparalleled visibility and as realms of intense scrutiny, where an image or line can cause mass-scale pushback or deplatforming.

Since it is self-controlled and frequently self-sustained, self-censorship will be hard to document or quantify. Scholars can't usually see the "negative space" of art — the possibilities not availed, the writing not done, the ideas placed quietly aside. But acknowledgment of such invisible limits is necessary in the understanding of how culture produces today. Each censorship decision changes the landscape of culture, constricting the boundaries of opinions, tastes, and ideas moving in public space.

Self-censorship must be studied not only to define the boundaries of artistic freedom today but also to comprehend its broader cultural import. It demonstrates how control mechanisms function beyond the law, penetrating daily decision-making and the inner dynamics of artists. It raises also extremely significant questions about creative autonomy: How much freedom does the artist have to follow their vision, and to what extent is that vision formulated in advance by expected response?

Self-censorship is examined here as a pervasive yet subtle force shaping contemporary artistic practice. Through theoretical perspectives, survey data, and representative case studies, the analysis considers how and why self-censorship emerges, the forms it assumes in both authoritarian and democratic settings, and its implications for the health and diversity of visual culture. By examining closely these dynamics, the chapter tries to shed light on the insidious but potent way fear of reaction can be as effective a limitation as any formal act of censorship.

Understanding self-censorship requires moving beyond the narrow view of censorship as merely a legal or political restriction. While formal censorship is imposed externally by clearly identifiable authorities, self-censorship emerges through the internalization of norms and the anticipation of consequences. It is an act of adjustment that precedes any formal prohibition, operating within the subtle interplay between personal agency and structural constraint. To account for the complicity of a phenomenon in visual culture, it is helpful to invoke a range of theoretical positions that situate such anticipatory compliance within larger structures of meaning, value, and domination.

Judith Butler's performativity theory, developed initially in relation to gender and identity, provides a framework for describing how the process of self-censorship becomes ingrained. Butler contends that identity is not an internal essence but rather is constituted through the reiterated performance of socially intelligible forms. That is, norms govern what may be seen as legitimate, coherent, and real within a certain cultural context. Such norms are double-edged: they make some expressions intelligible and worthwhile, and at the same time, make others unintelligible or unacceptable. In cultural production, this implies that what is considered "legitimate" art is never neutral; it is qualified by how well it meets current aesthetic and cultural expectations. When faced with such a situation, artists will consciously or unconsciously shape their work to fall within the parameters of what will be legitimized and funded. In this regard, the performance of socially legible forms is not only a method of obtaining professional legitimacy, but also a disguised form of self-censorship.

It is here that Pierre Bourdieu's examination of the cultural field expands on Butler's observation of the social mechanics of such performances. For Bourdieu, the cultural field is a structured arena of conflict among artists, critics, curators, and institutions for various forms of

capital — not just economic capital but symbolic capital, including prestige, influence, and legitimacy. Unequal access to this capital determines what is possible and desirable for cultural agents (Bourdieu, 1993). Positions near commercial or institutional power bases will generate work that is attuned to market needs or institutional agendas, and marginal positions will compensate by way of experimentation or overt political activism. Self-censorship, on these terms, is a strategic accommodation to the perceived demands of the field. By conforming their practice to the values and tastes of those who hold control over access to performances, funding, or critical notice, artists shield or augment their symbolic capital. Most of all, such accommodations tend to be felt as professional judgment rather than repression, making them still more difficult to discern — much less resist.

The structural aspect of this process is even more apparent in Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's examination of media systems in *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Chomsky describes how, in liberal democracies, overt censorship is not generally required: systemic "filters" like ownership concentration, advertiser reliance, and sourcing conventions guarantee that only particular stories reach the limelight. Journalists acquire these boundaries and practice what Chomsky describes as self-censorship — steering clear of subjects or frameworks that would compromise their credibility or invite institutional retaliation. The identical mechanism functions in the arts. Artists, sensitive to the norms of their cultural milieu, instinctively shy away from work that would be objectionable or injurious to their career. No explicit prohibition need be invoked; the boundaries have been internalized. This generates a feedback loop whereby both institutions and creators replicate the boundaries of acceptable expression without overt coercion.

Collectively, these views disclose self-censorship as more than an issue of personal restraint. Butler describes how norms delimit the very terms of recognizability, delineating what can be said; Bourdieu describes how the competitive dynamics of the cultural field direct artistic decision towards choices that optimize symbolic capital; Chomsky reveals the systemic filters that promote internalized compliance. Each framework shows a different facet of the same phenomenon: self-censorship as a deeply embedded, often invisible process that operates at the intersection of personal agency and structural constraint. Recognizing this complexity is essential to understanding why self-censorship persists across both authoritarian and democratic contexts — and how it continues to shape the diversity, risk-taking, and critical capacity of contemporary visual culture.

Social media is both a wonderful bounty and a possible danger for artists in our time. On the one hand, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X bring unparalleled visibility, channels of self-promotion, and straight communication with publics. They offer a space in which artists can sidestep conventional gatekeepers, share their works around the world, and create communities of practice. On the other hand, the platforms' openness exposes the creators to sharp public condemnation, rapid moral cycles, and reputational harm. In these circumstances, the threat of being "cancelled" — publicly criticized, shunned, or boycotted for a supposed wrongdoing — is a strong driver of self-censorship.

The cancel culture term is used politically and controversially, but it essentially describes the mass disendorsement of someone or an institution in reaction to behavior or words considered objectionable or threatening. Within the cultural sphere, the process is normally

enacted in the form of highly publicized internet campaigns, which can grow rapidly into sizeable amounts, fueled by the viral power of social media. For artists, the penalties are harsh: loss of public esteem, tarnished professional reputation, withdrawal of institutional support, and even de-listing from shows or websites. Most of all, the penalties can be applied not just for obviously objectionable work, but also for misconstrued, taken-out-of-context, or held-against-changing-cultural-norms work.

The velocity and pervasiveness of outrage on the web amplify its potency. Reception within the old media universes was binding over days, weeks, or months and was mediated by professional critics and institution-based discourse. On social media, there is instant feedback, often uninformed by context or reflection. One image, sentence, or visual allusion may be enough to create hundreds or thousands of responses in a few hours. The resulting attention — positive or negative — can have real professional impact. To artists who rely on popular support, patronage, or institutional partnership, the threat of such hostility is a powerful disincentive to experiment in subject, form, or style.

This environment produces what may be called anticipatory conformity. Artists discover, by experience and observation, what subjects, symbols, or sense of style will have a likelihood of causing controversy online. They will proactively shy away from work that broaches politically sensitive topics, questions mainstream moral ideologies or brushes up against culturally sensitive subjects. Such shying away is never openly declared as censorship but is rather justified as "being sensitive" or "being professional." But the result is the same: constriction of the set of ideas and topics that receive airplay.

The politics of "cancellation" also crosses over into drama about wider social phenomena, including identity politics and representation struggles. While demands for accountability can potentially support critical thinking and subvert the operation of toxic cultural norms, they can also encourage a culture of risk aversion that discourages individuals from experimentation and being nuanced. In visual culture, where meaning is more likely to be transmitted through uncertainty, metaphor, and complex symbolism, it can be totally stifling. The pressure for alignment, speed legibility, and legibility can homogenize sophisticated work, pushing artists to be drawn to safer, more predictable modes.

Most importantly, cancellation anxiety is not necessarily evenly distributed across the cultural field. New artists, those without strong institutional backing, or those who are part of groups that are underrepresented will tend to feel more pressure, since their livelihoods are typically precarious. Established artists with reputations and networks to fall back on may have more room to weather scandal, but even they are not necessarily immune to reputational damage in the hypernetworked digital era.

In this way, self-censorship is a strategic reaction to the dangers and uncertainties of appearing online. By eschewing specific topics or adapting their practice to what they perceive as audience demands, artists aim to preserve their careers and continue to have access to the networks and platforms that support them. But this self-protection comes at a price. It can disenfranchise the critical and experimental possibilities of art today, trading risk-taking for risk management and creativity for self-censorial caution.

The "fear of cancellation" is therefore a unique and widespread genre of self-censorship in the social media era. It is not a matter of official bans, but rather of artists' psychological and

professional calculations in advance of popular response. It thus illustrates the larger dynamics of constraint offered in this chapter: how cultural production is influenced not just by legislation and institutional culture, but also by the diffuse, capricious power of public opinion in a network culture.

Most directly related to fear of reprisal on the internet is the role of political correctness and institutionalization of DEI systems in the culture sector. Political correctness in a broad definition is language, representation, and behavior designed to be non-offending and expressing respect for historically oppressed or vulnerable groups. DEI efforts, increasingly institutionalized in museum, gallery, funding organization, and school policy, seek to right structural imbalances by affirming representation, access, and equity in cultural production and engagement. These ideals, as conceived, are an ethical desire for inclusiveness and social justice and have themselves catalyzed vast shifts in both the subject matter and institutional locations of art.

But such frameworks, in being so well meant, also risk suggesting implicit limits on what qualifies as acceptable expression. Artists will be pushed to conform to reigning narratives of representation or to avoid producing work that might be interpreted as insensitive, exclusionary, or in defiance of institutional requirements. These tensions may be overt, for example when a grant application specifies thematic priorities that align with DEI objectives, or implied, based on the artist's tact for prevailing cultural debate and susceptibility to damage to their reputation. They both contribute to the formation of a kind of anticipatory self-policing that informs artistic choices well prior to a work appearing in the public domain.

The tension is that DEI and political correctness are both enabling and constraining. They on the one hand open cultural space for works that foreground underrepresented perspectives and subvert exclusionary norms. They also have the tendency to make one avoid ambiguity, irony, or even critical treatment of sensitive material, particularly when such treatment threatens to be read as an endorsement of bad ideas. In a universe where subtlety gets lost in translation, and fallout from reputational harm due to perceived misstep is real, some artists would choose the relative safety of going along with the herd in following consensus positions.

This self-censorship is less about the suppression of ideas than about the restriction of thematic range and aesthetic possibilities. For instance, an artist may refuse to critique ambivalent or contradictory representations of identity for fear of undermining a politically empowering message. Likewise, pieces critical of the contradictions or constraints of activist discourse in general may be silenced lest they be charged with undermining solidarity. In each instance, the avoidance is not of lack of interest or creative aspiration, but of a deliberate choice to stay inside perceived boundaries of acceptability.

