

In an essay accompanying the exhibition, *Forms of Censorship*, held at The Cross Arts Project in Sydney (11 May – 15 June 2024), curator Jo Holder wrote:

In times of atrocity, art and reporting are crucial to evidence, to remember and assert moral witness. To paraphrase Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who will speak for those who are silenced?

The times of atrocity depicted in the exhibition and Holder's essay reflected decades of the subjugation, displacement and destruction of the Palestinian people and their culture. They also underscored the parallel harassment and silencing of artists 'for showing support for the Palestinian people or for simply being Palestinian.'

Holder's essay delineates an astonishing history of the insidious censorship of artists whose humane aspiration to expose the history of occupation and express solidarity with those who suffer unspeakable harm, is viewed as egregious. What is perhaps most disturbing about Holder's meticulous account, is the complicity of Australian public cultural institutions in crude and damaging forms of such censorship. While there is perhaps a tendency to assume this suppression of artistic compassion has been triggered by the current Israeli/Palestinian crisis in Gaza, Holder traces displays of this 'curatorial censorship' to 2003 (no doubt there are examples of earlier interventions) when senior management of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney removed an entire section of the exhibition *Treasures of Palestine* apparently due to 'lack of space.' Curated by the former Head of the General Palestinian Delegation to Australia, Ali Kazak, the exhibition aimed to illustrate 'a living culture with ancient roots and ... contextualise Palestinian resistance' from the British Mandate (1920-1948) to 2003. This 'lack of space' meant that two of the three exhibition documentaries and 45 of the 50 photographs were omitted, as was a Palestine poster collection, maps and timelines, leaving only a fashion film and craft show on display.

At the time, former chairperson of the Australian Arabic Communities Council, Hassan Moussa referred to this unilateral cull of art works by a public institution as "the deliberate suppression of one community's narrative in favour of another's. This is an issue that must concern the public. In the interests of transparency and community relations, the AACC has called on the Powerhouse Museum to explain why the exhibition was cut and who influenced the decision to censor."

In response to the issue of selective exclusion or self-censorship by public cultural organisations such as museums, many of which claim adherence to principles of diversity and inclusivity, the UK Museum Association has stated:

Self-censorship within museums is an issue faced by many in an era when public organisations are so open to criticism via traditional and social media.

It is perhaps understandable that risk-averse management would wish to avoid any potential controversy in order to cover their backs.

However, to allow self-censorship to become the modus-operandi of a museum means undermining the role of the museums to challenge audiences with new and different perspectives.

It also means that there is a real risk that museums will content themselves to working within their comfort zones and, over time, becoming stale.

Last December, South Africa launched legal proceedings before the ICJ arguing that the way Israel had prosecuted the war against Hamas was with the intention of denying the right of existence of Palestinians in Gaza and was accordingly, “genocidal in nature.” The court was asked to order provisional measures requiring Israel to take steps to “protect against further, severe and irreparable harm to the rights of the Palestinian people”.

The South African legal team presented meticulous and comprehensive evidence of the historical and contemporary decimation of the Palestinian people. Hours after watching the proceeding, I received an email from a former PhD student, now professor of law at An-Najah National University in Nablus, Palestine headed *Thanks South Africa*. It read:

When the Palestinian people were exterminated since the Nakba in 1948 through the 7th Oct 2023 to date, we were thrust into a black hole and spiralled ever downward. Our active mind went dormant, and our existence became meaningless. Self-pity became the order of business.

Then something remarkable happened; The Republic of South Africa came to the front. At this occasion, I gained a safe haven, a voice, a coat of armour, and hope. Right from the start, South Africa re-humanized us, gave us a new life and new hope.

As a lawyer working in South Africa during the height of apartheid brutality in the late 1980s, for us the courts were both a site of resistance and a critical forum for making visible what was often hidden, silenced, covered over, erased. During the hundreds of political trials where the state would use the courts to criminalise the legitimate expression of harm and cries against the relentless violations of human rights by the apartheid state, we used the courts not only to vigorously defend our individual clients but also to interrogate and expose the cruel and inhumane workings of the apartheid apparatus. Nelson Mandela wrote about his own experience as a defendant during the notorious Rivonia Trial in 1963/4 which saw him sentenced to life imprisonment:

The stand we took during the Rivonia Trial was shaped by the knowledge that our struggle was morally just. We were aware that the cause we stood for would eventually triumph. We went into that courtroom determined to put Apartheid in the dock, even if this was to put our own lives in jeopardy.

Our clients were presented as complex, spirited, moral people not simply as one-dimensional accused; the depiction of their conduct was challenged, assumptions were contested and sometimes, the evidence presented gave space for transformative outcomes and redress. Despite the racist, oppressive political context, the courts, as public institutions, and some of the judges who worked within the complex apartheid machinery, ironically sought to preserve their independence and derived their

aspiration for legitimacy from some adherence to due process and agreed rules of engagement.

