

## **Art Gallery threatens legal action**

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Renowned photographer, Tony Figueira, announced this week that he has decided to cancel his photo exhibition, which was scheduled to open at the Woermannhaus Gallery last weekend, in protest against the gallery's decision not to exhibit the work of Imke Rust.

"I wish to let everyone know that I have cancelled my exhibition at the Swakopmund Arts Association, Woermannhaus Gallery, which was due to open this afternoon at 5pm. The Swakopmund Arts Association and I do not share the same views about artistic expression and opinions," Figueira, wrote in an online post on Saturday.

The Swakopmund Arts Association (SAA) came out of its corner fighting this week and threatened legal action against newspapers that covered the story about an artist who was refused space at the Woermannhaus Gallery.

Earlier reports and a letter from the SAA suggested that Rust was turned down because her work is "politically loaded," but the SAA insists that they declined due to technical reasons.

The SAA says that it has been misquoted and that there were several grounds on which the work was refused. In a statement the SAA explained that, "An artist approached us in June this year and wished to exhibit a project addressing the current debates and happenings concerning the planned chemical industry, phosphate and uranium mining... the artist made it clear that 1-2 video beamers would be required, as well as 2-4 video screens.

Additionally it was planned to spread up to 525 kg of salt on the floor for one of several installations.

"The committee looked at the proposal and decided against this exhibition for several reasons ... Our locality was rather unsuited for the proposed video installations, as we don't have the required video equipment nor can the gallery be darkened during daytime; bringing in salt was technically challenging to our old building on the first floor, particularly as this is part of the National Heritage.

A third reason was the fact that the exhibition addressed the ongoing discussion concerning uranium mining at the coast. A heated debate had been going on for some time at the beginning of the year, and was still fresh in June 2012, and the Swakopmund Arts Association felt at the time that it did not want to add to an emotional and partially unscientific debate.

Our exact words were 'Durch eine unsachliche und wissenschaftlich fragwürdige Kampagne gegen den wirtschaftlich für Namibia wichtigen Uranabbau [...] ist die Debatte politisch belastet.'

The SAA admits though that its letter to Rust was ambiguous: "It was a mistake to add this statement [above] as the phrasing is unfortunate and the reason given was totally irrelevant concerning our decision."

"Does the SAA have a mandate to decide in the interest of any particular political or, indeed, any other agenda?" John Sampson, an art critic and owner of Fusion Gallery asked in a recent letter.

"The decision by the SAA to ban Imke Rust's latest work, dealing with environmental issues from being shown in the Woermann Gallery, is of serious concern to the art fraternity in Namibia. Her work is certainly not 'irrelevant.'"

As recently as two weeks ago the Scientific Association of Namibia hosted an evening in Windhoek at which the implications of uranium mining in the central Namib was discussed in some depth. So the issue is of national interest and absolutely relevant. The SAA is in no position to decide whether an artist's work is controversial or not, and in Rust's case, she is dealing with a current issue of enormous environmental concern.

Should artists therefore not engage with these issues?

Imke Rust is neither irresponsible nor cavalier in the production of her art. She is, however, informed and concerned, and has the right to express those sentiments in her art," Sampson wrote.

The SAA maintains that there was no "provisional booking" and that Rust was already informed in June that the gallery would not be able to accommodate the exhibition, but that they are willing to consider "viable objects" for future exhibitions.

"And I sensed an infinite scream passing through the Namib", will now be shown from 10 to 26 December at The Last Resort in Libertina Amathila Street, Swakopmund, while Figueira will now be exhibiting in Swakopmund from 16 December at Namibian Jewellers & Arts.