Report

Perspectives on Artistic Freedom at Risk

from the IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting 2025

By Elena Polivtseva

www.ietm.org

July 2025

IETM Report
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From the IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting,
15-17 May 2025

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Graphic layout
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www.formulaprojects.net

Published by
IETM — International Network
for Contemporary Performing Arts
Square Sainctelette 19,
1000 Brussels, BE
+32 2 201 09 15 / ietm@ietm.org

ISBN code
9782930897585

This publication should be mentioned as follows: E.Polivtseva, "*IETM Report: Perspectives on Artistic Freedom at Risk*", IETM, Brussels, July 2025.

www.ietm.org/en/reports

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The IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting 2025 was co-organised by:

This session was made possible with the support of:

Perspectives on Artistic Freedom at Risk

The global erosion of artistic freedom is a pressing issue that affects everyone in the cultural sector, regardless of role or affiliation - and it has profound implications for society as a whole. Power-holders are increasingly using the arts as a testing ground to undermine democratic structures, fostering a climate of fear and division. Even countries that once ranked high in democratic values and freedoms - across Europe and beyond - are now showing signs of regression in their commitment to protecting artistic expression. This includes silencing artists through direct and indirect censorship, politicising public funding, and failing to provide fair and inclusive conditions for all artists - especially those who are displaced or in exile - to belong, participate, and thrive professionally. Crucially, the mechanisms of oppression and authoritarianism do not remain confined within national borders; they have the capacity to spread, cross boundaries, and contaminate other contexts.

The session 'Perspectives on Artistic Freedom at Risk' held at the IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting 2025 and moderated by Sara Whyatt, Freemuse's Research Director with a long history of research and advocacy on freedom of artistic expression, focused on the growing threats to artistic freedom in both traditionally authoritarian contexts and those counted amongst European democracies. Whyatt, who monitors global violations of artistic expression through her work with Freemuse[1] and the Council of Europe, opened the session by framing the conversation within the broader erosion of democratic norms and civic space. The speakers - **Jakub Depczyński**, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, **Mey Seifan**, Syrian choreographer and diversity expert based in Berlin, and **Gerald Odil**, a Ugandan artist and curator based in Munich - are each rooted in different geographies and experiences and offered deeply personal yet widely resonant accounts of how cultural suppression manifests and how artists navigate and resist these dynamics.

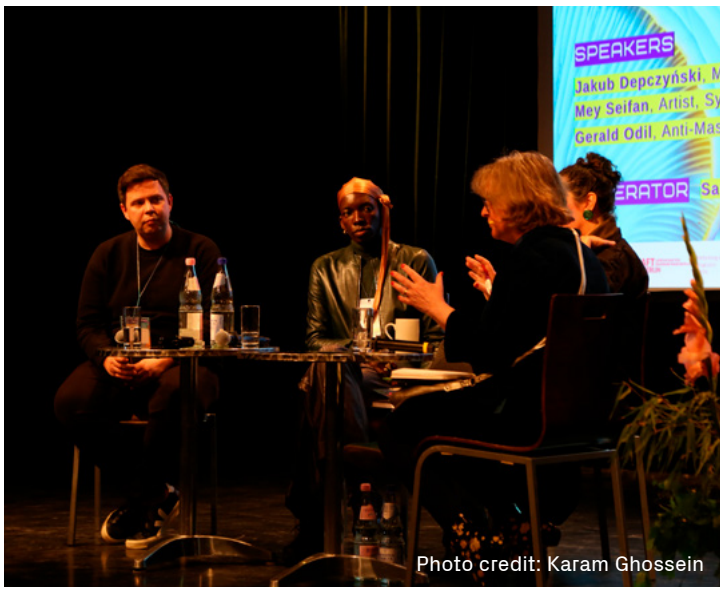


Photo credit: Karam Ghossein

'Art exists because life is not enough'

Gerald Ronnie Odil, a Ugandan curator, artist, and cultural organiser, has long borne witness to the complex entanglement of politics, queerness, and artistic expression in Uganda. For Odil, the story of Ugandan art is not just a chronicle of creativity, but a testimony to survival and resistance. 'The history of Uganda is one that is tumultuous,' Odil reflects, 'but the one thing that has always persisted has been artistic expression'.

