



# hitting a nerve

an unplanned essay on creativity, control and censorship

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every poster tells a story. who made them, how; who put them up, where, and when; who takes them down, and why? as someone who makes a lot of posters for political causes, that last question has always fascinated me. what compels someone to take down a poster? in the last weeks, i have personally become a central part of one of these stories; an possible intrigue of small proportions, with slightly larger ripples, on an gigantic pond.

tuesday, december 5 2023, i printed 37 white and yellow posters with the phrase “hela konstfack hatar \_\_\_\_\_” (all of konstfack hates \_\_\_\_\_) in connection to the minister of education, mats persson, visiting konstfack the following morning. i wanted to highlight how he and his government, collaborating with nazis and embracing outright fascist rhetoric and policies, go against all of konstfack’s values. in the evening, i spread the posters around the school’s public spaces, along the halls and corridors. only to find that, when i came back in the morning of december 6, almost all of them were gone, safe for 10, most of which were significantly moved from their original place, and set up somewhere else; sometimes slightly ripped and with new strips of tape. what happened?



i have certainly done my fair share of taking down posters around town. mainly because i liked a certain artist. taking them off the wall, peeling off the masking tape and making sure not to damage the print in the process. but i have also ripped down posters because they were about something that went strictly against my values, like a conspiratorial film, or nazi groups. what is the story of my posters? did cleaning staff take them down? or a disagreeing student? why would they put some of them back up somewhere else? was this a panicked employee, knowing that the minister wouldn’t like to see dissenting voices on his visit, and taking them down? was there a conscious decision behind which posters to keep, and which to move? in which case, what were the criteria? why leave up a sign against anti-semitism but take down the one about islamophobia? what is so controversial about hating war, mines and nazis? mostly, it seems that the most provocative words (not the most provocative opinions) and the most direct attacks against the government were taken down. the one poster that significantly complicates that theory is “hela konstfack hatar kapitalism” (all of konstfack hates capitalism), which was moved out of the way, but was still hanging on december 6. is this not a very direct attack towards person, member of the neo-liberal, growth-fanatic, free market loving liberalerna? why was the sign criticising “neo-liberals” gone then? something in this selection

process does not add up for me, and i don't think i will be able to find a reason why. i do know, from talking to people at the school, that some of the posters were taken down by people working with the minister's visit, but cannot, and do not want to, say that every single poster was taken down by them. in my view, all signs point toward these actions as part of the visit, both with how the posters directly criticising the government were removed, and the time frame matching so exactly. someone decided that the minister shouldn't see any of the posters criticising persson or his colleagues, and took down certain messages while leaving others up. regardless of who exactly took down which posters, the following stands for itself.

## rules don't apply



konstfack's rules of conduct<sup>1</sup> detail that

Graffiti is considered as damaging and will be reported to the police and that

Posters are only allowed on Konstfack's billboards. A general ban on posters applies within the school premises, also both inside and outside of the two external staircases .

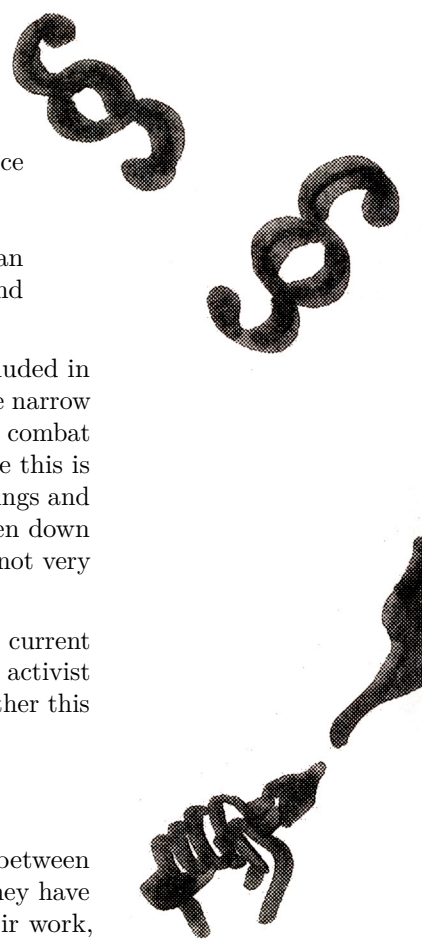
what counts as posters? prints made by students are probably not included in this policy, right? or is the putting up of artworks only allowed within the narrow frame of pre-booked spaces? if yes, that is something worth contesting, to combat the school's otherwise white abyss of rooms and corridors. also because this is not how konstfack works in practice: students announce exhibition openings and events with posters around the building, which are reasonably not taken down by the school. especially since the posters on the school's billboards are not very visible to everyone unless you specifically seek them out.

of what nature were my posters? they are incidentally also a part of my current school project, analysing the production and distribution of messaging in activist contexts. is there a line between art and activism? and who judges whether this line has been crossed?

