



IETM REPORT

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# ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR AND MORAL RESPONSES IN THE ARTS

Report from the IETM Amsterdam Plenary Meeting, 14 - 17 April 2016

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# Summary

Many artists claim to represent the conscience of society. But to what extent are we willing and able to take a stand when the options to develop or continue careers in the arts are being challenged by doing so? What if ethical behaviour becomes a costly luxury?

In this session, the participants aimed to discuss the very delicate balance between losing your audience and accepting support from controversial regimes or from sponsors whose practices are in conflict with our values. Should we stay away from politics? Should we boycott controversial regimes and funders? Should we ban the artists and organisations dealing with them? And what is the price — even if it seems the right thing to do — of adopting the moral high ground?



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Four speakers from different parts of the world each shared their experiences at the intersection of arts and ethics. This was followed by a lively debate with the participants. Multiple valuable insights were shared concerning the problematics of a human rights-based approach to freedom of expression, building long-term solidarity networks across the borders of art, and making informed decisions concerning boycotts and ethical fundraising. However, a proposal to create a toolkit that could help tackle individual ethical dilemmas was not embraced, as there were different ideas as to what its usefulness would be. Some thought it might go against what they considered the non-normative essence of art.

## Moderators:

Willie White - [Dublin Theatre Festival](#), Ireland & IETM's president

## With:

Judith Knight - [Artsadmin](#), UK

Grzegorz Reske - independent, Poland

Pelin Basaran, independent producer and co-founder of [Siyah Bant](#), UK & Turkey

Rana Yazaji, [Al Mawred](#), Egypt

## *If it means taking the moral high ground, we should*

With her opening remarks, Judith Knight defined her role during the session as the most vocal speaker on the necessity for political engagement in the arts: 'The arts community cannot stand aside. It cannot pretend that what is going on in the world has nothing to do with us. So what we can do is this; first and foremost, create projects that inspire, that anger, offer hope and courage, that question and change. Artists, writers, musicians and theatre makers all have this ability to make a difference.'

Knight considers it her job to help artists achieve this. In 1979 she founded an arts network called Artsadmin which is now particularly engaged with the environment, refugees, mental health, disability and diversity. To give an idea of the organisation's activities, they conduct a bi-annual festival about the environment called [2 Degrees](#) and organise tours of a [memorial](#) by Graeme Miller which commemorates asylum seekers who have fallen out of aeroplanes while stowing away in a bid to get to Western countries.

This kind of issue-based approach is something Judith sees a lot these days, and it is a stark difference with the broader political approach of agitprop theatre in the 1980s. In her experience, there is more political art now than when her network was founded. The reason is probably because the world has gotten bleaker, she says. Artists, including her organisation, are keener to respond to this.

Artists are great communicators, and if they can change something, then they must, says Judith. If that means taking the moral high ground, so be it. 'Perhaps one of the reasons for the hostilities against the arts today,' she says, [quoting writer Jay Griffiths](#), 'is precisely that they are implacable witnesses against the terrible lie of

our times that money is the measure of all. Art refutes this line, disentangles money from values, and argues with its deepest authority that there is another sky, infinite and boundless and open to all.'

So what should we do if we want to uphold the power of art to affect change? Firstly, though no country is spotless, she would never work in Israel. Moreover, she spoke vehemently about maintaining and increasing state funding for the arts: 'Call me old fashioned but I'd rather the state didn't offer tax breaks to the philanthropic so they can dish out money to the arts as they wish. We should resist following the model used in America and other countries, where art is mainly funded by philanthropists and companies, and alternative, risky, untested and political work is harder to make.'

Yet realistically, funds need to be raised from other sources than the state as well. Artsadmin recently sought to deal with this by drawing up an ethical fundraising policy with help of an organization called [Platform](#). However, using the language of cultural entrepreneurship and sponsorship can be problematic as it makes it increasingly easier for that funding to be withdrawn. Especially when one does not constantly make the case for public investment.

## *Artists as bridge builders*

Grzegorz Reske wanted to respond to Judith's remark on boycotting Israel. He is a Polish national, an art historian and producer. His story shows how isolation can be detrimental to positive change. Grzegorz was only a little boy when Poland was under the communist regime and culturally isolated from the West. Yet many of those he works with remember it well. During the few moments when the isolation did break, change became possible in the country. For example, when The Rolling Stones played a [concert in](#)

[Warsaw](#) in 1967. Activists of the time confirm that this event brought the political opposition of Poland together.

