

Photojournalists, artist censored by Australian authorities

Richard Phillips
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Over the past fortnight, New South Wales state authorities have censored the work of internationally acclaimed photojournalists in Sydney, while in Melbourne police seized images from an art installation by Paul Yore, who could face prosecution on so-called pedophilia charges. The actions are the most serious attacks on freedom of expression since the threatened arrest of Bill Henson and seizure of his photographs in 2008 under the federal and New South Wales Labor governments.

On May 25, scores of images by photojournalists were excised from Vivid Sydney's *Reportage* festival by the New South Wales tourist authority, Destination NSW. The authority, which owns and controls Vivid Sydney, issued its directive a few hours before the exhibition was to be projected onto two large screens near the Museum of Contemporary Art. The show contained images by a number of high-profile international documentary photographers—James Nachtwey, Jodi Bieber, Francesco Zizolla and many others—as well as local photojournalists.

Many of the award-winning pictures had already been published and widely exhibited internationally. These included war images from Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Africa, and graphic shots of natural disasters in Australia, along with images from the 2005 Cronulla race riots and the 1977 Granville train disaster.

The tourist authority management suddenly claimed that a large number of images were “too distressing” and demanded they be removed. Among these were black-and-white photos by Andrew Quilty of Victorian bushfires and the Queensland floods, and several by Raphaella Rosella—part of a series on young mothers. According to Destination NSW, “they weren't family friendly.”

Destination NSW chief executive officer Sandra

Chipchase told the media she made “no apologies” for her demands, falsely claiming there were pictures of “dead children.”

“What we don't want is children walking around the corner and seeing pictures of dead children. We think it is threatening to families.” The *Reportage* festival screening, she told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was “about entertainment and engagement.”

Reportage festival curator and photographer Stephen Dupont publicly denounced these claims and several photographers—including Bieber, a prize-winning South African photographer who was scheduled to speak at Vivid Sydney, and Zizolla—decided to withdraw all their images in protest.

Dupont told the *World Socialist Web Site* he had consulted with Destination NSW and the photojournalists during the initial editing process, but that just before the show was finalised he had been presented with impossible demands from the state tourist authority.

Dupont, who has decades of photojournalist experience, commented: “Chipchase's claim that there were dead children in the exhibit is not true. I don't know what they were expecting from some of the world's best photojournalists, but we were presented with an impossible situation.

“I've worked all around the world, and in countries where you would expect censorship, but I've never experienced this sort of thing before and especially in my own country. Something has shifted here and it's a real concern. The government clearly wants to control things, not just in the media but what the general public can see and hear. It's Orwellian.”

A photo essay by Jack Picone about life on the Thai-Burma border was also censored. The photographer posted an angry protest on his Facebook page: “While

some of the images are confronting, none are gratuitous or sensational. All of the images are an attempt by the photographers who authored them to reach out and ‘touch’ their fellow man.”

Reportage’s public screenings, Picone continued, were “to promote awareness and stimulate debate about contemporary social issues and the people they impact upon... It is not the role of the tourism division of the NSW State Government to pull the plug, switch off the lights and plunge the people in these images into darkness. This is the work of oppressive regimes, mad dictators, oligarchs and police states.”

These protests were met with a stony silence from the NSW Liberal government and the federal Labor government of Julia Gillard, making clear their endorsement of the censorship. Ruling elites everywhere are desperate to sanitise reality and cover up the human cost of war, poverty and other social disasters, and divert attention from those politically responsible.

A week after the censorship of *Reportage* festival, Victorian police raided the Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts in Melbourne, confiscating material from a large installation assembled by Paul Yore and entitled *Everything’s Fucked*. It was part of an exhibition paying tribute to avant-garde artist Mike Brown, the only Australian artist ever convicted of obscenity. Yore’s work contained sex aids, toys and balloons, and a cardboard cutout of a child with pop-star Justin Bieber’s head, urinating from a dildo into a sink. The gallery had issued leaflets warning patrons that the exhibition could be offensive and unsuitable for children.

Yore was questioned by Victorian detectives after the raid and, according to police, the 25-year-old could be charged with the production and possession of child pornography. Under current law, he could face up to 10 years jail if found guilty. Yore initially described the confiscation as “censorship gone mad” but, acting on the advice of lawyers, has not issued any further statement about the raid.

National Association for the Visual Arts Executive Director Tamara Winikoff and several gallery owners have defended Yore, opposing claims that his work was pornographic or exploited children.

Winikoff said it was “another case of people being overprotective of the public sensibilities and not

acknowledging that people are perfectly capable of making up their own minds. Any case of censorship where the work is not actually illegal is unjustified, and in this case I think the police would be very hard pressed to prove the work is illegal.”

Heide Museum of Modern Art Director Jason Smith rejected allegations that Yore’s work was pornographic and said the 25-year-old was a “serious and intelligent young artist.” The Heide Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Victoria are among several Australian galleries that have exhibited Yore’s work.

According to the Melbourne-based *Crikey* web site, the raid occurred after Port Phillip councillor Andrew Bond and local residents Chris Spillane and Adrian Jackson publicly claimed to be offended by the installation. Bond told one newspaper that the exhibition was “complete smut.”

After the raid, Jackson posted a comment in the *Leader* newspaper on June 2, stating: “Mission accomplished—the kiddy art exhibition is now closed. Next step is getting the Linden Gallery to be self-funding instead of behaving like a parasite on [local] ratepayers.”

While *Crikey* points out that these individuals have, or had, connections to the Liberal Party, no state or federal Labor Party official has condemned this outrageous attack on freedom of artistic expression and the threatened arrest of Yore. The establishment parties have no fundamental differences on this issue. All seek to create a climate of fear and intimidation where artists and writers begin to self-censor and steer clear of subjects or themes deemed too controversial or that might politically educate young people and the working class.

* Some of the censored photographs from the *Reportage* festival can be viewed here.



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