

Traitors and the Art of Self-Censoring

After the wining the civil war in 2009, the president of Sri Lanka announced that hereafter there would be no majorities and minorities in Sri Lanka but patriots and traitors. This re-labelling while allowing the age old inequalities to continue, marks all the voices of dissent as non-patriotic. In the post-independence politics of Sri Lanka, competing political parties and armed groups constantly use the word traitor to single out individuals and groups who have differences in opinion, ideology and vision. Dissent has been seen as a threat. On the other hand the nation-building project in Sri Lanka constantly produced its ›Other‹ along the line of binaries such as Aryan-Dravidian, native-invader, Sinhalese-Tamils, majority-minority and South-North.

While the 1983 riots against the Tamils and the war between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militant groups contributed to the shifts in the art practice of Jaffna, the JVP insurgency and the counter insurgency by the state led to the redefining of art in Colombo's art world after the 1990s. These two artistic responses from the North and the South against the state and non-state actors were treated by the present art-writing without distinction. Differences in the agency of the artist were not fully taken into consideration of existing art-writing. In this context, through a comparative reading of selected works of visual art produced during the time of war and the way they intertwine with the personal narratives of the authors, this paper inquires into the notion of artistic freedom in the context of ethnic polarisation. The paper looks for answers for the following questions: Did the artists of the different ethnic groups enjoy the same freedom of expression in the context of disparities of their relationship with the state? How does the state apparatus control visual art practices in general and the art practices of

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the underprivileged section of society in particular? How did self-censoring shape the art of the ethnic and religious minorities? Did the surveillance and the state control of the memorialisation of the experiences of minorities open up new possibilities? How do artistic responses vary in terms of thematic and problematic according to the social position of the artist?

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