

FORMS OF CENSORSHIP

The Cross Art Projects
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Forms of Censorship queries an unhealthy culture of self-censorship developing in the arts. Artists witness genocide in Gaza and Israel's intensified occupation of the West Bank and use art's analytic insight and affective power to respond to events as they unfold. Some artists have found themselves criticised, threatened or silenced for showing support for the Palestinian people or for simply being Palestinian. *Forms of Censorship* brings attention to an historical and increasingly pathological pattern at play.

For centuries art has raised its voice in terrible times. Censorship aiming to silence dissent and manipulate public opinion has no place in our public institutions, and artists and audiences stand firm with the International Court of Justice resolutions. Palestinian voices, the most powerless, living in bleakest circumstances, must be heard and their human rights endorsed. It is time for Australia to recognise Palestine as a nation.

The 670-kilometre apartheid wall built in 2001 is a concrete leitmotif for 76 years of Israeli military occupation of Palestine. Elsewhere green lines, military encampments, checkpoints and surveillance cameras are the enforcers. After Hamas' abhorrent 7 October 2023 attack on Israeli civilians, Israel's revenge has butchered over 35,000 people—mostly civilians—and destroyed the very landscape that sustains life. In January, the International Court of Justice called Israel's carnage in Gaza and the (now total) blockade of food, water and medicines “plausible genocide.” The Israeli government has not met the demand of the ICJ and world leaders to “take all measures within its power” to prevent genocide. Instead, the killings continue from air, land and sea and famine and disease have set in. As we near 8 months of Genocide in Gaza, university campuses and unions have joined long standing calls to boycott and divest.

In times of atrocity, art and reporting are crucial to evidence, remember and assert moral witness. To paraphrase Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, “who will speak for those who are silenced?” Reporters often risk their lives to tell the story, and from the first day of the bombing, the Israel Defence Force has targeted media outlets and journalists, universities, artists and writers. Taking up the flame on their behalf are Palestinian-Australian artists Mahmoud Salameh, whose political drawings show the targeted journalist's bravery, and Lux Eterna, whose self-portrait photograph shows her wearing an embroidered Palestinian taub (dress) shot in dying light in the bush surrounding the Shoalhaven River (NSW)—telling the story of exile and heartbreak.

Lacking direct access to politicians and public institutions, artists and allies use their creative skills as commentators to witness and/or join the ongoing solidarity protests. The dignity of the marches are a form of testimony and creative energy, as shown in Sofia Sabbagh's drawings that have mapped each consecutive weekly march. Nicole Barakat's banners with their innocently shimmering appliqué messages are a reminder that those killed or maimed are overwhelmingly children. Alex Gawronski compresses months of outrage and frustration into a single print that contains months of his protest placards—one a copy of artist Kahled Jarrar's (fake) passport stamp for Palestine “State of Peace” encircling a sunbird. Chips Mackinoly's banner calls desperately to “give peace a chance”, whilst Simon Blau's set of flag paintings contrast the ideal of peace against a grimly realist genocidal grey/red horizon. Narelle Jubelin's witness is to re-caption satellite photos on clunky Dymo Labels, paired alongside a concrete grey and black keening-shawl.

The text in the remote collective Mparntwe for Falastin's banner reproduction draws attention to the call to “Close Pine Gap”, the US spy base near Alice Springs crucial to surveillance of the Middle East, laced by tracery of the keffiyeh.

Meanwhile our art and cultural institutions respond to the daily carnage with hand-wringing self-censorship that prevents them from addressing (any) political conflict. Writers' festivals are one of the few cultural formations to defy intimidation campaigns, perhaps because writers are acutely sensitive to the history of book banning and book burning. In a world of increasing authoritarian instability, we need our funded arts organisations to be independent and boldly assert human rights.

Australian institutional irresolution has a long and sorry history of targeted-censorship, and *Forms of Censorship* reviews a case in point of militarised language and off-screen actors and their privileges. The exhibition *Treasures of Palestine* was first held at Canberra Museum and Art Gallery without controversy in 2003. The curator, Ali Kazak, former Head of the General Palestinian Delegation to Australia, had aimed to humanise a living culture with ancient roots and to contextualise and preserve an archive of Palestinian resistance.