As with the politics of "cancel culture," the impact of political correctness and DEI pressures are not evenly distributed on the field of culture. Artists of powerful social classes may be held to account more forcefully on representation issues, and artists of subaltern classes may be confronted with the double bind of being asked — indeed required — to create work about their identity or community, not necessarily reflecting their own artistic ambitions. Either situation, self-censorship is a strategic accommodation to norms of the cultural and institutional matrix.

Lastly, political correctness and DEI are two-edged swords in today's visual culture. They can bring about the change required and expand the parameters of representation, but they can also enforce rigid, albeit unofficial, boundaries of what is considered acceptable expression. To the artists who work here, self-censorship might feel less like a compromise than a pragmatic concession — a means of remaining professionally relevant during a politically charged and morally complex cultural discussion.

In addition to social and cultural coercion, artists are subject to stringent constraints stemming from their institutional and economic dependencies. They are highly dependent on grants, residencies, commissions, and curator-organized exhibitions — modalities of support informed by institutional agendas and funding arrangements. Those agendas may be explicit, as theme guidelines in grant programs, or implicit, determined by the directors of an institution, the political culture, or benefactor interests. Even without formal restrictions, artists internalize a notion of what will qualify as fundable or marketable and tailor their work to meet these expectations.

This anticipatory adaptation can subsequently be a type of self-censorship, in instances that are competitive, or resource constrained. Material that threatens controversy — political commentary, socially contentious content, or challenging donor agendas — is susceptible to trimming or re-authoring to preserve access to funding. In commercial contexts, the same principle exists as artists adapt their practice to collector preferences or market tendencies to obtain sales and representation.

Even as they speak of such changes as utopian career plans, they have a cumulative effect: in the long run, they tend to diminish thematic and aesthetic diversity in the cultural realm. Daring to avoid controversy, increasingly, people take the surest path, which ensures stability but at the cost of limiting critical research and experimentation.

Social media sites in the modern era are no longer passive pipes to art visibility; they are commercial webs whose structure and administration profoundly impact what types of content flourish. Nick Srnicek (2017), in his book *Platform Capitalism*, contends that modern digital platforms are administered by an infrastructural monetization logic, one that generates profits through harvesting user data, addressable ads, and engagement maximization. This commercial logic does not merely structure platform economies — it also structures the cultural forms that flourish within them.

Drawing on this, Tarleton Gillespie (2018) theorizes algorithmic governance as how platform algorithms, moderation regimes, and community policies literally come to control user behavior by pre-prioritizing some content and excluding or marginalizing others. For visual culture, the regimes favor pre-prioritizing content that is commercially consumable, emotionally neutral, and advertiser-friendly and de-prioritizing labor that is complicated, politicized, ambiguous, or emotionally disturbing.

The intersection of Srnicek's and Gillespie's accounts is that what commentators have asserted to be an aesthetic algorithm is a byproduct of the interplay between commercial interests and algorithmic control. For creatives, this would result in visibility as a function of being able to craft one's work to fit the tastes of platform algorithms. Even without overt takedowns, algorithmic ranking algorithms reward posting frequency, trend-joining, and

shorter engagement spikes — all qualities that favor stylistic conformity and repetition of established templates.

Regimes of automated moderation serve further to incentivize these practices. Machine learning–powered filters occasionally misfire in flagging political symbolism, activist visuality, protest journalism, or even some classes of nudity and abstraction as "inappropriate" and removing or downranking them. In anticipation of such repercussions, producers self-censor by avoiding topics or tastes that they believe will perform poorly or stimulate moderation. This pre-emptive adjustment comports with the dynamic of self-censorship delineated above in this chapter: a type of internalized restriction whereby producers adapt practice in advance to avoid taking a risk on visibility, profit, or professional standing.

Over time, this process restricts the thematic and aesthetic diversity of art in digital public space — not by explicit prohibition, but by subtle algorithmic indication. Such a constraint interacts with the above-mentioned pressures in this chapter: fear of social retribution, compliance with DEI framework, and dependencies on institutional funding. They collectively establish a feedback loop where the most visible art on the internet is the least demanding, the least ambiguous, and the most consonant with platform control and market rationality.

Recognizing the impact of platform capitalism (Srnicek) and algorithmic management (Gillespie) on visual culture places those boundaries to artistic freedom no longer in place by state or institution. They are integrated into the very infrastructure on which art is presently made, shared, and consumed. Platforms act as *de facto* cultural gatekeepers in this way, shaping the visual identity of our digital era not through overt censorship, but by the implantation of commercial and normative bias into algorithms that determine what is viewed.

The survey instrument for this research was filled out by a focused yet representative sample of responders to solicit an array of attitudes toward censorship and self-censorship, and how they are connected to visual culture and the process of artistic production. Although the total number of samples is limited, it provides useful qualitative and quantitative information about how people think about and negotiate restrictions on their freedom of expression.

The geographic distribution of participants reflects the dual emphasis of the study on both democratic and post-authoritarian contexts. For the questionnaire, six respondents were based in Portugal, a liberal democratic EU member state, and one respondent was based in Poland, a democracy where recent years have seen intensified debate on freedom of expression, cultural policy, and national identity. In addition to the questionnaire, qualitative material from Belarusian artists was incorporated through interviews, since direct survey participation was not feasible due to political sensitivities. Taken together, this geographic pattern provides comparative context on the multiple ways censorship and self-censorship emerge across diverse sociopolitical environments.

Age distribution was grouped into two wide age ranges: 18–25 and 26–35. This bias toward young adults is particularly significant, given that both groups are intensely active in online domains in which so much of public discourse — and, indirectly, so much social and cultural coercion — happens. Younger interviewees are likely to be at earlier points in their working careers and are thus more potentially vulnerable to reputational harms both on- and

off-line. They are also more active users of social media sites, which have strong impacts on what is considered acceptable expression.

The occupational background was deliberately mixed to illustrate how self-censorship works within and outside the creative industries. Approximately 43% of the respondents self-identified as being working in the arts and culture industry — designers, illustrators, visual artists, and other artistic professionals. The remainder represented other industries like technology, business, and education. This cross-disciplinary study enriches the data set because it enables comparison of those immersed in cultural production — and thus immediately invested in aesthetic and expressive labor — with those whose professional expression passes through some network of institutional or corporate arrangements.

Social and cultural levels of participation also differed among the respondents, with some participants being significantly active in civic organizations, activism, or communal projects, and others indicating very low levels of activity beyond the demands of work. This differentiation is significant context within the examination of political and social sensitivity-related reactions, since individuals who are more publicly exposed or have more experience with activism might be subject to different pressures than those within work environments less publicly exposed.

Lastly, although the sample size renders statistical generalization at scale impossible, it offers an informative snapshot of opinion regarding censorship and self-censorship among a demographically youth, culturally active, and digitally fluent audience. These traits are significant because they describe the demographic groups most likely to be beset by the contradictions of art freedom, social responsibility, and professional life in a more networked and surveyed public sphere.

These population findings will be cross-referenced throughout these pages with the quantitative and qualitative findings of the questionnaire to shed light on trends in how censorship and self-censorship are thought about and used in professional and cultural settings.

The results indicate that self-censorship is a pervasive and normalized experience across the sample. An overwhelming 85.7% of respondents reported practicing self-censorship “sometimes” or “often” by avoiding certain words, topics, or opinions in public or professional contexts. This confirms that self-censorship is not an exceptional act but part of everyday communicative and creative decision-making.

When asked whether they believed freedom of expression should have no limits, 57.1% answered “only in some cases” and 42.9% answered “yes.” This suggests a nuanced understanding: respondents acknowledge certain limits as legitimate — typically when linked to protecting minority rights or preventing hate speech — but still value the principle of unrestricted expression in most circumstances.

Open-ended responses provided more texture to the quantitative results. Several participants described self-censorship as a form of “avoiding trouble” rather than as a political choice. One respondent noted:

“I don’t post some of my opinions online because it’s just easier not to get into conflict. It’s not worth the stress.”

Others pointed to professional considerations, such as maintaining good relationships with clients, collaborators, or institutions:

“If I work with a big client, I will avoid political statements on my social media, even if I personally agree with them.”

These statements illustrate that self-censorship is often motivated by pragmatic self-preservation, blending personal, professional, and reputational concerns.

Summary of Key Findings:

Variable	Key Result	Percentage
Prevalence of self-censorship	Practise “sometimes” or “often”	85.7%
View on limits to expression	Accept some limits	57.1%
Main source of pressure	Society / public opinion	71.4%
Secondary sources	Government	42.9%
	Social media platforms	28.6%
Most dangerous source	Government	42.9%
	Social media backlash	28.6%
	Cancel culture / economic pressure	14.3%
Impact on creativity	High (4–5 scale)	85.8%
Perceived social sensitivity	High (4/5)	57.1%

Note. Multiple responses were allowed for some questions; totals may exceed 100%. See Appendix 5.2 for visual representations of these findings.

The combined analysis of interview and questionnaire responses identify a range of recognizable patterns in the consideration and practice of censorship and self-censorship today. Both within and outside authoritarian settings, self-censorship presents as normalized, routinised process — not as exceptional action to extraordinary pressures, but as everyday action of choice-making on what to say, reveal, or produce. The results highlight that the phenomenon cannot be accounted for based on reference to censorship by the state but rather serves as a multidimensional interaction between political, social, institutional, economic, and digital pressures.

One of the most striking of the trends is the virtually overwhelming predominance of social and cultural pressures as perceived constraints on expression. Whereas authoritarian regimes must have overt means of repression — legal restrictions, bugging, penal sanctions — interviewees within both democratic settings ranked society and public opinion as the most frequent sources of pressure (71.4%). This indicates that the means of constraint are becoming more varied: in most instances, the overriding force for restricting expression is not the state but the opinion of fellow citizens, audiences, or groups. This is confirmed through interviews, as artists in both settings explaining how they steer clear of certain subjects to prevent discord, reputation loss, or isolation from society.

