

THE NEW SCHOOL

VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS

Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness
Seminar 1: Mapping the Territory
Monday, November 12, 2018

SUMMARY

Participants

Mark Bray, political organizer, writer and historian

Abou Farman, Ass. Professor, Anthropology, The New School

Amar Kanwar, artist and filmmaker

Carin Kuoni, director/chief curator, Vera List Center for Art and Politics

Mendi and Keith Obadike, artists; Vera List Center board members

Vanessa Place, artist, writer and criminal appellate attorney

Laura Raicovich, independent writer and curator

Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs, National Coalition Against Censorship; moderator

This seminar sought to map the sprawling territory of what freedom of speech might mean today within the context of Amar Kanwar's film *Such a Morning* (2017). Svetlana kicked off the discussion by framing the "value" of free speech, particularly given the uneven distribution of/unequal access to these rights, and the limits on government power that free speech in the US is meant to define. Mark opened the conversation beyond the relationship between government and the populous by questioning the right of speech in relation to harm and fascism. He questioned whether "deplatforming" is really a curtailment of free speech or rather an assertion of a particular politics and values of liberation. Mendi and Keith brought the conversation into the realm of the control of data and speech, particularly in the context of race realities in the US both in history and in the present, including the particularly disturbing right to vote as a free speech issue being impinged upon in such a way to make it look like a data error (see voter suppression in Georgia 2018 Governor's race). Abou spoke to darkness or silence as a place of power and the determination to remove oneself from violence in the "security of darkness" (Arendt). He also discussed the importance of using people as shelter, as in people with certain privileges protecting others. Amar asked some important questions of the group including questioning how we might identify our own blind spots; how we might retreat to

reconfigure or reconstitute seemingly irresolvable conflicts; how might we question the “good guy/bad guy” duality; how might we prepare for the resolution of the fundamental questions so we are ready for the next. Vanessa finally brought us into the contentious territory of advocating for speech that is criminal and allowing the ugliness of humanity a space to exist, meaning that supporting the right to differ might come at the expense of justice and equality.

The discussion then centered on the friction between harm and safety, and the reality that freedom of speech for one person might impinge upon or curtail another’s access to those rights. This aspect of the conversation is certainly ripe for deeper exploration.

*The seminar series **Freedom of Speech. A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness** is organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics as part of the center's 2018–2020 curatorial focus *If Art Is Politics*. It is directed by Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center, and Laura Raicovich with assistance by Gabriela López Dena. Partner organizations for the seminars are ARTICLE 19, the National Coalition Against Censorship, New York Peace Institute, and Weeksville Heritage Center. *Feminist Manifestos* is curated by Gabriela López Dena as part of her Vera List Center Graduate Student Fellowship, Art and Social Justice.*

Further information, including SUGGESTED READINGS, PROGRAM, SUMMARY, and VIDEO DOCUMENTATION for each seminar at www.veralistcenter.org.