At its reshowing at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum the same year, senior management removed an entire section of the original installation that included posters, maps showing the diminishing land area of Palestine and 45 photos from UNRWA archives. Of three documentary films, two were removed, leaving one about embroidery on all 3 monitors. Almost half the planned exhibition area was sealed from public view. *Forms of Censorship* displays the opening sentence of the original exhibition introduction—“Palestinians and Jews have lived in the land now known as Israel for centuries. In 1948, with the creation of Israel as a Jewish state, many Palestinians became refugees exiled from their own homes”—alongside the evasive Orientalism of its replacement.

When questioned on ABC Radio's *Lateline* (17 November 2003), the director pleaded “lack of space”. Protest letters flooded the museum, many from outraged Jewish listeners. Postcards stating “Censorship has NO place in OUR museums. Why? Ask the Director”, were handed out by Arab Australian Arts Action Alliance. Meanwhile, across town, major venues were made unavailable to host the awarding of the Sydney Peace Prize to Professor Hanan Ashrawi.

In homage to those removed, *Forms of Censorship* reproduces 24 posters from Ali Kazak's collection in The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive. Selected posters are from the *1967-1987 Down with the Occupation* exhibition by Artists for Freedom of Expression—a group of Israeli and Palestinian artists who marked 20 years since the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, with a call for the return of the Occupied Palestinian Territories to make an independent state possible.

Also included is a poster by prominent artist Sliman Mansour, whose 1980 exhibition in Ramallah (occupied West Bank) was violently shutdown by the Israeli army for using “the colours red, green, black and white of the Palestinian flag”. Mansour's reply was to design the now well-known watermelon resistance symbol. *Forms of Censorship* reprises such symbols of the Palestine struggle. By suppressing not only language but imagery, Israel has sought to normalise the occupation and deny those oppressed all humanity. Watermelon badges and loosely wrapped keffiyehs now join the historical runway

of red Phrygian caps, tricolour cockades and the suffragettes' colour combo of white, green and violet, as artists and civilians highlight the rights and power of the visual in moments of crisis.

Two decades after his censored *Treasures of Palestine* exhibition, Ali Kazak states simply: "we are calling for Australia to support justice, international law, equality, and peace in the Middle East. This is where Australia's national interest lies". Curatorial censorship has seeped into our cultural institutions as "antisemitic" rhetoric has been weaponised by Israel. It became preposterous when the Australian Museum secured the exhibition *Ramses and the Gold of the Pharaohs* from Egypt, opening in late November 2023. At the request of lobby groups, the museum removed the words "in Libya and Palestine" from one label describing the Pharaoh's military history. When outed for censorship the museum countered by adding the slippery words "in what today is known as Libya and Palestine" claiming the need for "geographical clarity".

Artists look to their employers and representative organisations to support their right to freedom of speech and to integrate human rights law in their code of practice. Yet only a handful of Australia's 15 public contemporary art organisations even responded to an email from *Artists for Palestine* (17 January 2024), asking for a human rights stance on the conflict and "an embodied social justice and de-colonial struggle" in their program—hardly a revolutionary demand given contemporary art's broad social engagement. One or two have held community events, others opted for a "respectfully impartial" silence, while most Boards simply did not reply.

Our arts employers "support a ceasefire" (who wouldn't?) but do not seem willing to integrate human rights law in their charters. Why are our arts employers more scared about reputational, funding or sponsorship impacts than are willing to declare simple principles of human rights? Institutional hand wringing and the stifling of discussion helps tip the scales towards a distanced and performative reception of genocide and extends the "self-censor for your livelihood" message to artist supplicants.

Artists who express their views within the confines of the law should not have to risk their livelihoods or careers to do so. Mike Parr leaving Anna Schwartz Gallery after decades of successful partnership is a recent case in point. In a four-and-a-half-hour gallery performance Parr wrote that "Israel is an apartheid state." Most de-platformed artists, like Parr and a long list of others, explicitly oppose antisemitism and reject all forms of hostility towards people. As Parr implies, conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism feeds this tragedy. Yet many universities and arts organisations self-censor behind the controversial "Working Definition" of antisemitism proposed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Other definitions delineate clearly between antisemitism and varied anti-Zionist positions and other criticisms of Israel's occupation and governance. This precision is necessary to ensure fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression with respect to disfavoured positions on Israel.