A second is the internalization of constraint. Either due to fear of prosecution under the law or outrage at their social behavior, respondents explained that they adjusted their behavior prior to intervention taking place. Self-regulation ahead of time was typically rationalized as “common sense” or “professionalism,” but not censorship itself. Under authoritarian governments, as in Belarus, it is usually the outcome of the aggregative consequences of

existing under pervasive surveillance and threat, in which small deviation from approved norms may involve out-of-proportion risk. Democracies use the same process but less overtly: it is awareness of changing cultural norms, increased social sensitivity, and the reputation economy of being observed online.

When self-censorship is placed in the context of democratic and authoritarian regimes, similarity and contrast are present. In both settings, the result is the same: the reduction of the thematic and aesthetic scope of expression. The causes and forms, nevertheless, are different. In totalitarian regimes, the lines are clearer: express law and overtly acknowledged symbolic taboos establish where harm can be placed, and transgressions can spell ready, concrete consequences like arrest, punishment, or professional blacklisting. The boundaries in democratic countries are vaguer, in process of being renegotiated by social discourse, institutional routine, and platform moderation. Consequences in such cases are likely to be financial or reputational, not criminal, but they can still achieve the purpose of silencing voices, particularly those with no institutional cover or market protection.

A third broad trend is the facilitation effect of digital platforms. As mentioned previously, social media is a path to visibility and is also a site of vulnerability. Platforms' algorithms, moderation rules, and community guidelines meet with social forces to amplify certain voices and render others more marginal. Artists' spaces here not only amplify exposure to the public eye but also affects artistic decision-making in invisible yet profound ways. The pressure to remain visible algorithmically or to budget for content removal is a further layer of pre-emptive self-censorship that restricts expressiveness further.

The repetition and normalization of self-censorship pose great threats to the health of visual culture. To begin with, there is the threat of homogenization: as artists across contexts actively eschew controversial or questionable topics, the cultural field becomes less diverse, challenging, and innovative. Second, self-censorship may disempower the critical agency of art. The strength of art to unsettle, provoke, and discomfort is built upon its ability to escape the comfort zones of its consumer; if those comfort zones end up being the driving force behind production, then art can be a farce for confirmation rather than a pursuit of inquiry. And finally, there is the specter of invisibility by omission. Issues, perspectives, and visual regimes that are not within the prevailing histories — political, social, or commercial — can simply become invisible, not because they were repressed but because they were never brought into being.

They identify the paradox at the center of modern-day self-censorship: in most instances, it is not spurred by explicit bans, but by a complex web of incentives, expectations, and actual risk within the surrounding cultural environment. The phenomenon thus becomes relevant not only as an index of political repression, but as a component of art creation in the 21st century. This entails an awareness that the "freedom" of creation is always circumscribed by the conditions in which creation occurs — and that such conditions, established through the authoritarian fiat or democratic deliberation, have a strong bearing on the extent, diversity, and density of visual culture.

The trends revealed in this analysis show that self-censorship is not a fringe occurrence nor an issue specific to authoritarian regimes. It is a functional state of modern cultural production, influenced by the interrelations between political repression, social expectations, institutional structure, and platform policies. Although the immediate cause and apparent

outcome vary across environments, the net result is the same: a narrowing of the imaginative sphere within which artists operate.

Having established the key pressures, sources, and mechanisms of self-censorship as they appear in authoritarian and democratic contexts, the next step is to explore how these forces interact with broader cultural and political contexts. Specific case studies and comparisons are taken up in the following sections to gain not only the constraints themselves but also adaptive strategies, resistances, and new forms of expression that arise in response. By turning attention away from description and toward interpretation, these chapters will consider whether — and how — creativity can endure, change, or even flourish under conditions of constraint.

2.7. Comparison between different cultural and political contexts

This chapter responds to the dissertation's key research question: how are different cultural and political environments, ranging from authoritarian regimes through to democratic societies, shaping the negotiation of censorship and tolerance within visual culture? By comparing a range of case studies, the analysis elicits both the differences and the unexpected convergences that follow through environments with differing patterns of governance, institutions, and social norms.

Cross-cultural comparison of the functioning of censorship and self-censorship is necessary to avoid oversimplification and to spot patterns that would otherwise go unnoticed. Arguments concerning artistic freedom are susceptible to oversimplifications — characterizing authoritarian regimes as completely repressive and democratic regimes as completely open. Though such discrepancies are not unfounded, they fail to explain the subtle and interpenetrating character of how creative production is negotiated on the ground. Artists within different milieus must contend with different configurations of constraint, but their impact on their work may overlap in unforeseen manners.

The comparative methodology enables the possibility of being able to recognize both structural convergences and context-specific divergences between the mechanisms that circumscribe artistic production. It makes the process between open repression — such as the symbolic bans, legal bans, and punitive measures of authoritarian regimes — and less overt modes of constraint, such as institutional gatekeeping, reputational risk, and web platform moderation in liberal democracies, clear. By laying side-by-side the three types of regimes, we can be more certain about how varying sources of pressure drive similar behavior: the adjustment, avoidance, or intentional repression of ideas.

This is not an appeal to draw political differences between systems, but to chart the spectrum of constraint within which visual artists must work. An understanding of the spectrum of these constraints — and the diversity with which they are addressed by artists — is at the heart of building a more complete picture of contemporary visual culture. It also provides the foundation for determining those adaptive strategies, resistances, and reconfigurations that arise in such differing contexts and shed light on the broader question of how creativity persists in the context of control.

This comparative chapter relies on a mix of qualitative approaches and interpretative analysis to examine how censorship and self-censorship operate in various political and cultural

contexts. The empirical data comprises semi-structured interviews with visual artists from both illiberal (e.g., Belarus) and liberal democratic (e.g., Portugal) regimes, as well as feedback from an anonymous questionnaire sent out to artists and cultural workers. These conclusions are substantiated by visual analysis of images of protest, exhibition histories, and controversy case studies, and are also placed in context within theoretical literature on censorship, performativity, and media regulation.

Although the quantity of interviews and survey responses is not sufficient to allow for statistically generalizable claims, the richness and unanimity of the responses identify important patterns. The comparative focus here is not meant to imply equivalence between systems but, rather, to trace how differently organized societies can generate similar emotional and creative tensions. The discussion unfolds through thematic clustering — starting with blatant repression under authoritarian regimes, then the more subtle dynamics of democratic situations — before tracking parallels and contrasts. Along the way, the focus is on the lived experiences of artists and the ways in which they negotiate, internalize, and resist their environments of control.

In authoritarian settings, censorship is generally implicit, institutionalized, and supported by law. Artists are not left to fantasize about what one can do and what one cannot do — artists have instructed them, frequently accompanied by a possibility of imprisonment, monitoring, or deportation. This chapter is devoted to two magnificent case studies: 20th-century Soviet Union and Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko. Despite the disparity in time and ideological incline, both states share the same strategy of aesthetics governance and opposition.

Under the Soviet regime, censorship was formalized by state authority and aesthetic conformity. Socialist Realism, the only official style of art after the 1930s, was both a political doctrine and an idiomatic language of the visual arts. Artists were to celebrate Soviet existence, depict workers and leaders in heroic terms, and eliminate all vagueness or abstraction. Departure from these norms — "formalist," "bourgeois," or "anti-Soviet" — might mean blacklisting, arrest, or worse. But even in the repressive atmosphere of those times, underground artistic life thrived. The so-called "nonconformist" movement of art found its foundations in private flats, garages, and unofficial "apartment shows," where alternative aesthetics that were formally and conceptually opposite to state art developed. The Bulldozer Exhibition in Moscow in 1974, closed by the government by force, turned into an emblem of such resistance.

This case highlights how overt prohibition generates parallel cultural systems, where alternative aesthetics and counter-narratives evolve outside state-sanctioned spaces. It illustrates the direct link between repression and the emergence of alternative artistic institutions.

The Belarus precedent is a recent application of the same mechanism of control. Ever since the controversial presidential elections of 2020, the nation has lived through a poisonous campaign of political oppression, and the culture community was no exception. Artists and designers turned into direct victims of control, arrest, and public humiliation. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this censorship was the prohibition on the white-red-white flag, an historical national emblem revived by protesters. The flag, previously official, became a criminalized visual sign — its very presence in art, fashion, or virtual avatars could result in detention.

Belarusian artists interviewed in this dissertation referred to working under what one described as a "semantic war" — where even choice of color, type, and composition were read politically. Art was war at the symbolic level. Metaphor, abstraction, and visual coding became survival strategies for most artists. Others fled to anonymity or exile. In a provocative step, Artur Wakarow's "30 Posters about 30 Years of Dictatorship," made in Poland, renders each decade of Lukashenko's rule into an independent symbolic protest image — muzzled lips, chains, cameras, and erased faces. They call upon previous dissident tropes and retool them for the modern global digital age.

Both examples demonstrate how art resistance amidst repression is influenced by restraint. In the USSR, artists had established parallel systems of criticism, dissemination, and production. In Belarus, online platforms such as Telegram took the same function, facilitating encrypted sharing of protest posters and facilitating a new style of decentralized visual activism. What these sketches demonstrate is that censorship, even in its most brutal manifestations, cannot destroy artistic imagination — it just makes it adapt.

In contrast to the Soviet case, the Belarusian examples show how digital platforms such as Telegram now perform the function once held by underground apartment exhibitions, enabling decentralized resistance. This demonstrates continuity in tactics of metaphor and coded symbolism, but also the transformation of mediums under contemporary authoritarianism.

In democratic nations like Portugal, open practice of censorship is uncommon by the state. It most often occurs through soft censorship—means like institutional gatekeeping, reputational risk, and algorithmic content control. Though artists are supposedly granted freedom of expression, they are often subject to informal but coercive pressures within the cultural system to guide their creative work.

Portuguese visual artists' interviews showed evidence of a much-publicized phenomenon of laboring behind what the majority quoted as an "invisible wall." One of them noted: "Freedom there is—but there is always fear of being misunderstood, so sometimes one decides not to speak." The phenomenon evidences a normative self-censorship governed not by law forbidding, but by anticipatory social conformity, in accordance with Judith Butler's performativity theory that places expression within culturally intelligible limits.