## can you separate the art from the activist?

listening to a recent konstfack panel discussion about the connection between art and climate, i noticed that some artists are of the perception that they have to separate their role as an artist from their role as an activist in their work, refusing to call themselves activists even if they are founding members of climate groups demonstrating in front of the parliament every week. what do they feel the need to distance themselves from? is it the modern philosophy of art for the sake of art, the idea that there somehow is an inherent value to art that is disconnected from its meaning? a great example of the opposite is hong-kong based artist michael leung. the result of their artist residency in stockholm in 2023 was the book *elms as method*, in which leung draws parallels between, and

<sup>1</sup>konstfack's intranet, Safety and rules for order and well-being, Rules of conduct, state 2023/12/14



interweaves, a plethora of seemingly disconnected lived experiences, like the independence struggle of hong-kong, the region's rose tea culture and the 1968 occupation of the elm trees in stockholm's kungsträdgården (i will touch on them again further on), crafting a holistic picture of these local efforts as part of a global resistance movement. the book is beautifully illustrated with paintings of the elms ██████████, printed on available equipment and assembled by hand. also extremely relevant is monica sjöö's work as an ecofeminist artist and activist, combining beautiful, spiritual paintings with direct, stencilled lettering and fluidly moving back and forth between large canvas and screen printed mobilisation material. her work was radical both artistically and politically. leung and sjöö both show that activism is one of the most creative things a person can do. it makes us constantly look for new methods and strategies, build unconventional communities and challenge, make and unmake social norms. why some artists would want to separate themselves from that practice is beyond me.

coming back to the strictly legal: to be clear, the rules do state that the school had every right to take down the prints that weren't set up on billboards. but: some of the posters *were* put up on the billboards around konstfack. and those were all removed. at the same time, posters were moved and put up in other places that the school policy could deem illegal. so either, the person taking down the posters wasn't aware of the policy, or didn't care about it. whatever the case, i would argue that it cannot apply in this situation. the reason for removing the posters has to lie somewhere else, and i think it can be found when looking at the larger context in which this event took place.

## self-censorship in reaction to reactionaries

during the last months, the swedish government has become extremely hostile to protest, labelling civil disobedience and shouting activists as dangerous<sup>2</sup> and anti-democratic<sup>3</sup>, and attempting to ban protests at universities<sup>4</sup>, mainly in connection to protests against israel's bombing of palestinians in gaza. this follows a trend of anti-protest rhetoric all around europe, with britain's police and crime bill<sup>5</sup>, germany detaining activists<sup>6</sup> without evidence and forbidding demonstrations<sup>7</sup>, france trying to ban entire climate movements<sup>8</sup>, among many many others; in a time when right-wing parties and sentiments are celebrating a renaissance of horrifying proportions. as a climate justice activist myself, i have personally felt extremely hostile behavior during peaceful actions and in our contact with police during the last months.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.gp.se/nyheter/sverige/klimatministern-stalldes-in-pa-grund-av-sakerhetsskal.6097fa47-a3bd-4e18-ae66-2e15050976f3>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>3</sup><https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vast/kristersson-om-avbrutna-motet-inte-sa-demokrati-ska-fungera-w7vnzy>, state 2023/12/14

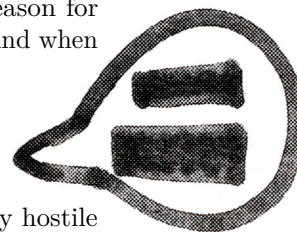
<sup>4</sup><https://tt.omni.se/chalmers-forbjuder-politiska-manifestationer/a/kE9AXa>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>5</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/law/2022/jan/13/how-will-the-police-and-bill-limit-the-right-to-protest>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>6</sup><https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/praeventivhaft-klima-protest-bayern-101.html>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>7</sup><https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/israel-palaestina-demonstrationen-deutschland-verbot-100.html>, state 2023/12/18

<sup>8</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/20/france-to-shut-down-climate-protest-group-citing-public-safety-risks>, state 2023/12/14



have i now also become one of those “violent anti-democrats” in the eyes of konstfack, for pasting posters with political messaging around school? will actions like this affect my application for a swedish citizenship? have i started to censor my opinion in fear of institutional retaliation? the swedish government recently proposed including a test for “swedish values” in the process of attaining a citizenship<sup>9</sup>. what values? the ones that instruct the military to “hunt” gang-members in the streets<sup>10</sup>? the ones that call for the destruction of mosques<sup>11</sup> in sweden? the swedish government has become a puppet of their far-right collaborator (sverigedemokraterna), in an amoral and inexhaustible drive for power. that fear definitely played into my choice of protest; semi-anonymous, silent and both physically and spacially non-confrontational.

