

Censorship and the Arts: Artists and Human Rights Organizations at the Inaugural Osnabrück Summer School on Law, Language and Culture

Special Evening Session on Tuesday August 11th, 19:00

Spitzbodencafe, Lagerhalle

Held in English; Free and Open to the Public

As part of the two-week 2009 Inaugural Summer School on Law, Language, and Culture, three high-profile non-profit organizations that deal with censorship, artistic expression, and human rights will be visiting the University Osnabrück to engage with Summer School participants over a three day period and hold a special public evening panel discussion on Tuesday August 11th. A central focus of the two-week summer school will be on the ways that the law has negotiated concepts of “human rights” and how rights to freedoms of expression sometimes conflict with cultural claims. “Censorship and the Arts” complements this research focus by bringing together academics, artists, and N.G.O.’s (non government organizations) to discuss the ways that censorship has emerged as a critical human rights concern in the 21st century.

In addition to engaging the Summer School workshops on Monday and Tuesday, the special public evening panel discussion in the Lagerhalle offers an opportunity to hear firsthand about the precarity of censorship and exile from artists who are currently experiencing such situations, and how a number of N.G.O.'s are attempting to redress artistic censorship through transnational networks and artist residency spaces. A special interest will be taken in the role that the law has played in both protecting individual creative freedoms, as well as the law's potential to erode and destroy fundamental human rights.

The evening is a planned highlight of the Summer School, and of particular importance for engaging the wider public in a topic that is timely and of great interest. In contrast to the other events in the Summer School (plenary lectures and focus talks, all of which are also open to the public), the evening on “Censorship and the Arts” features both scholars who have specialized in human rights as well as stakeholders outside the academy who approach the problem of censorship and artistic expression from a pragmatic perspective. To underscore the ways that censorship remains a global, transnational problem, which presents a particular complex of problems from a legal perspective, the evening includes participants from Belarus, Denmark, and the United States.

The participating human rights organizations and artists are very well known in their respective fields, and the press has been accordingly invited to attend the evening.

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Invited attendees who have promised to participate include:

- **Natalia Koliada** and **Nikolei Khalezin**, the cofounders, artistic directors, and primary actors in the underground theater troupe, "Belarus Free Theatre" (www.dramaturg.org). Originally located in Minsk, in one of the last openly dictatorial countries in eastern Europe, Belarus Free Theatre was founded as an artistic "voice of dissent" to protest the second term of Alexander Lukashenko. Václav Havel, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard have all strongly supported their endeavors, and Havel presented Belarus Free Theatre the 2007 European Theater Prize for "finding light in darkness and courage in truth" for their underground productions. In Minsk, Koliada and Khalezin continue to face daily oppression, arbitrary detention, and even police torture for the work they produce. They are currently abroad, in exile, on an artist residency in Lithuania.
- **Ole Reitov**, program manager for FreeMuse (www.freemuse.org), an independent organization based in Copenhagen which advocates freedom of expression for composers and musicians around the world. Freemuse receives its core funding from SIDA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and one of its primary aims remains to develop a global network in support of threatened musicians and composers. Ole Reitov is the co-author of 'Smashed Hits – the Book of Banned Music,' and organized the first World Conference on Music and Censorship. Reitov has lectured worldwide on music censorship, cultural policies and cultural diversity, and has sat on many E.U. commissions and boards dealing with these topics. He is also the former senior advisor to the Danish Center for Culture and Development.
- **Todd Lester**, director of freeDimensional (www.freedimensional.org), a New York City based non-profit (NGO) that manages a global network of artist residency spaces to accommodate artists and creative producers who have been persecuted for their work. Since freeDimensional's inception in 2003, the organization has established regional hubs for managing artists in distress in New York City, São Paulo, Berlin, Cairo and Pondicherry (India), and it has successfully placed over 20 artists in various safe-haven programs, allowing the artists to continue creating their work without fear of persecution or violence.

The above panelists will be moderated by one of the Summer School conveners, **Dr. Helle Porsdam**, professor of American Studies at the Saxxo Institut, University of Copenhagen. Porsdam is a specialist in human rights, and is currently publishing a book on the history of human rights in the United States.