A well-documented institutional instance makes this dynamic clear: in 2015, the Porto's Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art removed several works from an exhibition of photographs by North American artist Robert Mapplethorpe, judging them "pornographic." João Ribas, the exhibition curator, resigned in public protest at institutional pressure to remove 20 images on his behalf. This illustrates how censorship in a non-autocratic institutional setting can dramatically change curatorial autonomy and public display.

A second instance is the 2023 Porto Photography Biennial. In their show *Vento (A)mar*, the artist-duo Paulo Pinto and Dori Nigro addressed Portugal's colonial slave past with site-specific panels exhibited in a former psychiatric hospital founded by a slave owner. Three works were removed by administrators because they directly implicated the institution's patron in profiting from slavery. The censorship decision provoked public debate and press coverage, after which the Biennial reinstated the installation in a modified form, drawing attention to how

institutional sensitivity can obscure collective memory and artistic critique (Artnet News, 2023; Bienal de Fotografia do Porto, 2023; Esquerda.net, 2023).

Unlike authoritarian settings where repression is centralized, these Portuguese cases reveal how censorship in democratic societies operates through dispersed mechanisms — institutional sensitivity, public opinion, and algorithmic governance. While less visibly violent, such constraints equally shape artistic practice.

Cyberspace is also space for self-censorship. Portuguese artists attest that works with nudity, political symbols, or unconventional aesthetics get down-ranked, shadow-banned, or demonetized—despite being in conformance with community standards. Algorithmic filtering thus spurs self-censorship as artists foresee modifying their artworks beforehand to prevent loss of visibility—yet another form of soft censorship less difficult to digest and more difficult to monitor.

These illustrations suggest that soft censorship in Portugal never assumes the form of explicit bans, but functions by way of institutional, social, and technological control. Choices of creativity are mitigated by neither legality, but by expectation, reputation, and profitability. Although the nation's democratic regime offers legal cover for free expression, the lived experience of artists enunciates a mediated freedom—being but framed by normative expectation and systemic mediation.

In both democratic and authoritarian regimes, censorship has radially disparate forms — but in its psychological impact and its artistic output, it is frequently the same. Artists in both worlds describe experiences of constriction, uncertainty, and self-repression, but under the stimulus of disparate control mechanisms.

In stateless authoritarian states like Belarus or the ex-USSR, censorship tends to be overt, top-down, and punitive. It is also codified and may involve surveillance, threats, or legal persecution. In such environments, artists said they self-censored or withheld their work to prevent arrest, exile, or livelihood loss. Symbolic decisions — say, using or not using colors, fonts, or cultural references — became not just aesthetics but survival mechanisms.

In contrast, liberal democracies such as Portugal do not practice censorship in the formal sense. Artists are not particularly afraid of the police — but could be afraid of reputation attacks, losing money, or social exclusion. Thus, they will censor themselves in advance to satisfy institutional standards, stay out of controversy, or obtain algorithmic view logic on social media. This creates a more suspicious climate of regulation, where boundaries are not declared but acutely sensed.

Despite such contextual variation, all have some behaviors and affects in common:

- Softening political or personal material to avoid being misread or overread in both contexts.
- Metaphor and ambiguity are the prevailing tactics: in Belarus to circumvent state oppressiveness, in Portugal to navigate delicate social politeness.
- Self-censorship becomes habitual: either as a state expectation or social expectation, artists police themselves before others do.

But the location of pressure is utterly different. Under authoritarian regimes, pressure is applied by a centralized, single agent — typically the state — and is overt in intent. Under

democracies, pressure is diffuse: from institutions, audiences, fans, and algorithmic sites, generating a diffuse sense of what can be done.

Resistance modes also differ. In authoritarian regimes, resistance is likely to take the shape of coded communication, anonymous distribution, and diasporic action. In democratic societies, resistance could be in the mode of curatorial dissent, institutional criticism, or ironic disruption of consensus narratives.

Therefore, while the geography of censorship changes totally between political regimes, the emotional geography remains identical. Artists across all regimes describe tension between expression and retaliation, freedom and fear, imagination and constraint. This common experience implies that censorship in the contemporary world needs to be imagined not as a distinction between free and unfree society, but as an arc — a multifaceted interplay of law, norm, and perception.

This comparison of open and repressive systems shows that no system, either democratic or authoritarian, can provide complete artistic freedom. Freedom in repressive systems is withheld by legal prohibition and coercion; in open systems, often subtly redesigned by expectations, reputation risk, or institutional design. In both situations, the boundaries of expression are not necessarily well defined — they are sensed, expected, or internalized.

Artists then must work through an invisible system of acceptability, either imposed by state censorship or developed by cultural ethos. The machinery is different, but the necessary existential bargaining is the same. What can be said? What must be left unspoken? What will get misread?

In this situation, the artist is not merely a producer of culture — he or she is, also, a mediator between worlds of symbols and politics. Particularly artists who have had to endure both ends of the spectrum — e.g., Belarusian artists in exile in democracies — provide an interesting explanation of how visual language negotiates to the situations surrounding them. These artists undertake a variety of registers of risk, coded language, and ethical responsibility.

What results is an understanding that censorship not only "forestalls" creativity — it redefines its parameters, determining the limits of what may be imagined and articulated. Instead of situating freedom within some context, we need to grasp it as a movable border — defined by whom, where, to whom, and under what circumstances.

This is a meditation that tasks us to consider the artist not as dissident or victim, but as intermediary between systems — one who understands and moves through the mute grammars of sight that define our era.

This comparative analysis strengthens the theoretical understanding of censorship and self-censorship as on a continuum, not as an absolute dichotomy. Through Foucault's theory of power as productive, Butler's performativity theory, and Fraser's critical examination of the public sphere, the cases illustrate how artistic practices are negotiated in conditions of overt repression and in conditions of diffuse, low-key pressures. While the control modes differ in essence for authoritarian and democratic systems, they intersect with each other in affecting artistic activity in the generation of metaphor, coded symbolism, and futural self-restraint. These results emphasize the necessity for future scholarship to explore further how digital infrastructures, institutional policy, and social expectation all contribute to remaking the terms

of creative liberty, so that censorship is not only a political or legal process but an all-pervasive cultural force between societies.

3. Conclusion and Future Directions:

3.1. Reframing Censorship in the 21st Century

Across the multiple case studies and theoretical approaches covered here in this dissertation, censorship is uncovered as a far more variegated and subtle phenomenon than the simplistic association with authoritarian repression might suggest. Even in authoritarian regimes, there remains access to overt institutions of repression — prohibition of symbols, explicit state surveillance, law-based prohibition, and criminal prosecution — but these only constitute one element of an extensive array of practices controlling expression. Alongside explicit repression, more subtle forms of regulation have gained prominence, operating through cultural norms, institutional protocols, economic dependencies, and digital infrastructures. It is therefore necessary to reframe censorship not as a singular practice of suppression, but as a spectrum that moves from authoritarian control to diffuse and distributed forms such as social sanctioning, algorithmic moderation, and anticipatory self-censorship.

This dissertation contributes to theoretical debate over censorship by expanding its comprehension past the classic Foucauldian disciplinary prohibition paradigm. Foucault located censorship in a list of diffuse power mechanisms that organize discourse, but the evidence outlined in this paper reveals how new control practice also includes algorithmic filtering, institutional sensitivity, and anticipatory self-censorship. Positioning these dynamics on a continuum from authoritarian repression to democratic regulation, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of censorship as both restrictive and productive, organizing visibility, legitimacy, and aesthetics of visual culture.

Along this continuum, the least subtle and most coercive type of censorship would be the authoritarian model. As demonstrated with the Belarus examples, artistic liberty may be clipped outright through banning politically confrontational symbols, criminalizing the opposition, and harassing dissidents. Even in such an environment, however, artists do not completely stop creating; instead, they adapt, circumventing meaning through metaphor, irony, or encoded symbolism. The mere fact that these sorts of strategies exist suggests that censorship is not simply collapsible to prohibition but as a formative condition that shapes the very aesthetics of culture production.

Altering terrain away from authoritarian regimes, the example of Portugal shows how censorship works as social and institutional pressure and not state coercion. There, artists and curators spoke of "ideological expectations" associated with social justice, political correctness, and institutional policy. These mechanisms do not completely suppress expression but stabilize a system of acceptability within which cultural production is gauged. In this sense, censorship works not as erasure of content but as perpetual calibration of what is proper, sensitive, or legitimate in public space. This transition is important to grasp to understand how free societies, in their celebration of freedom of expression, depend on methods to restrict or condition what may be spoken or depicted.

The digital environment makes these dynamics even more complicated by introducing algorithmic means of regulation. As Tarleton Gillespie (2018) illustrated in his work on content moderation and algorithmic governance, platforms are turning into new curators of culture: they

do not merely allow or ban but amplify certain voices and render others invisible. Through ranking, recommending, and deleting, algorithms unobtrusively shape the boundaries of cultural visibility. This is perhaps most evident in the censoring of nudity, political opposition, or content that is deemed "unsafe," with artists having their content removed, shadow-banned, or relegated to the edges of digital flow. Algorithmic censorship thus reconfigures cultural hierarchies not by law but by code, so the politics of visibility are an infrastructural issue.

Recent scholarship has further emphasized this infrastructural dimension. Suzor et al. (2019) argue that platform governance establishes normative frameworks that shape expression as effectively as legal regimes. Likewise, Gorwa, Binns, and Katzenbach (2020) describe algorithmic moderation as a form of "infrastructural power," operating less through prohibition and more through shaping the conditions of visibility and legitimacy. These perspectives complement Gillespie's (2018) analysis by underscoring that digital regulation functions simultaneously as governance, infrastructure, and cultural curation.

Finally, self-censorship appears as both the most intimate and most pervasive form of regulation. Interview and survey answers suggested that artists tend to alter work beforehand in expectation of negative reaction from audiences, patrons, or institutions. These alterations — removal of certain images, alteration of color palettes, or watering down political criticism — are instances of internalization of risk. As Judith Butler (2006) reminds us with performativity theory, norms are upheld less by explicit prohibition than by their constant rehearsal in practice. Self-censorship is a case in point: what appears to be an individual decision is determined by the broader systems of expectation and obligation.

This resonates with empirical findings from European contexts, where artists and journalists report modifying their work in anticipation of negative consequences. Farkas and Schou (2020) show that such anticipatory practices emerge not from direct repression but from diffuse forms of expectation and reputational risk, reinforcing Butler's insight into the performative reproduction of norms.