The colonial oppression in Uganda, like elsewhere, systematically erased traditional artistic and cultural practices. Odil explains how the British colonial government imposed Western educational frameworks that are still deeply embedded in Uganda's institutional art scene. For decades, the country's leading art school - the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts at Makerere University - prohibited the use of traditional materials such as bark cloth, beading, and weaving. Instead, students were required to work only with oil paint, charcoal, chalk, and stone sculpture - mediums that mirrored the approaches of colonial art institutions.

It was not until 2020 that these restrictions began to loosen, catalysed largely by Ugandan artists who had gained international recognition. Their success outside Uganda pressured institutions to reconsider what counted as 'legitimate' art: 'We are kind of looking to look into our archives and learn from it and figure out a way forward', Odil says, highlighting the vital role of cultural memory and reclamation.

Yet even after the end of colonial oppression, artistic practices continued to be co-opted by political power. Ugandan leaders, including the long-standing president Yoweri Museveni, who has ruled since 1986, have used cultural production as a propaganda tool. Music, theatre, and visual art have often been marshalled to uphold state ideologies.

1 Read the latest Freemuse report 'State of Artistic Freedom 2025' here.

Today, the National Theatre - once envisioned as a public cultural hub - has become an administrative shell, intermittently used for dance rehearsals or workshops, but closed to any programming that critiques the regime. As Odil shared, anything that is critical to the state is shut down immediately.

Odil's practice as a freelance curator led to a radical initiative: the formation of Anti-Mass, a Kampala-based collective of queer artists, DJs, music producers, and performers. Emerging in 2018, Anti-Mass offered a vital alternative to Kampala's heteronormative nightlife and artistic scene.

Inspired by the electronic and experimental sound cultures blooming in East Africa, including the Nyege Nyege Festival, the collective sought to create inclusive spaces for queer expression. Nyege Nyege, known for spotlighting underground music from across the continent, brought together artists from Tanzania, Congo, Kenya, South Africa, and beyond - yet even in these progressive spaces, queer participation was often marginal. 'There weren't many places that centred us', Odil recounts. 'We wanted a place of our own'.

Anti-Mass functioned as a mobile cultural space - hosting pop-up parties, performances, and installations across the city. This nomadic strategy not only allowed the group to infiltrate different urban zones but also served as a form of protection in an increasingly hostile political environment. 'When you're sort of permeating through the city, there is a way that you sort of become part of the landscape', Odil explains. 'They don't know where you're going to pop up, but you're going to pop up'.

However, at a certain point, the political reality rendered it illegal for individuals to identify as queer. While Uganda has long criminalised same-sex relationships under colonial-era laws, the passage of the *Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2023* marked a dangerous escalation. The law, influenced heavily by US evangelical and European far-right ideologues, criminalised everything from identifying as LGBTQ+ to providing healthcare, employment, or housing to queer individuals. It even proposed penalties for families who failed to report queer relatives.

For Anti-Mass, the crackdown was devastating. Collaborators who owned performance venues and private spaces withdrew in fear. Members of the collective were harassed, their homes raided, and their networks dismantled. The law is vague enough that it could target not just queer people, but just about anyone, repressing any voice - political, artistic, human. Ultimately, the group was forced to disband and leave the country. Exile became the only viable path to safety.

Despite this forced displacement, Anti-Mass's impact remains. Their model of cultural resistance inspired other grassroots collectives in Kampala, and their events provided rare moments of freedom and affirmation in an increasingly oppressive society.

