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## **On “Freedom” and Flags**

Two troubling emblems of the Truckers’ Protest were the use of the word “freedom” to signify the group’s objectives, and the deployment of Canadian flags in ways that have not been seen in this country before. It’s a fair guess that many of us probably became quite tired – perhaps quickly became tired – of those agitating representations.

Late in the period of the protest, on Feb. 14, 2022, ten Ottawa area art galleries and museums drew eloquent attention to the term “freedom,” in a letter critiquing the manner in which the Canadian “Freedom Convoy” had curtailed the ability of local institutions to do their work -- providing *access* to cultural events and artistic expressions. Their letter seems to me to point to some significant terms regarding how freedom works – or perhaps ought to – in our culture, and therefore casts in doubt its usage on the streets of Ottawa earlier this year.

In this short talk I want to review the content of the letter to consider how the protest, and the likening of it to others involving environmental and land claims activism, could be seen to have mocked the aspirations to critical engagement of the latter kinds of actions – and also set in high contrast the community-building that artistic and cultural institutions intend to foster. Then I’ll loop back to briefly comment on the regressive way the Convoy deployed the Canadian flag.

Before turning to the letter, I want to say a couple of things about the way the word and the concept ‘freedom’ get interpreted and conscripted in certain of our contemporary frameworks.

As an artist who has taught art for a long time, I’m keenly aware that the idea of ‘freedom of expression,’ is a hallmark of what artists in our society ought to be able to reliably engage with. Similarly, as academics we hold freedom dear, which is analogous to artistic freedom, though here I’ll refer to the latter in light of what the Ottawa galleries had to say.

I think freedom regularly gets subsumed into the idea that artists – or any of us – should be able to do what we want, simply because it’s what we as individuals want to do. And while I don’t want to get into unpacking that thinking (which has certain legitimacies, contextually), such a notion of freedom isn’t synonymous with the expectation that one should be able or safe to express themselves freely, without fear of reprisals, censorship etc. As we know, this latter has more to do with what academics hold dear.

When I teach first year art students, I give assignments based on criteria and creative objectives. Occasionally a student will bristle and say, “I just want to do what I want to do!” This reaction is a great opportunity to talk about the fact that creative work doesn’t often thrive unmoored, without the recognition of a context: a community that includes a history; and perceived limitations that need to be recognized before the artist can push beyond them.

To summarize, I'm simply reminding us here that free expression requires the absence of oppressive structures, but it doesn't operate in a vacuum, when we have access to it.

One other broad perspective on 'freedom' deserves some note, before turning to the letter: an article in last Saturday's Globe and Mail, by U of T Philosophy professor, Mark Kingwell, was entitled, "When Language gets in the way of Truth." It was somewhat helpful in addressing the idea that, "true freedom is not (about) doing whatever the hell you want...." A further assertion is helpful here, even if it doesn't go quite far enough: "There is such a thing as the public interest.... Freedom entails responsibility, and it means nothing if not enjoyed by everyone equally." Kingwell goes on to add: "Indeed, (the use of the word) 'freedom' is a central case ... of what philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called 'language on holiday.' Its misuse is a symptom of very deep epistemological and political malaise."

Further to the above, and not so parenthetically, I think it's obvious that many current understandings of freedom have been hugely influenced by the Internet, and by social media. Certainly, the loss of a robust notion of 'context' therein is significant to recognize. And, I think it's clear that taking a definition of freedom determined in light of social media dynamics to the streets of Ottawa was a big problem.

### *The Letter (see below)*

Now I'm putting up the letter that the ten Ottawa galleries and Museums supported -- and hoping you can all scan through it.

The letter eloquently alludes that not only does freedom involve social responsibility, as Kingwell notes, but the context of the community itself is important in determining what 'freedom' looks like. Moreover, while freedom needs to be available to everyone equally, the emphasis in the letter on differences within the community suggests that individuals and groups will experience freedom differently, depending on prior experience, culture etc.

During the time of the pandemic, all citizens experienced challenging impacts. The letter draws attention, however, to the fact that marginalized and racialized community members, who potentially access fewer freedoms in communities, might experience the loss of freedom more acutely when it's suppressed. None of this is to suggest that the Truckers Convoy was, by contrast, a monoculture, but to argue that 'freedom,' according to the aims of the Convoy lacked nuance to the point of equating it with whatever the loudest of mouths might argue it to be -- on behalf the group.

I think the letter also highlights the difference between individual wants and 'desires,' and a sense of responsibility to the collective that determines the right thing to do. The retort, "Yah, it was (difficult), but we persevered....," points to the fact that the Pandemic required levels of discipline and commitment that many of us would rather not have had to draw upon, but we did, and we do. Of course, we all needed forms of 'escape,' but one hopes that in seeking those moments, the intention to remain neighbourly can still prevail.

For me, among the most compelling assertions of the letter is the notion that cultural institutions need to “safeguard the freedom of expression at the heart of cultural and artistic practice as a means to understand each other and respect different perspectives and experiences.” So, rather than being a no-cost opportunity – the writers allude that freedom is costly. Freedom itself is never ‘free’ ... and that’s what gives it its supreme value. To do what you want without thinking of one’s neighbour is cheap, and cheapening.