Out of seven respondents to the questionnaire, six acknowledged practicing self-censorship "sometimes" or "often" in professional or public communication. As one Belarusian interviewee noted, "Even choosing the wrong color could be seen as a provocation and put you at risk," while a Portuguese artist reflected, "Freedom is there, but there is always fear of being misunderstood." Such statements give empirical weight to the claim that self-censorship is not incidental but a habitual condition of cultural production.

Altogether, these arguments indicate a revolution in the definition of censorship. The older model of censorship as direct prohibition decreed by the government is insufficient for the twenty-first century. What has emerged in its place is a more differentiated model where censorship is lived through visibility, acceptability, and representation. Censorship does not just silence but also coordinates what may show itself, what may flow, and what may become legitimate.

The central premise of this dissertation is therefore that censorship can be understood not only as a repressive power of prohibition but also as a productive one. By producing boundaries, censorship also produces new norms of legitimacy and forces creatives to invent alternative means of presentation. This accords with Michel Foucault's (1990) definition that power is not merely repressive but productive as well: it generates knowledge, discourses, and

practices even as it constrains them. Likewise, Butler's (2006) performativity thoughts illustrate how norms are repeated and solidified, whereas Gillespie's (2018) research on algorithmic governance illustrates the infrastructural character of control in the contemporary period.

A comparison of these theorists fortifies the argument. Foucault illuminates the structural and historical dimensions of censorship in the diffusion of power. Butler underlines the performative nature of norms, where self-censorship gets entangled with social responsibility and ethical obligation. Gillespie takes the debate into the virtual space, showing how algorithms act as new curators of visibility and legitimacy. Considered together, these perspectives indicate that censorship in the twenty-first century cannot be accounted for in a monolithic mode but will have to be synthesized from structural, performative, and technological modes.

Recontextualizing censorship in this way renders visible its contradictory position within the cultural field. It is not an easy-to-identify limit to creative freedom nor an entirely external requirement but more a constitutive aspect of how culture functions. Censorship in every guise comes to determine what can be thought, seen, and uttered and structures the terrain on which artists labor. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more nuanced understanding of artistic production today: one where creativity unfolds not despite censorship but through it, navigating, resisting, and at times even appropriating its constraints.

As with all qualitative inquiry, these results must be interpreted with some provisos. The empirical material is geographically focused on Belarus and Portugal, with additional references to broader European and post-Soviet contexts, which limits the generalizability of findings. The number of interviews and questionnaires remains relatively small, offering depth rather than statistical representation. Temporally, the analysis is restricted to the period of 2020–2023, and conditions may evolve rapidly considering shifting technological and political landscapes. Moreover, exceptions exist, such as artists who deliberately refuse to self-censor regardless of repercussions. Identifying these limitations enhances the academic reliability of the study and provides directions for future research that would expand coverage across other regions, domains, and periods.

3.2. Beyond Suppression: Creativity Under Constraint

Though censorship is typically imagined as a force that dampens only expression, the data presented in this dissertation show that restrictions tend to generate new styles of creativity. Far from halting cultural production, censorship provokes artists to devise alternative tactics that redirect meaning in metaphors, irony, coded symbolism, or oblique reference. These strategies not only allow artists to survive repressive conditions but also redefine the aesthetic vocabulary of their art, making a lasting impact on cultural forms. As shown in Chapter 2.6, artists frequently navigate censorship through self-censorship and adaptation. Building on those insights, this chapter demonstrates how such constraints generate new creative tactics.

One of the most common of these strategies is the use of metaphor. Where overt political critique is dangerous, metaphorical imagery can enable communication that addresses audiences experienced in the coded allusion without at once inviting repression. Belarusian protest posters after the 2020 elections are a fine illustration of this tactic: flower, domestic, or

folk symbolism became vectors of opposition, making commonplace imagery into symbols of resistance. What appears as unengaging visual material acquires a double meaning, legible to insiders who understand the cultural code but harder to suppress for authorities. As one Belarusian artist explained in an interview: “When you cannot show the flag, you draw a flower, and everyone knows what it means.”

Connected closely are irony and humor. Satirical re-purpose of state rhetoric, caricature of politicians, or absurdist pairings subvert the seriousness of state narratives and demonstrate their vulnerability. This form of creative diversion has been cited as a survival strategy under authoritarianism for centuries, seen in Soviet underground humor and visual satire (Fitzpatrick, 1992). The discussion in Chapter 2.4 illustrates how the Soviet nonconformist movement made irony into a covert language of dissent in the face of Socialist Realism. In the USSR, and in Belarus, irony was not only entertainment, but also subversive practice through which publics could voice dissent without direct confrontation. One respondent to the questionnaire noted: “Jokes and absurdity were safer than slogans, because they confused authorities but united us.”

Repetition and circulation of visual codes across various media is another significant strategy. One would discover the same theme in posters, graffiti, cloth, and performance art, weaving a network of familiarity and solidarity. The visual echo carries the message further and authenticates it by seeding it in different cultural registers. These patterns resonate with the comparison in Chapter 2.7, where commemorative practices in Portugal and Belarus show how repetition transforms individual works into shared visual languages. In Belarus, the white-red-white color scheme worked in that way, and in Portugal the Carnation Revolution has continued to symbolically resonate with the repeated use of red carnations in artworks and remembrance (Rezola, 2019). These repetitions transform individual works into works of a larger aesthetic movement, where the act of citation is an act of resistance.

Anonymity and collective authorship are also important responses to censorship. In Belarus, artists tend to publish anonymously, or with false collective pseudonyms, as a way of evading persecution. This anonymity, however, is not merely protective but generates a sense of shared authorship and dulls the emphasis on solo genius, shifting attention to the effort in common. In contrast, Portuguese cultural practice within a democratic context tends to embrace institutional models, yet these same tensions are present when curators or artists evade attribution to remain outside of politics. Anonymity in this case does not signal the muzzling of voice, but a redirection of agency that is itself an aesthetic and political move. As described by a Belarusian interviewee: “It is easier to post anonymously — not only to survive but to feel we are doing it together.”

This strategy recalls earlier discussions in Chapter 2.5, where dissident art under totalitarian regimes often relied on local idioms and materials to construct counter-publics. The use of local language and cultural allusions also illustrates the way constraint generates creativity. In the USSR, unofficial art took recourse to vernacular materials and idioms — from samizdat publications to improvisational exhibition spaces — to construct counter-publics outside the reach of official institutions (Groys, 1992). Contemporary Belarusian artists also employ such tactics, invoking folkloric references or general craft practices as tools of commentary in the here and now. These reappropriations are not nostalgic flashbacks but affirmative rearrangements of cultural heritage to convey opposition in situations of constraint.

What such instances demonstrate is that constraint does not always lead to silence. Instead, it compels artists to reorient practice, creating aesthetic languages that inscribe criticism while unfolding the maximal expressive capacities of art. Censorship of overt speech leads to an increased reliance upon ambiguity, symbolism, and multiple meaning, and produces a cultural landscape that is both bounded and richly inventive. Taken together with the findings of Chapter 2.7 on cross-cultural comparison, these examples reinforce the argument that censorship operates less as an exception than as a constitutive condition of artistic practice.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that censorship does not always generate creativity. In some cases, repression leads to silence, exile, or abandonment of artistic practice altogether. Several artists interviewed emphasized that they sometimes chose not to create at all, as the personal risk outweighed the possibility of coded expression. Acknowledging these limits provides critical balance and prevents an overly romanticized view of constraint.

By this, censorship can be seen as a paradoxical force: it aims to constrain but does so in a way that encourages aesthetic innovation. The tactics of art like metaphor, irony, visual iteration, anonymity, and regional cultural allusion demonstrate how creativity through limitation gives rise to novel forms of expression which endure longer than the duration of repression. Instead of temporary solutions, such strategies redefine visual culture itself, with the memory of war and the creativity of survival. The reconfiguration of cultural forms under censorship highlights the central argument of this dissertation: that censorship not merely represses art but constitutes it, demonstrating how constraint is a prerequisite for creativity. These findings connect back to the reframing of censorship in Chapter 3.1, confirming that constraint is not merely repressive but also constitutive. At the same time, they set the stage for the following section (3.3), which explores how resistance functions as both political critique and affective belonging.

3.3. Resistance as Memory and Belonging

Resistance in art is not simply a reaction to political repression; it is an act of memory and belonging too. The visual practices analyzed in this dissertation prove that artists resist, not just to challenge authoritarian power, but to sustain histories, to speak identities, and to sustain collective presence. Artistic resistance is therefore political critique and an affective performance of care bringing people to people across time.

Building on Chapter 3.1's reconceptualization of censorship as productive and Chapter 3.2's focus on creativity under constraint, this section expands the analysis by considering resistance as both political critique and affective belonging. Whereas Chapter 3.2 highlighted how constraints generate new forms of creativity, this section shows how such creativity acquires an additional dimension of memory and belonging.

A crucial part of this process is included in what Marianne Hirsch (1997, 2012) has labeled postmemory. Postmemory explains the relationship of subsequent generations with traumatic events that they have not experienced themselves but to which they remain greatly connected through images, stories, and cultural discourses. For Belarusian artists, politicization of symbols such as the white-red-white flag or folkloric subjects is political protest but also a way of restoring repressed historical identity. Circulation of these images constitutes an

affective archive that enables continuity between generations even when there is state erasure. By reframing visual culture as a space of postmemory, resistance is a performance of cultural survival and historical obligation. As one Belarusian artist interviewed put it: “Every time I use the red and white colors, I feel I am continuing what my parents could not say out loud.” A Portuguese respondent similarly noted: “When I photograph carnations on April 25, it is not only about history, it is about showing we are still connected to that freedom.” This confirms earlier studies on the symbolic power of protest memory in Eastern and Southern Europe (Kubik, 2018).