Meanwhile, institutions like 32° East continue the work on the ground. 32° East, an independent non-profit organisation and home for the visual arts community in Uganda, is one of the few safe and purpose-built art spaces in the country, offering material support, residencies and visibility to emerging artists. The organisation - community-funded and artist-led - exemplifies the kinds of infrastructures necessary for creative survival in hostile environments.

Odil's reflections serve as a powerful reminder of the stakes of artistic and queer existence in Uganda. In a place where visibility can mean violence, and where artistic dissent is met with repression, collectives like Anti-Mass offer not only creative outlets but lifelines. 'In Uganda, as in many places in the Global South, arts and living are not different. It's one and the same.' Odil reflects. 'Art exists because life is not enough', they quote poet Ferreira Gullar, underscoring what remains most urgent: art as a form of survival.

Odil also shared the professional and emotional complexities of working in exile. 'I've been in Germany for a year', they said, 'and I'm still trying to figure out how to work in exile. I'm so used to being rooted in the soil and in the water of where I was born'. Displacement, for Odil, is not only geographical - it is somatic, epistemological. 'Having to build yourself in a ground that you do not know, in a soil you do not know, is traumatic, to say the least'.

Odil also reminded the audience that exile is often a privilege of the few - a costly one. 'Many queer people still remain behind', they said, 'because they cannot afford a passport'. Visas, sponsorships, and airfare become insurmountable obstacles. 'The European visa process is one of the most dehumanising things I've ever gone through', they said, 'having to prove your worth as a person - again'. But once in Europe, another layer of silencing occurs: 'Compared to your peers who are unable to flee, you're seen as the lucky one, so be silent. You're not allowed to suffer, as you are so much better off than colleagues remaining in danger'.

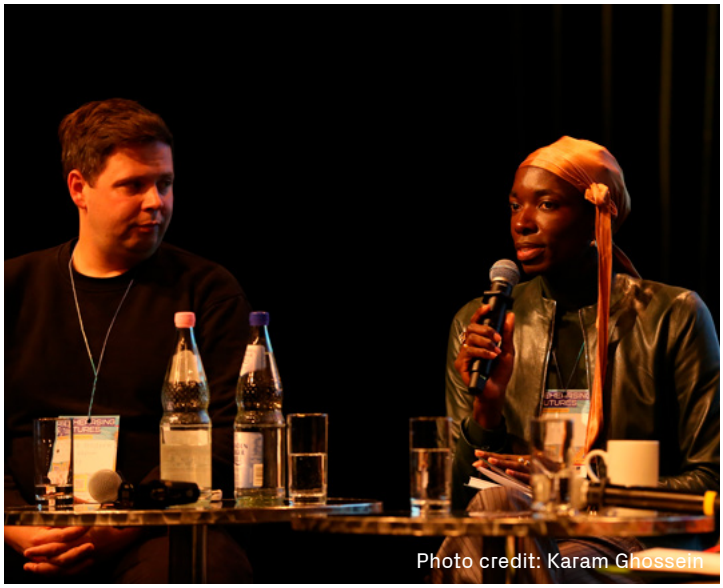


Photo credit: Karam Ghossein

Structural invisibility in contexts of exile and supremacy

Mey Seifan, Syrian choreographer and diversity expert working in Berlin and Syria, shared a powerful reflection on the issue of exile and migration, speaking about the community of Arab artists in Germany. Referring to a panel they proposed six months earlier on the Syrian art diaspora in Berlin, they noted that none of the originally invited artists could participate - not because they were unavailable, but because they were all working outside Berlin. This professional absence, they argued, is emblematic of the deeper structural inaccessibility faced by Arab artists in Europe.

Despite the presence of a large, vibrant community of Syrian and Arab artists in Germany - especially since the wave of migration around 2015-2016 - Seifan observed that very few manage to integrate into the local cultural scene. They live in Berlin, but it's always very difficult for 'non-white' people to gain real access to the art life of Berlin: to earn money, to be in leadership positions, to do things in a different way. Representation remains minimal, and when artists are included, it is often conditional or tokenistic.

