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THE ART NEWSPAPER

Brazilian arts group calls out censorship by 'arrogant fundamentalists' in open letter

More than 1,000 artists, curators and professionals have signed the protest document published by the pro-democracy collective Pela Democracia

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A nude performance by the artist Wagner Schwartz at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM), where a child touched the artist's arms and legs, was shut down after conservatives condemned the piece as promoting paedophilia

An open letter written by a group of Brazilian artists and art professionals that condemns “the rise of hate, intolerance and violence against freedom of expression in the arts and education” in the country has been signed by more than 1,000 people since it was published online last week. The pro-democracy collective says that “right-wing militants, segments of the neo-Pentecostal churches, some politicians, members of the state, the police and the Public Ministry are working together against artistic productions and institutions. They censor exhibitions, harass visitors and museum employees and use social media networks to demean and outrage people they disagree with.”

The letter cites a specific string of incidents that have happened over the past year, including the closing of an exhibition dedicated to queer art at the Santander Cultural Center in Porto Alegre, which included works by artists like Lygia Clark and Adriana Varejão, and a nude performance by the artist Wagner Schwartz at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM), where a child touched the artist's arms and legs as part of the performance. Both were denounced by conservatives for promoting pornography and paedophilia.

“Such arrogant fundamentalists shy away from reading the works more closely and hunt for signs of indecency, levity, pornography and heresy—there is no intellectual debate, no questioning, only violence and intolerance”, the letter states.

The backlash from conservative groups is part of a larger social and political trend that started in 2010, the letter says, in response to an expansion of Brazil's National Plan for Human Rights, which argues for stronger protections for women and the LGBT community. The right-wing's power grew in strength through the opposition to Brazil's former president Dilma Rousseff, who was impeached in 2016. "They are day by day limiting individual, civil and social rights in Brazil, endangering working conditions, threatening the freedom of teaching in schools, the protection of the environment, the union of people of the same sex, etc," the letter states.

The letter calls for "all democratic forces to confront, in the streets, in the legislative houses, in the courts and in the available means of communication, the concrete threats to freedoms and [recent] social victories". The letter was read out loud in Brazil's National Congress on 19 October by a representative of the Workers' Party, and by an artist at the opening of an exhibition that deals with the history of sexuality in art at the Museu do Arte de São Paulo, which recently set an over-18 age limit admission policy for the show after outcry from conservatives. Among the anti-censorship protesters at the show's opening was the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who was in town for [the Brazilian premiere](#) of his documentary Human Flow at the São Paulo Film Festival.



Ai Weiwei at a anti-censorship protest at the Museu do Arte de São Paulo, which put an over-18 age limit on its current show looking at the history of sexuality in art