Resistance as belonging has another aspect in Ariella Azoulay’s (2008) idea of the civil contract of photography. For Azoulay, the act of viewing a photograph invokes an ethical relationship between the photographed figure and the viewer, and one which necessitates acknowledgement and address. In censorship situations, this theory points to the way that images not only describe but build communities of responsibility. Belarusian protest images streamed through Telegram channels, for example, bond those in and outside the country into a shared moral space. Carnation Revolution commemorating images in Portugal also act as picture covenant of belonging, relating the memory of struggle for democracy in the here and now. In both cases, images extend beyond record to provide ethical and political attachments. Recent scholarship further confirms that images in digital circulation do not merely record but actively sustain communities of belonging (Reading, 2016; Garde-Hansen, 2021).

Resistance is also articulated through the creation of zones of affective belonging. Visual art often provides what political institutions may not be able to offer: recognition, solidarity, and presence together. Exhibitions, posters, or street performances can generate temporary publics that allow individuals to be part of something larger than themselves. Under repressive authoritarianism, that space is precarious; under democratic conditions, they are places of re-figuring identity and belonging. In either case, resistance is not the issue of “saying no” to repression but one of asserting presence and upholding bonds of community. Political resistance directly confronts systems of authority, often seeking immediate change, whereas affective resistance sustains cultural identity, solidarity, and intergenerational bonds. Both forms intersect, but distinguishing them helps clarify the multiple registers in which resistance operates.

Further, resistance as belonging functions beyond the moment of protest to the terrain of cultural continuity. In the USSR, unofficial art created parallel circuits of circulation and remembrance under which other histories were preserved outside official institutions (Groys, 1992). Underground shows and web-based archives today in Belarus continue the tradition, building remembrance infrastructures that ensure visibility to marginal histories. Portuguese artistic references to the April 25 Revolution are a reminder that democracy itself is not a completed work but one that must be continually refreshed by acts of collective memory.

This perspective complements the creative strategies under censorship outlined in Chapter 3.2: whereas those strategies focused on metaphor, irony, and anonymity as tactics of survival, here resistance is understood as a broader practice of cultural care and collective continuity. These stories suggest that resistance, far from being exhausted in direct political action, is a sustained cultural practice. It testifies that membership is not an institutional thing that can be posited by automatic membership but is produced through shared images, symbols,

and narratives. Resistance, then, is both an ethical and a political act: it preserves memory, inscribes place, and makes available collective forms of survival.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that resistance does not always achieve lasting political or cultural transformation. At times, acts of resistance remain largely symbolic or ephemeral, unable to counteract systemic repression. Several interviewees stressed this difficulty, noting that while artistic gestures create solidarity, they may not change immediate political realities. Recognizing these limits avoids idealizing resistance and underscores the fragile balance between expression and impact (Etkind, 2020; Jordão, 2022).

Simplifying this perspective, visual culture resistance must be understood as both political and affective. It resists censorship and repression but also creates communities that maintain memory and belonging. By calling upon the work of Hirsch on postmemory and Azoulay on the civil contract of photography, we see how resistance works not merely as opposition but as a practice of care, one that maintains open the horizon of solidarity across generations and borders. Resistance in this sense is not simply a question of coping with constraint, but of recomposing culture itself as common space of presence.

3.4. The Limits of Tolerance

The comparative study of democratic and authoritarian contexts demonstrates that untrammelled freedom of expression is an unrealistic utopia. While the ideological tone of liberal democracies attempts to be centered on tolerance and diversity, the fact of cultural production reveals the prevalence of forces limiting what can be uttered. These pressures are not visible as explicit bans but operate through less evident forms of control — public opinion, gatekeeping in institutions, and platform moderation. Together, these processes suggest that freedom of expression is never absolute, but always contingent, bargained within specific social and political landscapes.

The question at hand, then, is whether absolute freedom of expression is possible. Evidence examined here suggests that it is not. In authoritarian states such as Belarus, the restriction is overt, codified in censorship laws, political repression, and penal punishment. Even in democratic society such as Portugal, though, artists are restricted: institutional agendas, funding mechanisms, and popular tastes set the limits of what might be said or shown. Freedom is not the abolition of restriction but the negotiation of acceptable boundaries.

This recognition requires a subtler understanding of tolerance. As Chantal Mouffe (2000) has argued, liberal democracy is not based on unadulterated pluralism but on excluding some stands in the interest of consensus. Tolerance thus signifies the reverse: establishing boundaries between what is tolerated and what is excluded. Nancy Fraser (1990) also reminds us that public spaces are structured hegemonically, which benefits some speakers and excludes others. Quite understandably, then, tolerance here cannot be understood as some kind of neutralized state; instead, it is a place of struggle where freedom is already always constrained.

Practically speaking, tensions that impact expression in democratic settings generally originate outside of the state. Public opinion plays a significant role to play, for instance, as artists worry about backlash on social media or negative coverage in mainstream media outlets. Institutional cultures also impose restrictions, not by banning work but by staging exhibitions

in ways that align with institutional priorities or broader ideological requirements. As the case of João Ribas and Nuno Crespo in Portugal demonstrates, the exercise of curatorial judgment can become sites of dispute, precipitating accusations of censorship, prejudice, or exclusion. These tensions illustrate that tolerance is not a stable dogma but a precarious equilibrium that must constantly be renegotiated.

The context of the internet complicates these dynamics further. As Tarleton Gillespie (2018) has shown, platforms perform a form of governance through algorithmic curation, promoting some content and excluding or downgrading other material. Content moderation policies, while justified in the name of safety and community standards, covertly set the limits on expression to an extent consistent with state censorship. The censoring of artistic nudity on Instagram are examples of how tolerance is not decided by democratic deliberation but by corporate policy and un-transparent algorithmic procedures. Freedom of expression in this case becomes conditioned not only by government and institutions but by technological infrastructures.

The discourse of "negotiated freedom" is one that embraces all these complexities. Freedom of expression does exist, but it is mediated through social norms, institutional politics, and technical filters. Artists are continually negotiating these pressures, balancing on the tightrope between critical expression on one side and loss of audiences, funding, or censorship by platforms on the other. This negotiation is not a restraint; it is a constitutive condition of cultural life today. By recognizing that freedom is never total and yet ever contingent, we move beyond the illusion of total tolerance and toward a more realistic understanding of the forces that govern expression.

This is not a perspective of dismissing the worth of freedom of expression but one of reframing it as a contested practice and not as a guaranteed right. The limits of tolerance shift; they shift with political tides, social justice movements, and technological innovation. What is allowed now could be forbidden the next day, and what is repressed here could be enlisted there. This relative nature of tolerance highlights how best to think of tolerance as a real-time negotiation rather than an accomplished fact.

The conclusion reached is that no system can ever provide absolute freedom of expression. Authoritarian regimes exert control through coercion and punishment; democracies exert control through institutional mediation, social sanction, and platform governance. What differs is not the presence or absence of censorship but what determines it and the actors that enforce it. To acknowledge these limits is to be capable of critiquing the way freedom of expression really works and to understand tolerance not as an absolute but as a precarious and temporary condition of affairs.

3.5. The Artist in the Age of Platform Capitalism

The profusion of digital platforms has established new terms for cultural production that far exceed traditional paradigms of censorship. In this case, the aesthetic algorithm surfaces as a useful thought instrument for coming to terms with how artistic practice is conditioned not through explicit interdictions, but through infrastructural logic that manages visibility, circulation, and reception. The concept, as the mentor suggests, allows us to see how platforms

curate not only access to content, but also the aesthetic forms most likely to succeed in their environments. It resonates with the argument presented throughout this dissertation: that censorship is no longer only a matter of what is blocked, but of what is promoted, normalized, or incentivized.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are the new gatekeepers of cultural expression. Their algorithms, designed to maximize engagement and commodify attention, are effectively replacing the institutional gatekeepers of the past with automated regimes of visibility. As Tarleton Gillespie (2018) has argued, platforms position themselves in a contradictory role as both neutral intermediaries and active transformers of discourse. Their moderation and algorithmic ranking policies are a form of governance that determines what is pushed into visibility and what remains hidden. For artists, success now increasingly involves not only institutional validation, but also positioning oneself in accordance with the timing and requirements of algorithmic visibility.

One of the more apparent consequences of this shift is the promotion of specific aesthetic formats. Short, easily consumable, and affectively arresting work is privileged over complex, ambiguous, or critical work. On TikTok, for example, brevity and immediacy are the priorities, while Instagram rewards visual clarity, saturation, and simplicity. In both cases, the platform economy rewards content that is “safe,” instantly readable, and widely shareable. This is not to suggest that politically or aesthetically challenging work is absent from these platforms but that it does so under circumstances disincentivizing opacity, nuance, or ambiguity. The platform’s aesthetic algorithm favors the smooth over the challenging, coherence over contradiction, safety over risk. This modulation of visibility resonates with the continuum of censorship traced in Chapters 3.1–3.3: whereas authoritarian contexts impose explicit prohibitions and democratic contexts rely on social and institutional pressures, algorithmic culture enforces compliance through the silent logic of ranking and filtering. In all three cases, the effect is similar — artists anticipate restriction and recalibrate expression, whether in response to law, to audiences, or to algorithms. This confirms that algorithmic culture does not replace but rather extends classical censorship logics: while authoritarian regimes rely on overt bans and democratic contexts emphasize institutional and social pressures, platforms normalize constraint through invisible infrastructures of ranking and filtering (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Helmond, 2019).

The effects of these dynamics are observable across contemporary visual art. Artists adjust their practice to optimize visibility, producing work that is in the formats, durations, and visual grammars rewarded by platforms. Shows are now designed with Instagram aesthetics in mind, with a focus on photogenic installations that can be posted on the platform. Performance and participatory projects are reduced to their most easily consumable moments for circulation as digital images. Even politically engaged art is frequently translatable into memes or slogans that can be fitted within the attention economy. While such translations allow artists to reach greater audiences, they also risk reducing complexity and reducing the critical potential of art to its most consumable surface.

The long-term implications of these dynamics extend beyond immediate circulation. By privileging quick readability and shareability, algorithmic infrastructures risk reshaping the very canon of contemporary visual culture. Works that resist simplification may struggle to

persist in cultural memory, while those optimized for engagement dominate not only distribution but also historical record. Over time, this could erode the diversity of aesthetic vocabularies and narrow the critical imagination available to future generations. As recent scholarship argues, platform infrastructures not only shape circulation but also memory itself, privileging what is “algorithmically friendly” for future cultural recall (Cotter, 2019; Helmond, 2019). The canon of contemporary culture thus risks being curated as much by algorithms as by institutions.