Seifan, who works with various institutions on diversity and inclusion, pointed to pervasive hierarchies within German academia and cultural funding bodies.There is also a persistent expectation that Arab artists serve as political spokespeople. After October 7, for example, Seifan described how many Arab artists were invited to political panels to comment on the Israel-Palestine conflict. 'But they're not trained to speak in a political language', they said. 'It's dangerous, as people were or could be punished for using the "wrong" words.' This burden of forced representation becomes a trap: artists are simultaneously pressured to be political, yet punished for being political in the wrong way.

Returning to their engagements in the Arab world, Seifan also spoke of how European artistic standards are internalised in local cultural institutions. Arab and non-European artists are frequently expected to conform to predefined notions of 'good' or 'high' art - shaped by European cannons, methodologies, and aesthetics. 'Who defines what art is?' they asked. 'Who teaches it? Who leads it? And why is it that Arab students are taught to perform plays in Arabic by European teachers who don't even speak the language?' These dynamics, they argued, perpetuate a kind of cultural coloniality under the guise of cosmopolitanism.

From body norms in contemporary dance to preferences for Eurocentric dramaturgy, Arab artists are often led to believe that legitimacy must come from Europe. 'Even physically, we are forcing our bodies into forms not made for us', Seifan said. 'We're not researching our own bodies, our own ideas, our own problems'. The result is an identity crisis within the arts - where students dream of making their career in Europe, only to arrive and realise that the artistic forms they were taught to aspire to feel hollow and disconnected.

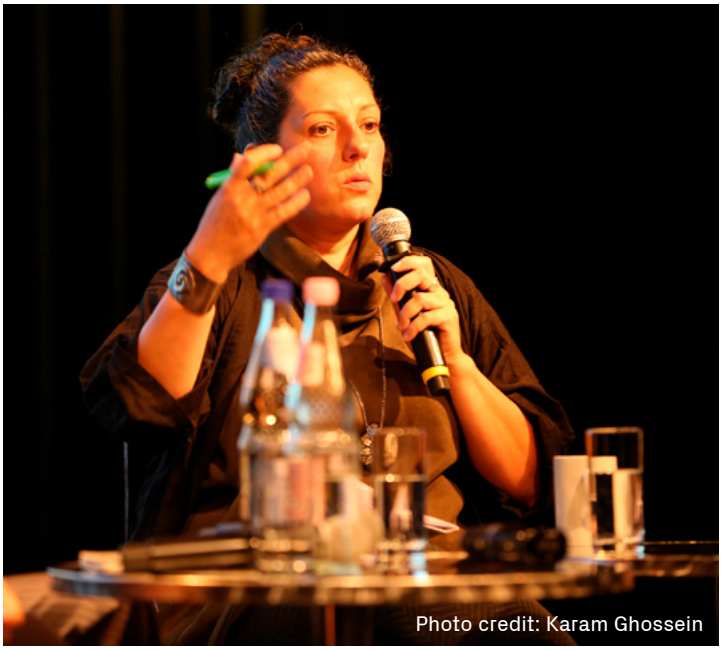


Photo credit: Karam Ghossein

The discussions also addressed the responsibility of certain Western countries in contributing to or being complacent amidst the deterioration of freedoms in the Middle East - factors that have forced many artists to seek exile in Europe.

An audience member who introduced themselves as an artist and activist from Egypt provided a searing account of how queer and dissident art has historically flourished in the Arab world - only to be violently suppressed in recent years. They referenced a time not long ago when queer artists in Egypt could work relatively freely, citing artists like Dalida who was born in Egypt and the presence of queer themes in art as far back as the 1940s. But the space has drastically closed: in 2018, 19-year-old film maker Shady Habash was arrested for producing a politically charged video. Two years later, he died in prison. More recently, cartoonist Ashraf Omar was jailed simply for his cartoons critical of living conditions - not even of the regime itself.