The role of the public cultural institution is importantly analogous. They are, in the words of Australian writer, Shankari Chandran (who here is referring to the power of the novel), forums for creating spaces for multiple truths ... *particularly when a country is unwilling to do this itself, when political authority undermines, delays or ignores the mechanisms of justice that should provide that safe space.*

They are spaces that can generate new points of connection, accommodation, understanding and clarity that can potentially help us find our ways forward.

We live – or like to promote an image that we live – in a multi-diverse, multi-cultural and multi-faith community. Australian public cultural institutions are a part of this democracy, serving the critical role of depicting and disseminating opportunities that facilitate learning - critical and free enquiry, informed intellectual discourse and public debate, and simultaneously respecting diversity of origin and opinion.

These cultural ‘zones of contact’ are containers where people who may be politically, geographically or historically opposed or separated, can interact with each other and in the process of engagement and dialogue, establish an awareness and understanding. Potential participants in these interactions may find them uncomfortable, confronting and even unreasonable, particularly if they involve issues of inequality, discrimination, or intractable conflict. But where public cultural institutions have signed on to value statements or codes of ethics which promote inclusivity, diversity and human rights principles such as freedom of speech and expression, allied principles of transparency, participation and accountability give rise to a legitimate expectation by the communities these institutions serve that they will cultivate inclusive and productive discussions about the times in which we live rather than shut down or exclude perspectives and so risk reproducing one-sided narratives which entrench division.

However, as the crisis in Gaza has unfolded on a cataclysmic scale, the inept responses of many public cultural institutions across the world to artists and writers, filmmakers and poets critical of the “severe and irreparable harm to the rights of the Palestinian people”, have been confused at best and gutless at worst. Instead of being true to their mandates of fostering diversity and inclusivity and giving unbiased visibility to the artistic or cultural manifestations of complex global issues, offering the public the possibility of new ways of seeing, some public cultural institutions have retreated into the precarious role of unilateral arbiter, at times becoming a proxy for a partisan state or small but disproportionately powerful interests.

Rather than using the depiction of conflicts through visual art as a basis for enabling us to stand in the shoes of others and disrupt our limitations of fear and blind prejudice, to imagine a future as a basis for hope and join in solidarity with those who refuse, as Sarah Saleh writes, to “adjust to injustice”, these institutions have chosen to silence, ban, and bar, intensifying acrimony, fostering hatred, and entrenching stereotypes. Perhaps the greatest casualty of this tendency, is the ousting or blunting of empathy and that takes us into the cold and dispassionate, terrifying territory of dehumanising

other. In writing about the decline of Berlin since 7 October 2023 as the beacon of artistic freedom, cultural critic of the *New York Times*, Jason Farago quotes German playwright, philosopher and author of 'On the Aesthetic Education of Man', Friedrich Schiller:

The arts are the motor of human freedom - they enjoy an absolute immunity from human capriciousness.

... If we lose cultural freedom, we lose the very ground – the ground of sympathetic imagination – upon which you combat antisemitism and other forms of bigotry.

At the foundation of cultural responsibility is an obligation to our public and to our artists to resist the pressures of shutting down, of erasing and so stifling artistic expression and creating a fear to participate in public life. There is no doubt that leaders of public cultural institutions also have a parallel duty to protect against and if necessary, sanction hate speech and inflammatory statements and in doing so, to act with legality, necessity, and proportionality. It is especially important in times of crisis and strained public debate, that these institutions uphold human rights principles and procedures with equanimity, and that the rule of law is applied without discrimination.

But critically, public cultural institutions cannot afford to operate in climates of censorship with double standards: they must demonstrate a clear commitment to the cultural manifestations of injustice whether in apartheid South Africa, Indigenous Australia, the Ukraine or Gaza. If there is a partial exclusion from the public gaze, a hierarchy of the 'permissible', then there is a splitting, a distortion, a taking of sides, a deceit which corrodes public trust in public institutions.

In conclusion, I return to South Africa and to the words of Mongane Wally Serote, the founding Chairperson of Medu Art Ensemble and South Africa's National Poet Laureate. In January 2024, Artists Against Apartheid, together with The People's Forum and the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research organized an event, Art, Culture, and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle, which brought together cultural workers and activists from South Africa to Palestine and beyond. Addressing the gathering, Serote read a poem he had written entitled *Gaza* and reminded the participants that

... while arts and culture activity are a creative process to portray and to depict the milieu of a nation, nations, and the world, as a mirror does, cultural workers must also be creative and committed to shape, mold, and create artistic and cultural expression to intervene. This way, arts and culture can become the tools to shape, reshape, and/or contribute to the national political consciousness, to defy and dismantle the (unjust) policies, law, and system, and to initiate the betterment of the quality of life of the people, the nation, nations, and the world.

That is why the exhibition, *Forms of Censorship* and its accompanying public events, are such an important contribution to keeping the "artistic and cultural expression to intervene" and to defy alive. Most importantly, they have been a critical call "to initiate the betterment of the quality of life of the people, the nation, nations, and the world" and especially of those who face the daily degradation of war and man's relentless inhumanity.