The movement that was born on that day consisted of many of the same people that were later able to negotiate with the regime in order to manifest change: 'So although it might sound funny, The Rolling Stones, in a way, created the political opposition in Poland,' says Grzegorz. This is an example of how artists can function as bridge-builders.

Now, the walls in Europe are growing higher once again. After the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the big Polish-Russian cultural season, which was planned by the previous government of Poland, was cancelled. The relationship between Poland and Russia soured. Nonetheless, there is a Polish project being staged in one of the State Theatres in Moscow. Reske has spoken to the director of this project.

In Poland, the project was met with disdain. Yet the Polish director decided to carry on. The current situation in Ukraine reminded him of his teenage years growing up under the communist regime. He was lucky enough to watch a few western plays at an open theatre festival and this was the only time he could catch an aesthetic that differed from the one dictated by the communist regime. For this director, the project in Moscow constitutes a form of payback. In Russia, he recognises the same kind of cultural walls being built around the country, the same kind of implementation of a single ideology. With this development taking place, Grzegorz says that each interaction between countries is an opportunity for change.

## Gezi Park remains an inspiration

Over the years, Pelin Basaran has learned that a human-rights-based approach, when working on subjects such as censorship and editorial practices, can be problematic. Pelin is UK-based producer and curator, having a background in Turkey, and she is the co-founder of [Siyah Bant](#). Siyah Bant researches and monitors censorship cases in the arts in Turkey via web site and publications and reports to the UN and the EU. She has long defined herself and her colleagues as activists.

One of the main activities of her organization is the promotion of freedom of speech as a human right. This kind of language — of activism and human rights — can however also be counter-productive. Not only does it unfairly place you, as an ‘activist’ or ‘NGO’, outside of society and its power struggles, it also puts you in categories defined by the oppressing powers or government.

The job her bureau does, reporting on censorship and creating transparency, can sometimes help predict larger political shifts. The Turkish government began its recent bloody crack-down on Kurds in the east of the country not long after a Kurdish film called ‘[Bakur](#)’ was withdrawn from the Istanbul International Film Festival. This is why transparency is vital.

In order to create political change, Pelin has observed that establishing long-term solidarity networks across the borders of occupations is a promising tactic. In Turkey, there is an excellent example of this happening in one of Turkey’s leading textile factories, Kazova. This company was taken over by its workers. Artists aided them by designing motifs for T-shirt production. Workers and artists

came together and shared their struggles against the system. In this sense, Basaran experienced the Gezi Park protests of 2013 as a great inspiration: ‘There were no fixed roles there. It was a moment we will always remember and one that gives us hope for a better future.’

## Syrian Dilemmas

The last speaker, Rana Yazaji, cultural activist and director of [AlMawred](#) posed some poignant questions. Rana is from Syria, and when she lived and worked there, she was faced with several dilemmas. These problems shed light on the pragmatics that are involved in difficult ethical situations.

Do the benefits of influencing cultural policy weigh against working for a regime you do not trust? This was the first dilemma Rana posed for the group. Before the Syrian revolution in 2011, Rana was offered a position training people in cultural research and arts. The job was created by the wife of president Bashar al-Assad. Before accepting this offer, she thought long and hard. She did not fully trust the government. Yet the position did not rank high enough for her to be labelled as one of those active in the regime. Moreover, many said that this president was better than his father Hazif al-Assad, who preceded him. The job would allow Rana to improve the cultural environment in her country.

Then the revolution broke out, which brought a new dilemma to her and many others. When a country is in civil war, do you continue to work? Do you defend the position that art must live on in the most difficult of situations? Or do you decline and say: now is not the time for art, but for political engagement and activism? In practice, taking a political position in this situation means having to flee within three days or face torture. If you stay in the country — if you continue work and hide your political opinion — you might be

able to do some good. But should you feel ashamed for being silent? Rana decided to stay. But she still does not know the right answers to these questions.

‘What is happening in the Arab region forces us to rethink our ethical responses,’ says Rana; ‘it forces us to look at the fine line between being ethical and pragmatic. To weigh principles against results. And all of this brings us to the question of why we are here.’