What the participant highlighted, however, was not only the repression at home, but the complicity and silence in Europe. 'Nobody talks about this. Not in the EU, not in the West', they said, pointing at the tremendous gap of solidarity. They added that this silence becomes even more striking when considering the EU's ongoing support for the very regimes persecuting these artists. This intervention served as a vital reminder that artistic exile is not simply a matter of granting support - it is a forced consequence of inaction, complacency, and legitimation by Western countries of oppressive regimes that jail, exile, and silence their artists.

What authoritarianism does to culture

Jakub Depczyński, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, offered a trenchant diagnosis of how far-right regimes strategically dismantle cultural ecosystems. Speaking explicitly in a personal capacity, Depczyński highlighted the five systematic tactics used by Poland's previous ultra-conservative government to capture the cultural field:

1. **Replacing leadership** in the cultural institutions that are hierarchical by design can effectively change the position and discourse of the entire system.

2. **Creating parallel structures**: instead of firing staff, the regime created duplicative, loyalist bodies alongside existing institutions that were defunded. This can lead to marginalising dissenting voices while maintaining an appearance of continuity.

3. **Introducing small improvements**: initial policies included raising salaries and improving contracts for the most precariously employed workers, creating a veneer of progress and making the environment less conducive to dissent and resistance.

4. **Redefining the essence of culture**: the regime avoided overt censorship. Instead, it manipulated funding mechanisms, reshaped criteria for grants, and weaponised terms like 'woke', 'liberal propaganda', and 'cultural Marxism' to delegitimise progressive art.

5. **Undermining collective resilience**: the government targeted solidarity itself - driving wedges between climate, feminist, migrant, and artistic movements, rendering resistance fragmented and easier to suppress.

These tactics, while rooted in the Polish context, resonated with participants from other regions. A participant from Slovakia, described a similarly severe situation in their country: radical funding cuts across all artistic disciplines, the silent 'occupation' of the Arts Council, change of leadership in some cultural institutions, and others being on the verge of collapse. As they noted, there is a sense of urgency, but also helplessness, stemming from the lack of collaboration between the state-funded and independent arts sectors.

The damage inflicted on culture by such regimes is not easily reversed, even when political tides shift. Depczyński offered a sobering reflection on the aftermath of Poland's far-right government. While its removal from power brought hope, the coalition of centrist, Christian democratic, and left parties has proven deeply disappointing to many artists and cultural workers. Not only has the successor government failed to undo the structural damage, but they have often adopted similar mechanisms of control - prioritising mainstream narratives, sidelining progressive or critical practices, and applying subtle forms of censorship masked as depoliticisation.

Photo credit: Karam Ghossein

Depczyński warned of how the shift from overt censorship to instrumentalisation of culture is often equally dangerous: 'You're not directly censored, but you are asked not to be divisive. You're told to make work that "unifies". And suddenly your only option is to paint landscapes, horses, still lifes'. This kind of censorship - through funding criteria, discourse management, and aesthetic pressure - produces a chilling effect that undermines critical art just as effectively as direct bans.

Depczyński also spoke about the moods within the wider public, linking the erosion of the cultural sphere to broader democratic disenchantment. Many working-class and rural communities in Poland, they said, no longer see democracy as a meaningful promise. 'Democracy is your housing list, your school, your job security', they reflected. 'If those things fail, democracy feels like a lie'. In this vacuum, authoritarianism offers a warped sense of stability - and culture becomes a battlefield for values that have already been hollowed out economically.

Ways forward: resistance, vigilance, and the power of community

As repressive regimes grow increasingly sophisticated in controlling public discourse and dismantling cultural infrastructure, artists, curators, and cultural workers across the globe are forging new strategies to resist, endure, and reimagine their futures. From Poland to Uganda, from Europe's bureaucratic corridors to the bottom-up community circles of the Middle East, a shared understanding has emerged: the struggle is ongoing, but so too is the creativity that fuels resistance.