In political economy terms, such tendencies amount to what Nick Srnicek (2017) has called platform capitalism. In this regime, platforms are infrastructures for extracting value from data and attention. Cultural production cannot be dissociated from these infrastructures, with visibility, legitimacy, even viability involving the logics of data circulation. The algorithm thus does not simply mediate artistic expression; it shapes its form and content, inscribing the arts within an expanded system of capitalist valorization. Artistic practice is rewritten by the imperatives of platform governance: consistency, engagement, and scalability.

The impact of this transformation is twofold. On the one hand, platforms provide unparalleled access to audiences, such that artists outside institutions can gain exposure and visibility. They democratize distribution and facilitate the proliferation of diverse voices. On the other hand, the conditions of visibility are radically asymmetrical, rewarding those who accommodate algorithmic convention and punishing those who foster complexity, slowness, or opacity. The result is a paradoxical one in which artistic diversity is both augmented and restricted: new channels of creativity are opened within the platform economy, but at the cost of simplifying complexity and critical traction.

At the same time, artists have developed strategies to resist or circumvent algorithmic reduction. Some use irony and memes to smuggle critique into shareable formats; others employ collective authorship and participatory culture to amplify voices otherwise suppressed. Visual codes and tactics of ambiguity — discussed in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3 — reappear in digital environments as tools to evade detection or to create layered meanings beneath the surface of algorithm-friendly content. This corresponds with recent studies of memes as polyvocal tools of critique (Tuters & de Zeeuw, 2020) and the tactical professionalization of content creators navigating algorithmic pressures (Bishop, 2020). These practices show that even under algorithmic governance, resistance and creative adaptation remain possible.

The idea of the aesthetic algorithm therefore captures the ambivalence of this condition. It allows us to see how art is not today simply censored in the traditional manner, but instead more subtly inflected by the infrastructures through which it is distributed. Algorithms act as curatorial agents, advancing certain modes of expression and sidelining others, not through prohibition but through sheer invisibility. This is a resonance of this dissertation’s entire argument: that censorship in the twenty-first century is less about overt repression and more about the modulation of the visible, the sharable, and the recognizable.

3.6. Future Trends and Open Questions

This thesis unfolds here sends us into a set of questions whose reach extends beyond its confining ground. If twenty-first-century censorship is more than prohibition but modulation,

then future work will have to contend with how these processes might be carried out in other forms of art. Visual culture has provided an extremely specific lens through which to look at such tensions, yet the same logics of constraint and negotiation apply across performance, music, literature, and film. They each have their own modalities of censorship, and it looks like rich terrain for comparative study. Governments, for instance, have long banned politically subversive songs in music, from Soviet bardic song traditions to contemporary hip-hop under authoritarian rule (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020). In literature, authors such as Salman Rushdie or Svetlana Alexievich illustrate how censorship intertwines with global debates on blasphemy, memory, and identity. In film, controversies such as the banning of Jafar Panahi's work in Iran or the withdrawal of politically sensitive productions in Eastern Europe show how state and market censorship continue to shape the cinematic field. In performance art, the recent tensions surrounding works engaging with migration or queer identity in European festivals illustrate the way institutional sensitivities can be disguised forms of repression.

Of equal concern is the mediation by the cultural institution of such forces. Museums, sponsors, and galleries are guardians of cultural legitimacy and regulatory agents. Their choices of what to curate validate either the nefarious mechanisms of censorship or open avenues for more dire forms of expression. Academic writing in the future still needs to explore the double role of institutions: how they balance a twinned set of obligations to the public's sensitivities and social responsibility, on the one side, and to freedom of expression, on the other.

The emergence of digital infrastructures as points of cultural being also complicates the future of artistic freedom. With more sophisticated algorithmic networks, platforms will grow to shape the arts more. Scholarship will need to follow the evolution of such "aesthetic algorithms" and how artists develop strategies to work with or around them. Specific care must be taken to address the visibility asymmetries of platform capitalism: who gains, and who doesn't make it, and through which resistive opportunities are made available under such platforms. These are future concerns based directly on the cases examined here: the explicit repression of Belarusian artists, the institutional sensitivities that constitute Portuguese cultural existence, and the algorithmic filtering that figures on global platforms. They collectively make us see how the new questions about censorship and tolerance derive from the daily practices of present-day artists.

These results raise more general questions that must be followed up. How would these processes for other arts practices such as performance, music, or writing look like? What specific role does cultural institutions — museums, galleries, patrons — have to normalize or subvert indirect censorship? And lastly, how and why do artists, alone and in collectives, resist, renegotiate, or strategically adapt to shifting boundaries? These questions imply the necessity of continued research into the dynamic tension between power, restriction, and creativity — a tension that continues at the very center of contemporary cultural life.

The open questions posed by this research imply the need for a reconceptualization of freedom and tolerance in contemporary societies. And if censorship is not only a force of repression but also one of production, then freedom must no longer be imagined as the lack of constraint but as the power to negotiate and reinterpret it. This presents immediate challenges for education and cultural policy: how do institutions educate audiences to become welcoming of ambiguity, complexity, and non-conformity rather than demanding clarity, security, and

predictability? How could new forms of collective resistance and self-organization emerge to counter hybrid censorship, political, social, or algorithmic?

Coming back to the central argument of this dissertation, censorship therefore needs to be understood as being both repressive and productive. Rather than merely a blockage, it sets the very conditions under which art practices emerge, evolve, and make meaning. Being aware of this paradox is key to understanding how future expressions of art will continue to mediate between constraint and creativity.

In brief, the future of artistic freedom is not based on the elimination of censorship but on being able to see and resist its new forms. The arts will continue to be spaces of laboratory for brokering power, memory, and belonging and will offer not just resistance but other imaginaries of freedom. The issues raised here are not only intellectual but also political: they are issues about the kind of cultural life that societies today are prepared to sustain and about which kinds of creativity they want to encourage.

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5. Appendices

5.1. Visual Examples of Artistic Resistance

Figure A1. White-red-white flag of Belarus (1918; re-adopted 1991–1995). Later reclaimed as a symbol of the Belarusian independence movement and protests of 2020.



Figure A2. Joana Vasconcelos, *A Noiva (The Bride)*, 2001–2005. Chandelier made of tampons. Installation view, Venice Biennale, 2005.



Figure A3. Belarus, 2020 — “Mass Protest in Minsk”. Photograph by Sergei Grits, Associated Press. © AP Photo.



Figure A4. Belarus, 2025 —Poster from Artur Wakarow's series 30 Posters about 30 Years of Dictatorship, created in exile and exhibited in Poland. Photograph courtesy of RFE/RL, 2021.



Figure A5. Iran, 2022 — “Women, Life, Freedom”



Figure A6. Hong Kong, 2014 — “Lennon Wall”



Figure A7. Pedro G. Romero, *Conexion con Pedro G. Romero* (detail), ARCO Madrid, 2023. Installation with Marian icon fragments.



Figure A8. Chto Delat, *Partisan Songspiel: A Belgrade Story*, 2009. Video still / performance documentation. Mudam Collection



Figure A9. Pussy Riot, Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Drive Putin Away, Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow, 2012. Performance still.



Figure A10. Chile, 1980s — “Portraits of the Disappeared”



Figure A11. The Bulldozer Exhibition, Moscow, 1974.



Figure A12. Ilya Kabakov, The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment, 1985. Installation view. Collection of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow.



Figure A13. Alexander Deineka, *The Defense of Sevastopol*, 1942. Oil on canvas. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Figure A14. Evelyn Richter, *Textile Worker in Leipzig*, 1970s. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Deutsche Fotothek, Dresden.



Figure A15. Cover of Sibylle magazine, January/February issue, 1987. Verlag für die Frau, East Berlin.

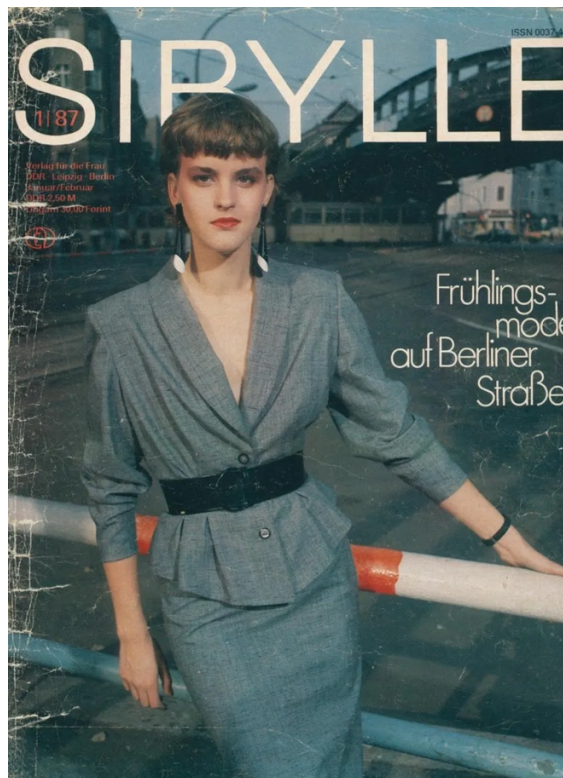
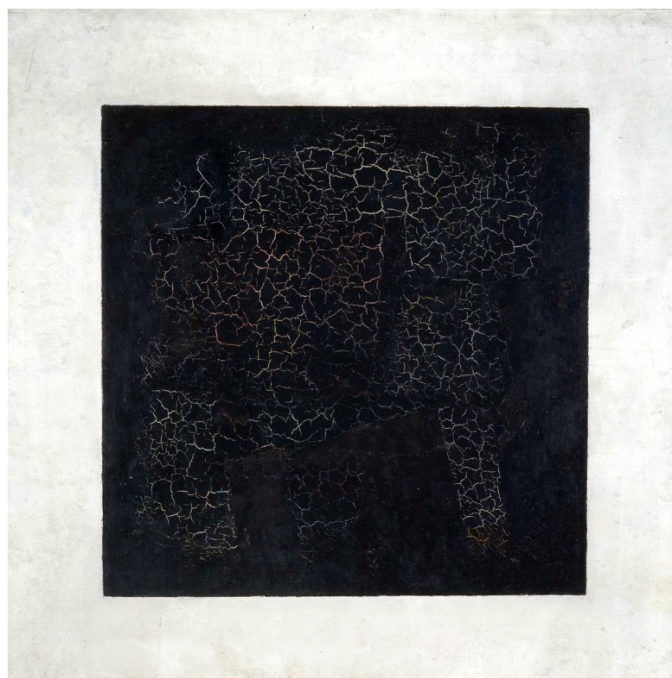
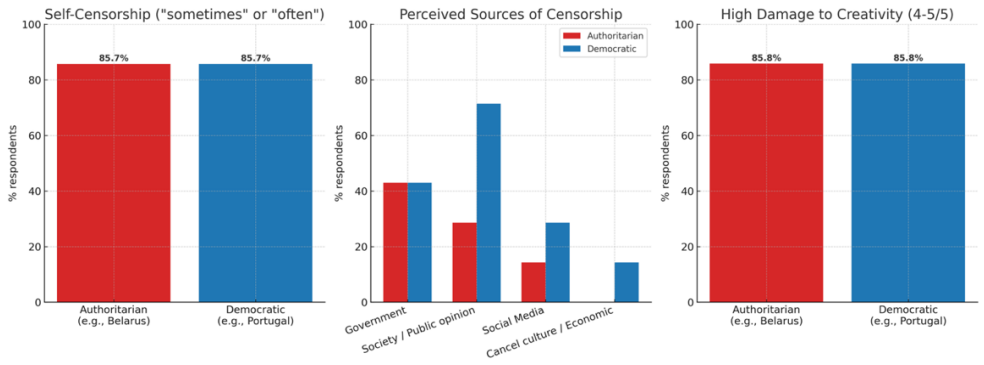


