UK: Manchester’s Whitworth Art Gallery in ongoing censorship battle over criticism of Israel

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The Whitworth Art Gallery, run by the University of Manchester, withdrew a statement in support of the Palestinian people last week. The statement formed part of the “Cloud Studies” exhibition mounted by research group Forensic Architecture (FA). The statement had been attacked by supporters of the Israeli state.

FA said it would remove the whole exhibition rather than have it bowdlerised. The gallery reinstated the statement but accompanied by a counter-statement from Manchester’s Jewish Representative Council (JRC) attacking it. The gallery have now also posted a legal defence of the original statement.

The innocuous title “Cloud Studies” belies the exhibition’s important subject matter, which is an investigation of various crimes of imperialism. Borrowing scientific techniques from meteorology, architecture and satellite imaging, FA has extrapolated changes resulting from human intervention, military or industrial.

FA describes itself as “a university research group that works with communities at the forefront of conflict all over the world,” producing architectural evidence in legal contexts and for advocacy purposes. FA explains, “The necessity for Forensic Architecture as a practice emerges from the fact that contemporary conflicts increasingly take place within urban areas where homes and neighbourhoods become targets and most civilian casualties occur within cities and buildings.”

FA has engaged in many international investigations “into state crimes and human rights violations.” In 2017, FA contributed a digital model of a murder site to a tribunal investigation into German far-right terrorist group the National Socialist Underground. The following year, FA’s work was nominated for the Turner Prize. It has repeatedly revealed war crimes committed by the Israeli government against the Palestinians, and looks for changes in Israeli law and practice.

“Cloud Studies” investigates incidents relating to issues such as the use of tear gas against protestors in Santiago, Chile in 2019, and the impact of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion. *The Bombing of Rafah* explores “the deadliest and most destructive day in the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza,” August 1.

FA and Amnesty International were denied entry to Gaza, so constructed a narrative of the day’s events through thousands of images and videos posted online or sent directly to them. FA drew attention to the “Hannibal Directive,” formally withdrawn in 2016, authorising the use of “maximum available firepower” should a soldier be captured, regardless of the risks to the captive or civilians in the area.

The Use of White Phosphorus in Urban Environments reports that FA’s proof of the use and impact of this barbaric weapon forced the Israeli government to end its use.

Herbicidal Warfare in Gaza, Palestine investigates the spraying of herbicides along the Gaza border to enhance visibility for military operations. They were only sprayed when the wind was blowing easterly, to ensure they would blow into Gaza and not Israel. Herbicide drift has reached 300 metres into Gaza, and satellite images show a dead zone of former arable land.

FA’s opening statement, “Forensic Architecture stands with Palestine,” written about the most recent attack on Gaza, honours those who “continue to document and narrate events on the ground and to struggle against this violence, apartheid and colonization.” It states that “this liberation struggle is inseparable from other global struggles against racism, white supremacy, antisemitism, and settle colonial violence.”

Zionist legal lobby group UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) called it “propaganda,” accusing the gallery of “inflammatory” language that might provoke “racial discord.” UKLFI suggested it might put the gallery in breach of its Public Sector Equality Duty responsibilities.

UKLFI was founded in 2011 by British lawyers

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"concerned about the failure to combat *the use* and abuse of law by enemies of Israel" (emphasis added). They intended "to use their skills pro bono to combat BDS [the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement] and the delegitimization of Israel."

UKLFI have history with FA and the Whitworth gallery. In 2018, UKLFI launched a smear of FA, demanding it not win the Turner because its material on Palestine constituted "modern blood libels likely to promote antisemitism."

In June this year, after the renewed crackdown on Gaza, the Whitworth posted an online statement of solidarity with the people of Palestine. This was quickly removed following objections from UKLFI.

University of Manchester Vice-President for Social Responsibility Nalin Thakkar withdrew the FA statement, issuing an abject apology. UKLFI declared sententiously that it was "unacceptable" that the gallery "has displayed deeply problematic content" twice within weeks. They added, "We hope that lessons have been learnt and the same mistakes will not be repeated."

It is to FA's credit that it did not accept this.

UKLFI director Daniel Berke had attempted to link FA and the exhibition to a reported upswing in antisemitic incidents following the latest attacks on Gaza. The International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP) called the accusation an "apparent attempt to smear them and to censor and censure information about Israeli human rights abuses, simply because the exhibit includes the impact of Israeli abuses of Palestinians." ICJP called the "antisemitic" claim "manipulative, misguided, and dangerous."

FA founder Professor Eyal Weizman said he thought FA's work did more "to dispel prejudice and hatred, including that against Jews, than an unqualified support of apartheid in Palestine."

When the opening statement was removed "despite our repeated objection," Weizman demanded immediate closure of the whole exhibition. The Israeli-born professor said it was "outrageous that Manchester University interfered with our exhibit after pressure from a self-appointed lobbying group known to platform the extreme right settler movement in Israel and for its attacks on groups providing humanitarian aid to Palestinians. That this group is accepted as arbitrators on issues of parity in relation to Palestine is a travesty."

Weizman noted that FA's statement explicitly opposed and condemned antisemitism, while the UKLFI's concern about the Public Sector Equality Duty was expressed without any reference to Palestinian groups.

The UKLFI's attack on Weizman provides further evidence that the International Holocaust Remembrance Association's (IHRA) redefinition of antisemitism is explicitly a political weapon aimed at preventing legitimate criticism of the Israeli state. UKLFI said Weizman is "banned from the US on security grounds," and "opposed the internationally recognised definition of antisemitism."

Last year saw FA's first major US exhibition. Two days before he was due to travel, Weizman was notified his visa waiver had been revoked. Applying for a visa, he was told that an "algorithm" had identified a security threat, possibly triggered by people he had interacted with, places he had visited recently, or a combination of these. He was told his case could be assessed "more promptly" if he volunteered additional information, including fifteen years of travel history and "the names of anyone in my network whom I believed might have triggered the algorithm. I declined to provide this information."

FA's refusal to accept a censored exhibition forced the gallery to close for "reinstallation" and reopen with the statement restored. UKLFI then criticised the university for having "reneged on their decision to remove the introductory statement."

Gallery director Alistair Hudson then added a space for "different perspectives", a JRC message accusing the exhibition of "false statements," instructing the public "not to assume that any statement in that exhibition is true."

The JRC message is an unequivocal defence of Israel, "the ONLY democracy in the Middle East. To claim that Israel is a colonial enterprise is antisemitic. Jews have a right to self-determination in Israel, which is the Jewish people's ancestral homeland."

On Sunday, the Whitworth agreed to post yet another statement, the ICJP's legal opinion on why the FA statement was based on international law. The whole thing, as Weizman said, was "a *mishegas* " (insanity), and not every cultural contention necessarily needed "balance."

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