Sara Whyatt, long engaged in human rights work through Freemuse and the Council of Europe, emphasised the urgency of learning from each other's battles. Authoritarianism rarely arrives all at once - it creeps, often first into the cultural sector, through censorship, defunding, and ideological purification. There is a need to learn from other contexts: as Whyatt observed, 'we don't need to walk every step - we can leap ahead by learning from each other.'

Cultural workers, she suggests, must treat global repression as a shared challenge and develop strategies not in isolation, but in dialogue.

Photo credit: Karam Ghossein

Five lessons from Poland

Jakub Depczyński offered a distilled set of survival strategies drawn from the Polish experience - where, for eight years, the cultural sector faced relentless assaults from a far-right government. These five lessons, forged under pressure, can now serve as a toolkit for others facing similar tides:

1. **Be prepared for the unthinkable.** The more you think something is impossible, illegal - the more probable it happens. Expect repression to come dressed in legality and surprise. Preparedness means anticipating the absurd and having a plan to withstand it.

2. **Build alliances.** Holding space for difference is crucial, but unity is essential. Resistance is stronger when it reaches beyond comfort zones, including unlikely or even uneasy alliances. 'You can break this alliance later, but if you want to resist neo-authoritarianism, you need to unite - even with the neoliberal centre'.

3. **Document everything.** From diaries to public posts, from protests to legal challenges - every small act of documentation matters. It may not stop the present, but it builds a memory archive for future accountability.

4. **Unionise the cultural sector.** Organisation is key to strong resistance, especially considering that 'far-right regimes are terrible managers', as Depczyński observed. In Poland, in the face of right-wing pressures, these were the unions that proved most effective. They mobilised workers and won battles that others couldn't.

5. **Don't let the narrative close.** The far right's most effective weapon is despair. Convincing people that the fight is over ensures no one will resist. That is why it is crucial to continue believing in a better future and preparing strategies for seizing the moment and building it. 'They are not geniuses. They will stumble. And that's the moment to be ready.'

Care as resistance

Mey Seifan, working in the intersection of Arab and European cultural politics, reminded the group that survival is not only political but emotional. Communities under siege often face exhaustion, depression, and emotional collapse. In such moments, care becomes its own form of defiance. 'That is why we always go back to our hugging circles', they shared, 'These little bubbles give us energy to go and fight again. It's like one battle after the next - each one bigger than the last'.

Support systems - both intimate and strategic - allow artists and cultural workers to regroup, to hold grief, and to restore their energy for the work ahead.

Community as institution

Gerald Ronnie Odil closed the discussion with a powerful reminder that, for many, resistance is not a project - it is daily life. In Uganda, where queer existence is criminalised and public art heavily surveilled, collective survival becomes the only 'institution'. 'Resistance is in the living', they reflected, 'It's in the community building. It's working toward changes you might never live to see - but you build anyway'.

Odil's collective, Anti-Mass, functioned without institutional support, without external funding - powered instead by mutual aid, shared resources, and radical trust. Working with the artists on the ground becomes an institutional system in itself.

