

Head of Manchester's Whitworth Art Gallery Alistair Hudson sacked after Zionist witch-hunt

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The University of Manchester has requested that Alistair Hudson leave his post as head of the Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery. This blatant act of censorship and victimisation has attracted widespread condemnation from students, academics, museum professionals and artists, and must be widely opposed.

It follows controversy around last year's exhibition "Cloud Studies" by Turner Prize-nominated investigative agency Forensic Architecture (FA), which came under attack from supporters of the Israeli state. Cloud Studies was part of the 2021 Manchester International Festival (MIF) which said of the exhibition it was "commissioned for the Festival by the Whitworth and MIF" and "is an exhibition about the weaponization of the air we breathe..."

FA is a research group that produces architectural evidence in legal contexts and for advocacy purposes. By using scientific techniques from meteorology, architecture and satellite imaging, FA extrapolates changes resulting from human intervention, military or industrial, allowing it to investigate various crimes of imperialism.

"Cloud Studies" included the use of tear gas against protestors in Santiago, Chile in 2019, the impact of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, and the petrochemical pollution of a stretch of the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge. But the dispute which led to Hudson's sacking arose over FA's investigation of war crimes committed by the Israeli government against the Palestinians.

"Cloud Studies" featured *The Use of White Phosphorus in Urban Environments*. FA's proof of its use and impact had forced the Israeli government to end the use of this barbaric weapon.

In *Herbicide Warfare in Gaza, Palestine*, FA investigated the use of herbicides along the Gaza border. Deployed as a means of enhancing visibility for military operations, they were only sprayed when the wind was blowing them into Gaza, not onto Israeli soil, creating a 300-metre dead zone of former arable land on the Palestinian side of the border.

Most powerfully, *The Bombing of Rafah* established a narrative of "the deadliest and most destructive day in the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza," August 1. Denied entry to Gaza, FA and Amnesty International had to construct this through thousands of images and videos posted online or sent directly to them.

FA's opening statement, "Forensic Architecture stands with Palestine," commented on the most recent attack on Gaza, in June 2021, honouring those who "continue to document and narrate

events on the ground and to struggle against this violence, apartheid and colonization."

Its mission is to reveal the truth of the situation, and to campaign for changes in Israeli law and practice. But this is unacceptable to UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI). Founded in 2011 by British lawyers with the declared aim of combating "the use and abuse of law by enemies of Israel" (emphasis added), its earliest action was securing the arrest of a humanitarian aid ship to Gaza, which they said was "circumventing Israeli restrictions on the transfer of materials to terrorists."

During the June 2021 Gaza assault, the Whitworth Art Gallery posted an online statement of solidarity with the Palestinian people. UKLFI objected, and the statement was withdrawn.

UKLFI denounced FA's opening statement as "propaganda," and accused the Whitworth of "inflammatory" language that might provoke "racial discord." The University of Manchester, which runs the gallery, withdrew the statement and issued a craven apology. When FA then threatened to withdraw the exhibition rather than have it displayed in bowdlerised form, a free-for-all of statement and counter-statement, of legal opinion and provocation erupted.

Manchester's Jewish Representative Council instructed the public "not to assume that any statement in that exhibition is true," while insisting, "To claim that Israel is a colonial enterprise is antisemitic."

In the words of British-Israeli Professor Eyal Weizman, FA's founder, it became "a *mishegas*" (insanity).

Weizman and FA were already UKLFI targets. In 2018, UKLFI lobbied the Turner Prize with a smear campaign against FA, calling its material on Palestine "modern blood libels likely to promote antisemitism."

Confirming that the International Holocaust Remembrance Association's (IHRA) redefinition of antisemitism was a political weapon to prevent legitimate criticism of the Israeli state, UKLFI have attacked Weizman as "opposed [to] the internationally recognised definition of antisemitism."

The FA exhibition went ahead. While UKLFI attacked the university for reneging on the removal of FA's opening statement, they were strengthened by its readiness to accommodate their right-wing attacks, and they did not back down. In the words of UKLFI chief executive Jonathan Turner, in September they "suggested

that the university should take appropriate disciplinary action” against Hudson.