was konstfack’s response to my posters maybe also an example of self-censorship? the school has long been the target of right wing populists, in the typical fascist tendency of decrying liberal arts schools as hurting national identity and fostering “radical” leftist ideas to develop. in 2021, konstfack’s students and leadership faced large amounts of hate from the liberal right and got dragged through the mud as perpetrators of “cancel culture” as a result of a (originally internal) debate about racism within the arts world. mats persson himself has weighed in on this and been a proponent<sup>12</sup> of the “anti-woke” talking points we have become so used to hearing over and over again. he also forcibly shortened the mandate period<sup>13</sup> of all of sweden’s university board members as soon as he came to power, citing “risks to national security” to gain control over universities’ leadership appointments, which was highly criticised by sweden’s universities’ vice-chancellors<sup>14</sup>. museums have become less accessible<sup>15</sup> in the year since the government was sworn in. in light of all this, it is fair to assume that konstfack’s leadership was somewhat afraid that student protest during the minister visit would worsen our already bad situation. does that fear legitimise self-censorship?



**no.**

i do not think so. as a cultural and educational institution, konstfack has the responsibility to be independent and confident in its role, not bow to the fear of fascist retaliation. we will not survive any better by accepting and pandering to a government that hates everything we stand for. we cannot tolerate those who do not tolerate us. and we have to continue standing for our values. especially now, when sweden is exporting weapons<sup>16</sup> which are used to kill civilians in

<sup>9</sup><https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/sverige/pehrson-invandrade-ska-testas-for-svenska-varderingar/>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>10</sup><https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2023/09/statsminister-ulf-kristerssons-tal-till-nationen/>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>11</sup><https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/0QadvB/jimmie-akesson-riv-moskeer>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>12</sup><https://www.svt.se/kultur/debatt-om-utredningen-av-cancelkultur>, state 2023/12/14

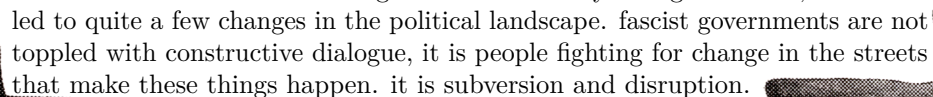
<sup>13</sup><https://www.dagensarena.se/innehall/ministern-om-utnamningar-vid-larosatenas-styrelser-vi-har-inte-rad-att-vara-naiva/>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>14</sup><https://suhf.se/app/uploads/2023/04/Till-regeringen-Utb-Land-Skrivelse-angaende-styrelserna-SUHF-SU-850-0024-23-REV.pdf>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>15</sup><https://www.dn.se/kultur/sa-mycket-kan-biljetterna-kosta-nar-museerna-infor-entreen/>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>16</sup><https://www.svenskafreds.se/vapenkartan/israel>, state 2023/12/14

gaza<sup>17</sup>, when it is colonising sápmi in the name of “green growth”<sup>18</sup> while at the same time waging a culture war against climate activists. when the government is blatantly islamophobic and “collaborating” with (aka. at the mercy of) actual nazis<sup>19</sup>, we have a responsibility to fight back, and stand up for what is right. when a representative comes to visit, we need to use that opportunity to voice resistance and increase public awareness, especially if the school’s leadership doesn’t, out of a (somewhat legitimate) fear of cuts in funding. my posters were a part of the criticism towards persson that konstfack itself didn’t say out loud, and they shouldn’t have been taken down.

when i spoke to a person in konstfack’s administration, they criticised my posters for generalising all students’ opinion with the phrase “hela konstfack hatar \_\_\_\_\_” —a nod to the classic “hela stockholm hatar rasister”—banners and signs employed for decades by stockholm’s antifascist movements—and suggested that a direct dialogue would have been a much more effective strategy to criticise the minister, saying the posters had no influence over the visit. i disagree. i don’t think the criticism can come in the form of “constructive dialogue”, because the criticism is not just “small” things like highlighting the school’s cut funding and disregard for students’ needs—as important and true as those things are. it is a systematic rejection of what mats persson stands for. his government has strayed too far into the extreme right to reach any kind of common denominator in a discussion with such a blatant power imbalance. protest is the only way to make sure that we get heard. this is me and my friends’—and generations of social and environmental justice activists before and around us—lived experience of trying over and over and over again to appeal to politicians for change, and being ignored. all the while the world is falling apart, environmentally, socially, totally. the only reason there are any mentions of the climate in today’s political agendas has been because the climate justice movement managed to mobilise a huge number of young people around the world to protest and pressure. that doesn’t mean that climate change is taken seriously enough or at all, but it has led to quite a few changes in the political landscape. fascist governments are not toppled with constructive dialogue, it is people fighting for change in the streets that make these things happen. it is subversion and disruption. 

protest is a central part of an active democracy, because there will not be meaningful change without ruffling some golden feathers. whether my form of protest was radical enough to be noticed, i am unsure. i might not have caused enough of a disruption—but that doesn’t improve with 3/4 of my posters missing...