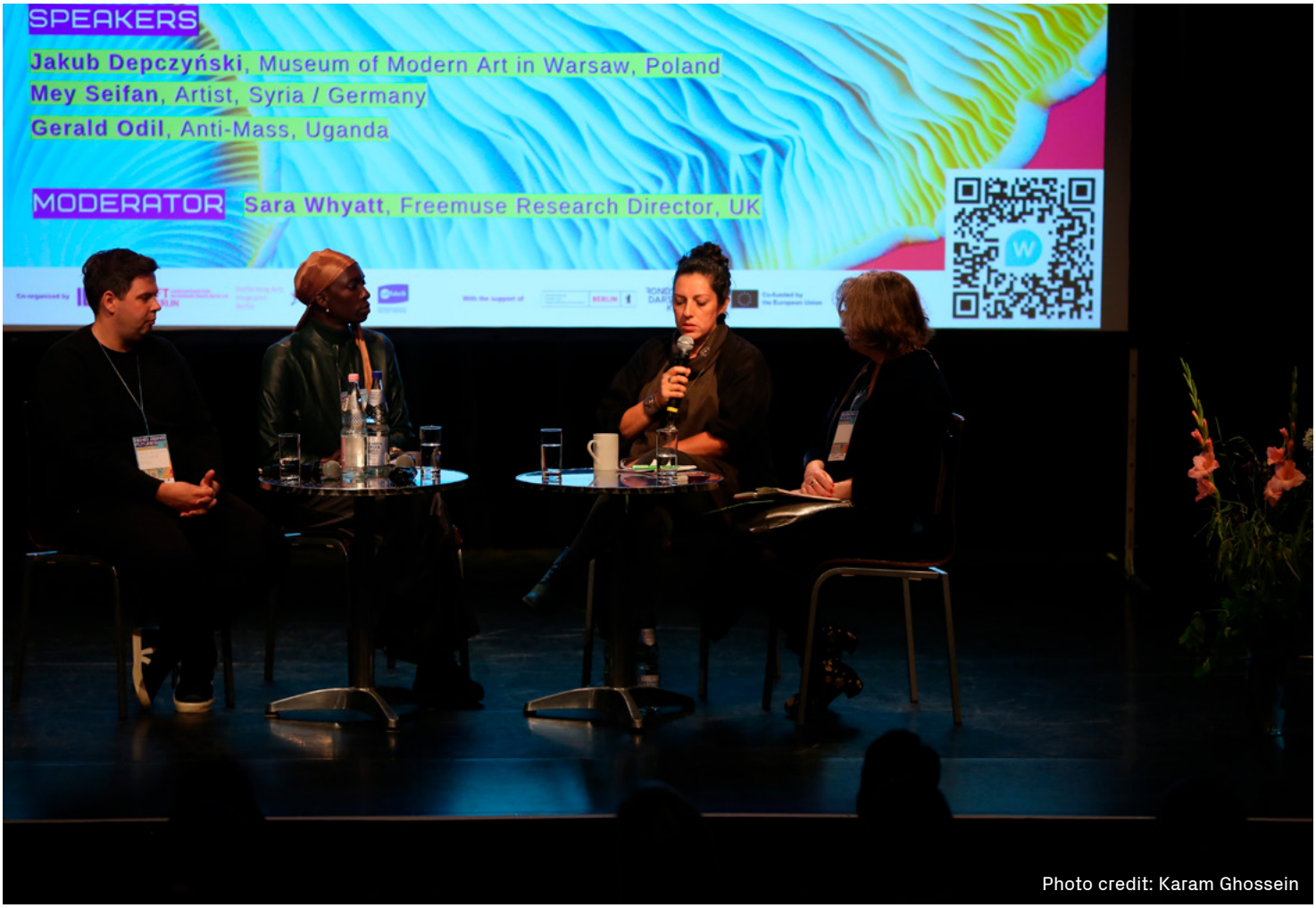
This mode of organising - grassroots, decentralised, and deeply relational - offers a model for contexts where formal institutions are compromised or weaponised.

Conclusion

In every testimony shared, a clear message emerges: authoritarianism thrives on isolation, fear, and fatigue. The true counterforce is not only resistance, but also imagination and community. The responsibility to care for every voice - including those forced into exile and rebuilding their lives in new contexts - must go beyond symbolic gestures. It should be a shared commitment embraced by the entire arts community and demanded of those in power.

The path forward lies in continuing to create spaces for solidarity, experimentation, and healing. Artists must tell their stories across borders, build alliances - even across ideologies, and uphold care as a deliberate strategy. Most importantly, they must remember that while authoritarianism and oppression can cross borders, no regime is invincible - and every oppressive system carries within it the seeds of its own undoing.

'Art exists because life is not enough,' was cited earlier in the conversation. In the face of global turmoil, art - and those who make space for it - remind us that life can still be more.



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