‘We know we are not here for the money and fortune,’ says Rana: ‘In the end there is always something I see and don’t like. Something I want to change. It can be aesthetic or economic. But there is no way you can have nothing to do with politics. You cannot forego taking a position. Others and me have been accused of being in the middle—the grey zone. This is not true. My approach allowed me to stay until 2014, which all my friends could not. They were politically outspoken, but I continued to train people in cultural research and arts. So was that the right thing to do? I still don’t know.’

# *Participant Examples: Government pressure in Australia, the UK and Azerbaijan*



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One audience member from Australia spoke of how the Sydney Biennale for visual arts rejected sponsorship from a company that had won the tender to run the off-shore detention camps in 2014. These camps are places where asylum seekers are mandatorily detained in 'disgusting prisons where people are tortured, raped and are committing suicide in numbers', he said. However, the boycott caused a huge debate, with the Ministry for the Arts, said the audience member, chastising the organisation for refusing private sponsorship and threatening to take away their government funding. Eventually, the sponsorship was successfully rejected as the philanthropic family that owned the company in question resigned as chairman of the Biennale.

Rosita Bergman from the Opera Theater Amsterdam spoke of how she was asked by UNESCO and Azerbaijan to create and direct a huge performance for the Year of the Light: 'I had arranged for people from the street to play in the performance, and among them was an old lady. Soon however, I realized that the Ministry of Culture was monitoring me. When the minister came to see the first performance, he said, it's fine, but the old lady must go, she is too ugly. I realised I could say no if I played the part of the naive foreigner. So I declined, he accepted, and we could continue. I do however feel ashamed about having this privilege. I said no many times, to many proposed changes, knowing it was only possible because I am a foreigner.'

# *The Discussion: Talking Points*

**#1** Some participants felt forced to 'change the world'. 'What is wrong with making art about the human condition?' Though everyone seemed to agree that artists should never be forced to do anything, the discussion was split between those that felt 'the time is up, we cannot be grey anymore', those that did not have enough faith in the power of art to change much, and those that believed art could change perspectives for the better by showing the human condition. 'There is not much use being human when you are underwater,' Willie White joked. Judith Knight replied that she has a real worry about taking the grey moral ground: 'because we are in serious times. Climate change is the biggest threat. We've got to make things move quicker. We can't be sitting here in twenty years' time at an IETM meeting saying, let's discuss it. What's the arts' role? We have to move. This is urgent.'

**#2** To complicate things, the question was raised about great art made with money from tyrannical regimes (The Nazis, the Communists); should an artist continue to work under such a controversial regime? The artist might hide coded anti-regime messages, some said. But is that enough? Judith Knight said 'I'd rather have a little less world destroyed if that means missing some great pieces of art'.

**#3** One participant was particularly concerned about the place of privilege in taking a moral stance. We should realize that taking an ethical standpoint is something that the underprivileged cannot afford. Most of those who responded seemed to agree that

this point might be valid, but that the speakers and participants, as they addressed ethics from different perspectives of privilege during their talks, were clear about their understanding of this problem and that it was at present not an issue.

**#4** This led to some of the important conclusions of that discussion. Rana Yazaji emphasised that the moral responsibility to act is dictated by your situation. If one is in the situation where speaking up means death, then continuing to work might be enough. For others in safer areas of the world, more pronounced ethical action might be necessary.

**#5** Concerning boycotts, it is invaluable to have connections on the ground. One must weigh as much as possible what the effects of working in a controversial area or with controversial money will have. Will the respective company or government use your presence or cooperation to improve/whitewash its image? Does this outweigh the good you can do (i.e. as an artistic bridge builder)? How do the people effected or the people in the country you are considering to boycott feel about it?

**#6** Willie White proposed to create the basis of a toolkit for ethical responses in the arts. Some participants were very wary, as they wanted to emphasize that each case is individual and moreover that art is something that cannot be normalized. Willie's response was that when speaking of a toolkit, he was thinking of the tools he has for his bike: a hexagonal, a Phillips

screwdriver etc.: 'I take the kit out and maybe one of the tools will be useful for the problem I have. That's the sense that I have: we have a series of questions that are more developed than when we entered this room and that we can ask when we face these dilemmas.'