When Palestinian photographers were excluded from the *PHOTO 2024* festival in March in Melbourne, artists staged a guerrilla street poster festival under the banner *NO-PHOTO 2024*, to highlight the unseen work of the Palestinian photographers on the ground in Gaza. The sets of posters covered the city: stark black rectangles with the photographer's name at the bottom and the other with a text that evokes the absent image's power. *NO-PHOTO 2024*'s introductory manifesto reads in part, "No mention of the war. No photos of its victims. No mention of the hundreds of photographers who have died taking them."

As a statement of solidarity with Palestine, artists James Nguyen and Tamsen Hopkinson painted over their exhibition *HuiHui* in

black paint and "turned off the lights" at ACCA in Melbourne. Nguyen, who works with language and migrants, then made two significant digital works depicting snatches of found text onto fake gallery spaces. The first work titled *Found text from leaked WhatsApp Groups*, is chilling in its word-for-word strategies of how to target artists for their pro-Palestine views. The second work, *White Cube* deflates the logic of arts organisations who snubbed *Artists for Palestine* while "seeking challenging projects that radically care for the cultural safety of our funders and sponsors". Nguyen points out that every act of censorship is related to a larger pattern or system of pressure, which is always at the expense of the weak. Virtue signalling cannot possibly remedy the live-streamed atrocity we are witnessing.

The international artworld hosts equally worrying examples of overt censorship over Palestine. Recall the most recent *Documenta 15* (Kassel, 2022), where the artistic directors (the Indonesian artist collective Ruangrupa) reframed the contemporary art event as a school, for art to be a relational model of knowledge production grounded in democratic access. As in previous *Documenta* events, many of the artists involved addressed issues facing refugees and life in the camps. For example, Palestinians ethnically cleansed in 1948 still living in dire refugee camps in Syria, Jordan or Lebanon, are one of the world's largest refugee populations.

Even before the show's opening, German media accused individual pro-Palestinian artists of antisemitism. Soon after, Taring Padi's historical and collaborative work *People's Justice* (2002), a vast banner of shadow-puppet-style caricatures of despots and oppressors that had been widely exhibited (including at the Art Gallery of South Australia), was removed as it included an antisemitic depiction of a Mossad agent lurking amongst other colonial boss and henchmen stereotypes. The *Documenta 15* 'schoolroom' provided an opportunity for open and safe discussion on racial stereotyping and the legacies of both Indo-Dutch colonial and anti-Western resistance imagery. Sadly, the German Minister for Culture simply accused *Documenta 15* and its curators of betrayal and *Documenta's* CEO was stood down. The artists and the curatorial collective were left alone to face an orchestrated storm of media denunciation.

A 2023 open letter signed by over 4,000 artists and writers was published in *Artforum Magazine*. It railed against the deliberate shut down on discussion of 75 years of Israeli apartheid and called for an immediate ceasefire and the passage of humanitarian aid into Gaza. *Artforum* editor of six years David Velasco was sacked in the ensuing fallout. In reply, New York artists formed a National Coalition Against Censorship. An even more massively subscribed letter of petition called for the closure of Israel's pavilion at Venice Biennale citing the precedent of the event's boycott of South Africa under the apartheid regime.

On dismantling apartheid, the iconic South African President Nelson Mandela said in 1997, "But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians, without the resolution of conflicts in East Timor, the Sudan and other parts of the world." Most artists share Mandela's clear-sighted focus on historical and international parallels. Like the Republic of South Africa at the ICJ, it is the vocal artists and collectives, trade unionists, students at peaceful camps, and relentless efforts of millions of protesting civilians world-wide that are testing proof of support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Genocide Convention. There is a global call for an end to military trade with Israel, divestment and sanctioning. All are aware of the generation defining civil movements against South Africa's Apartheid regime and the Vietnam War, and we collectively and crucially bear witness now.

Jo Holder