Figure A16. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

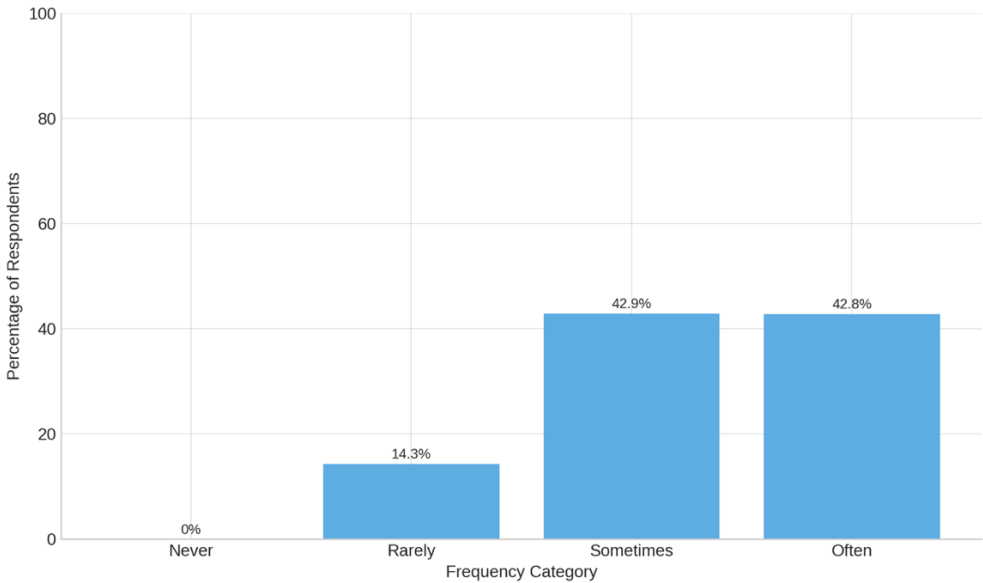


5.2. Graphics

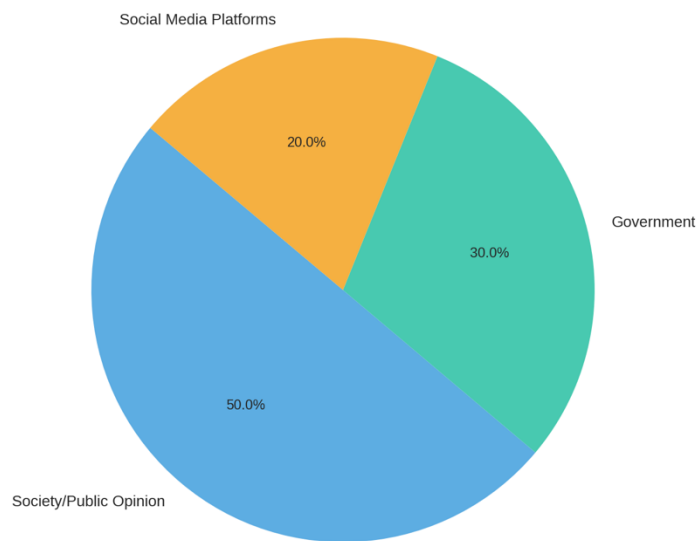
G1. Comparative perceptions of censorship between authoritarian (e.g., Belarus) and democratic (e.g., Portugal) contexts: (left) frequency of self-censorship, (middle) perceived sources of censorship, (right) perceived damage to creativity.



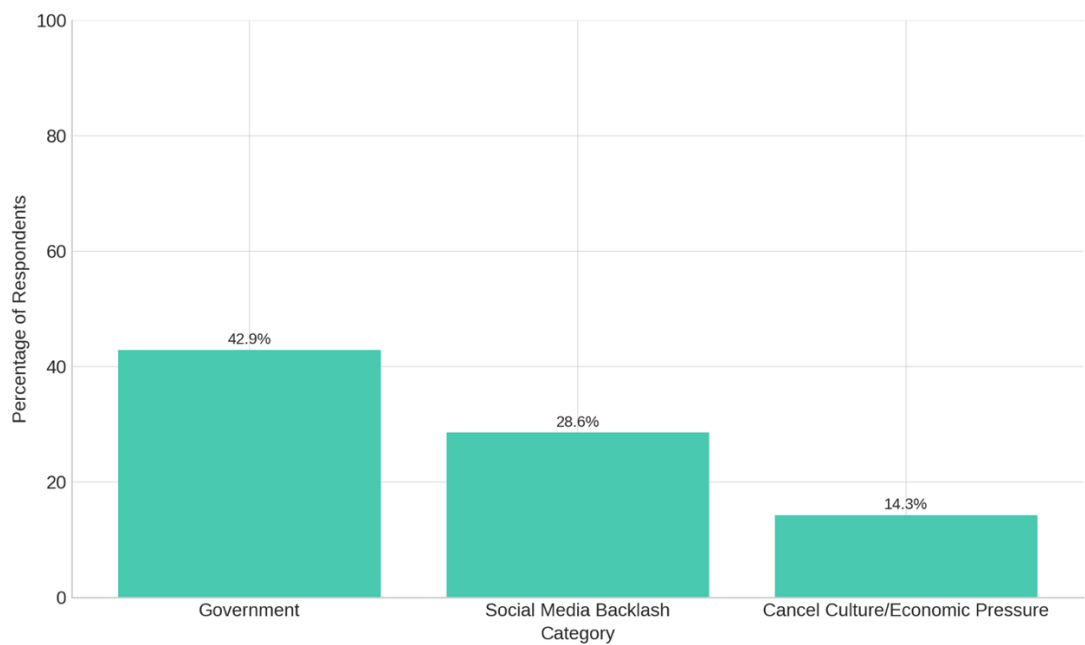
G2. Frequency of self-censorship reported by respondents (never, rarely, sometimes, often).



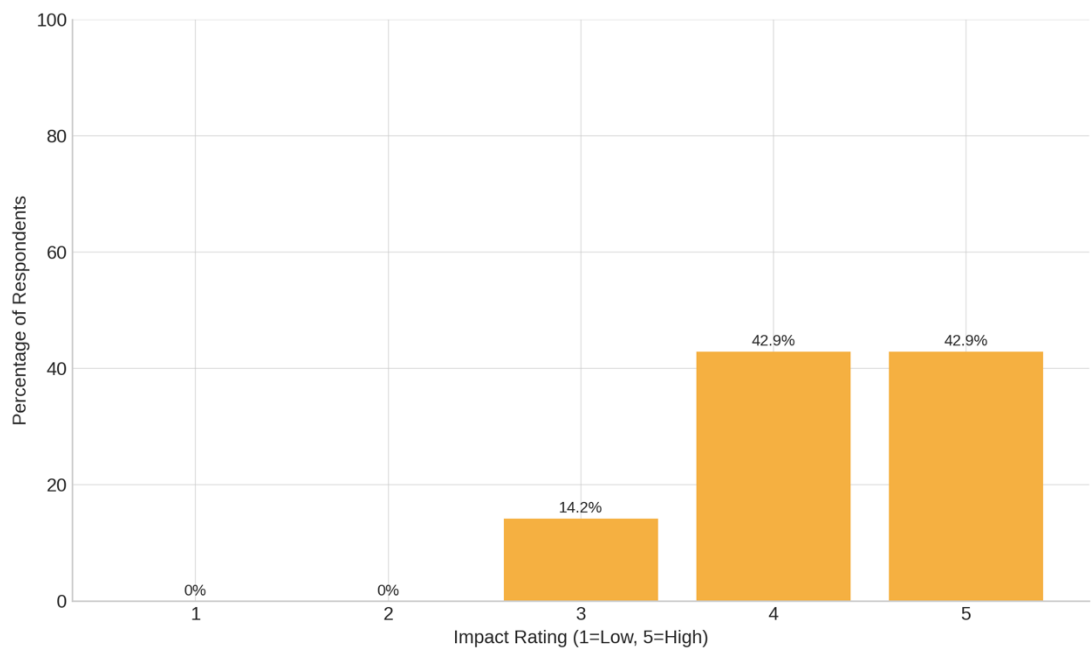
G3. Respondents' views on the main actors restricting freedom of expression (government, public opinion, platforms).



G4. Identified sources of censorship pressure: government, social media backlash, cancel culture/economic pressure.



G5. Respondents' perception of the impact of censorship on creativity (1 = low impact, 5 = high impact).



G6. Distribution of respondents' views on whether freedom of expression should have limits.