### Flags and Protests

Now I want to wrap up by speaking very briefly to the flag issue.

A photograph by Indigenous Ottawa photographer, Jeff Thomas, and is entitled “Caledonia Protest Site (2008).” (Photograph not shown here)

Among the most famous land-claims situations in Canada, to date, the Caledonia dispute is between the Six Nations of the Grand River and the Government of Canada. The Six Nations were granted the land in perpetuity and argue that the lands were improperly sold, leased or given away by various Canadian governments, leaving only 5 per cent of the original lands under Six Nations control.

Jeff’s work beautifully captures the protest site as a borderland of tension and contestation, where the protagonists are clear, and the flags articulate the political terms of engagement. Interestingly, we see the Palestinian flag here as a means of punctuating the terms of the dispute.

How did the Canadian flag, in contrast, function in Ottawa? I think it’s evident that it was not being deployed as a cipher of clearly defined tension between communities, or even between a community and the government, in the truest sense. Instead, it made reference to the way the American flag was mobilized in Washington on Jan. 6, 2021 -- and also to the ways national flags have been used elsewhere, notably in Australia, aligning the flag with white nationalism.

My time doesn’t allow for a deep analysis of the function of the flag on Ottawa streets, but I don’t think we can really assess the meaning of the Canadian Flag at the Truckers’ Protests without first acknowledging the genesis of the red Maple Leaf 50 years ago, in large part to distinguish our flag internationally from the earlier version indebted to the Union Jack. This seriously differentiates its use from that of the stars and stripes in America – although perhaps not in the minds of the leaders of the Truckers Protest.

At this late point in my talk, I would remind us that there is another flag-related matter that needs not to be forgotten, amidst all of this. That is regarding the flag’s extended stay at half-mast as the Residential School burials sites began to be revealed in Canada, earlier in 2021.

During the Spring and Summer of last year, the flag at half-mast was a fraught reminder of the history of the treatment of Indigenous people on this land, and of the tremendous amount of work still to do towards reparation and economic justice.

Without intending to tokenize the Residential School subject with this brief mention, I would submit that its importance needs not to be in any way eclipsed by the problems associated with the Truckers' Protests – or other matters of social and cultural importance that arise in the meantime.

To conclude: during the Trucker's Protest, the Canadian flag was co-opted, ostensibly in the name of freedom – in ways that the majority of citizens disapproved of. Nonetheless, that moment points to a site of contestation, the ongoing analysis of which could help unpack the epistemological and political malaise to which Kingwell referred.

Some of the work has begun; there's much more to do.

Patrick Mahon  
March 2022

**OTTAWA LOCAL ARTS ORGANIZATIONS UNITED STATEMENT ON “FREEDOM CONVOY  
FEBRUARY 14, 2022**

From the Board of Directors and Staff of the Ottawa Art Gallery; [The Ottawa School of Art](#); [Bytown Museum](#); [SAW](#); [Digital Arts Resource Centre \(DARC\)](#); [Ottawa Dance Directive](#); [Independent Filmmakers Co-operative of Ottawa Inc.](#); [Artengine](#); [Canadian Film Institute \(CFI\)](#), and [Ottawa Fringe](#).

We the undersigned believe that arts and culture are the lifeblood of a vibrant society. Through our local cultural organizations, we tell the wonderful and complex stories of our region, we entertain and provide education, and we are a respite that contributes to the wellbeing of our citizens. We are a reflection of our communities, helping us to remember the past and imagine the future. Made up of dedicated and passionate people, our art galleries, dance groups, art schools, artist run centres and museums have worked for decades to deliver intrinsic value to our community that promotes and empowers inclusivity as well as adding important social and economic benefits.

Throughout the pandemic and the societal shifts that have occurred over the last couple of years, we have all worked tirelessly and with limited resources, to reach our audiences in the digital sphere, to close or adapt our spaces in accordance with health regulations and more importantly, to listen to equity seeking communities and address systemic racism and discrimination. We did this because it was the right thing to do, because as members of civil society, we played our part to keep the citizens of Ottawa safe and inspired. We also did it because we are passionate about the role culture and art can play as an essential bridge-builder, mirror, and, response to the challenges and realities of our current time. Would we have wanted to be open to serve our community as usual? Yes, of course. Was it difficult to deal with

all the economic and social uncertainties? Yah, it was, but we persevered because we fundamentally believe that culture is necessary for our individual and collective healing, and that we need to safeguard the freedom of expression at the heart of cultural and artistic practice as a means to understand each other and respect different perspectives and experiences.

For weeks now, we have remained shuttered, no longer due to COVID regulations but because of the “Freedom Convoy”. This occupation has made us, the artists and culture community members, and our many, often vulnerable, neighbours feel unsafe and harassed. It has allowed hate-filled and racist sentiments to fill our public spaces, has impacted us financially, and has taken away our freedom and stopped us from serving our community. Even more critically, this artistic freedom is being curtailed when people most need it. We stand in solidarity with all those who have been so deeply impacted by this, particularly marginalized and racialized community members.

We call on the organizers of the “Freedom Convoy” to end their occupation of Ottawa’s downtown core immediately so that we can open our cultural organizations to a community in need. We look forward to continuing to bring the restorative, reflective, and provocative power of art and culture to this region as soon as we are able.

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