## the aftermath



on december 11, the last ten posters are also gone, in a pace that feels much more natural for konstfack, a constant flow of different posters and exhibitions

<sup>17</sup><https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/12/gaza-unbearable-suffering-civilians-demands-end-violence-turk>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>18</sup><https://www.codastory.com/waronscience/sweden-climate-change-colonialism/>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>19</sup><https://expo.se/fakta/wiki/sverigedemokraterna-sd>, state 2024/01/02

taking their place. in an article<sup>20</sup> published that afternoon about the visit the week before, mats persson seemingly accuses students at konstfack of cancel-culture and restricting free speech because they are calling on the school to take a position for palestinians, something which does not seem to me like an act of cancel-culture or restriction of free speech; quite the opposite actually. and when mats says that universities should focus on education and research instead of becoming a space for political demonstrations, he apparently forgets the crucial rolls that universities have as front-line proponents of human-centred, life-affirming political change.

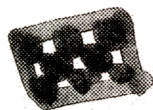
konstfack is a great example. on christmas 1968, students invited lonely and houseless people to the school, hosted an “alternativ jul”(alternative christmas) and occupied the school the weeks after, as part of a larger movement of anti-capitalist resistance in stockholm (and sweden), that (among others) fought against car centrism, privatisation, gentrification and environmental destruction. the same movement, renamed to “alternativ stad”(alternative city) is responsible for the occupation, and thus the survival, of the aforementioned elm trees in kungsträdgården that were intended to be cut down for the entrance to a subway station (which is now 100m away) and hindered the city from building a street through the park<sup>21</sup>, and more recently, were a central part in the successful push to stop the city from letting apple have their turn at destroying kungsträdgården when they attempted to turn large parts of the park it into another one of their locations, a semi-public townsquare-techstore-amalgation hellscape<sup>22</sup>. they are still an active part of the local climate movement.



tove jansson, the illustrator, moomin author and konstfack alumni, is another example of the school’s legacy always having been political. throughout her career, she illustrated covers and comics for different anti-fascist and leftist publications<sup>23</sup>. she was in several queer relationships her entire life (in times when homosexuality was a crime in finland) which made its way into her art through different themes and characters<sup>24</sup>.

all this to say that konstfack, as an arts school, and a university, has historically played an active roll in driving political change, something that mats persson seems blissfully unaware of. he does not know what he is talking about. and konstfack shouldn’t try to accommodate his feelings by hiding dissenting voices.

## conclusion



every poster tells a story. at their best, they are a very democratic medium. everyone can put them up around the city, with the risk of being told off by shop owners, city officials or pedestrians. and everyone can take them down. but this dynamic process only works when both the postering and the taking down are equally accessible for everyone. at their worst, posters—in the form

<sup>20</sup><https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/jlWXQ9/mats-persson-om-cancelkultur-pa-hogskolor-behovs-ett-varderingsomtag>, state 2023/12/14

<sup>21</sup><http://www.folkrorelser.org/texter/alts-1.html#5>, state 2024/01/08

<sup>22</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/nov/01/stockholm-apple-town-square-park-kings-garden-kungstradgarden>, state 2024/01/08

<sup>23</sup><https://tovejansson.com/sv/story/illustrator-barnboksforfattare/>, state 2024/01/02

<sup>24</sup><https://tovejansson.com/sv/tovepedia-sv/#karlek-och-vanskap>, state 2024/01/02

of advertisement—are more and more being placed behind glass walls, across subway tracks and in the view of security cameras, where the access to money dictates whether your ideas and views are untouchable and unavoidable. the chaotic democracy of public postering—for all its flaws a human and beautiful process—falls apart.

i don't want to paint the picture of a large conspiracy against me or my fellow activists, at least none that is not already obvious. we know about all the hate and dehumanisation activists have endured the last months, years, and forever. i also want to emphasise that all of the implications and arguments in this essay stand for themselves. my example is one of many cases, some of which i have partially highlighted here as well. the problem is systemic and it is real. so, to conclude:

my posters are part of a bigger story. a story of rising fascism, of self censorship and of a university grappling with what it stands for. someone taking the posters down (if that's you, hi!) contributed to that story, and made me tell it. and hopefully, it will encourage and contribute to a discussion around postering, artistic freedom and activism at konstfack, and maybe even society at large.