That has now happened.

Once again, the argument has played out around UKLFI providing a legal whitewash for the activity of the Israeli state. Turner accused Hudson of having “falsely assured the vice-chancellor that they had established the accuracy and legalities of the work” in “Cloud Studies.” UKLFI continue to insist “Cloud Studies” was inaccurate, claiming a freedom of information request “showed no attempt had been made to check its accuracy.”

FA strongly denies any suggestion of inaccuracies. It has contributed widely to courts, tribunals and truth commissions, and has continued to probe the truth and evidence in cases where a legal whitewash already exists.

In 2018, FA investigated the shooting dead by Israeli police of Bedouin Palestinian Yacoub Abu al-Qian during protests over forced evacuations of Umm al-Harin for settlement construction. The police initially claimed falsely that al-Qian had driven at them when they opened fire on his car. Later, clearly contradicting medical reports, they claimed he had been struck by rocks.

This narrative was accepted as the official record. Only in 2020 did Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu eventually apologise for the killing. FA, however, continued investigating. When this project was nominated for the Turner Prize, UKLFI accused an earlier FA piece of lacking objectivity, and launched their “blood libel” smear.

The UKLFI was founded “to combat BDS [the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement] and the delegitimization of Israel.” The Whitworth announcement coincided with government moves to prevent public sector pension investments being linked to BDS.

Former housing secretary Robert Jenrick told parliament that the proposal “should be merely the beginning of a wider effort to tackle BDS within the private sector, and that we as a government make good on our manifesto commitment to a full BDS bill.”

The move against Hudson is a right-wing attack on freedom of speech and artistic expression. Weizman told the press Hudson had made the Whitworth “an art space where the important questions of our time could be asked.” He pointed to a “series of bullying actions by the University of Manchester, which initially aimed a silencing our solidarity with Palestinians, then at stifling open debate and taming political art more generally. This move will shrink the space for art and artists.”

The university now claims, “We absolutely uphold academic freedom,” while refusing to comment on Hudson, saying, “Staffing matters are strictly internal to the university.” It states that it has not “bowed to external pressures.”

More than 170 University of Manchester staff have signed a “Statement of opposition to the attempt to force out Whitworth Art Gallery director, Alistair Hudson”, calling it a “grave violation of academic and artistic freedom of expression,” and demanding his reinstatement and an apology. The letter said it was “damaging and dangerous” that the university “supported the idea that a statement against Israel’s war crimes against the Palestinian people was an act of antisemitism, and forced its removal.”

The signatories also recognised that this attack is not confined to

the question of Israel but reflects university treatment of staff more generally. Forcing Hudson out six months after the event, they wrote, “is therefore not only punitive, but also shows that UoM will not support and defend its staff when and if under pressure from outside organisations.”

Alistair Brown, policy director of the Museums Association, called the “sacking ... deeply mistaken, wrong-headed and unethical.”

Oliver Basciano, editor at large of *ArtReview*, called it a “disgrace.” A group of 23 artists, including Turner Prize winners Helen Cammock, Tai Shani and Oscar Murillo, have announced they are withdrawing their work from the Manchester leg of the British Art Show 9 in support of Hudson. The show, held every five years, was due at the Whitworth in May. The artists tweeted their condemnation of the university’s “capitulation” to UKLFI, writing that “truth needs to be made public and cultural spaces have to remain open for difficult discussions.”

Around 150 protestors demonstrated outside the university on Tuesday last week. One banner read, “The purpose of art is the fight for freedom.” Speakers included local Labour councillor Ekuia Bayunu, who spoke of the “great work being done at the Whitworth ... to place a creative institution firmly at the centre of communities.”

But it is Labour which has been at the forefront of a witch-hunt using the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism as a weapon for policing any left sentiment, targeting the “left” of the party—an offensive Jeremy Corbyn not only refused to oppose but even presided over the expulsion of many of his leading supporters. Bayunu’s response now was a desperate appeal to Blairite leader Sir Keir Starmer, made as part of the “Don’t Leave, Organise” group.



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