

Artists oppose firing of *Artforum* editor—under pressure from wealthy collectors—for defending Palestinians

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Well-known artists Nan Goldin and Nicole Eisenman told the *New York Times* on Friday they would no longer work with one of the leading journals in the art world, *Artforum*, because its owners had fired editor David Velasco for publishing a pro-Palestinian open letter on October 19. Goldin told the *Times*, “I have never lived through a more chilling period. People are being blacklisted. People are losing their jobs.”

Eisenman told the *Times*: “I want to echo what activists have been yelling in the streets: Not in my name. This war will not be done in my name. [Eisenman, like Goldin, is of Jewish descent]. I resent these cowardly bullying and blackmail campaigns to distract everyone in the art world from the central demand of the letter, which was: cease-fire!”

Over 50 employees and contributors to *Artforum* have also signed a letter to the owners of the magazine demanding that Velasco be reinstated, and at least four editors have resigned from the journal in protest as well.

The “Open letter from the art community to cultural organizations,” published in *Artforum* states in part:

“We support Palestinian liberation and call for an end to the killing and harming of all civilians, an immediate ceasefire, the passage of humanitarian aid into Gaza, and the end of the complicity of our governing bodies in grave human rights violations and war crimes.

“We demand that the institutional silence around the ongoing humanitarian crisis that 2.3 million Palestinians are facing in the occupied and besieged Gaza Strip be broken immediately. ...

“Silence at this urgent time of crisis and escalating genocide is not a politically neutral position. Over the last few years there have been significant steps to institutionally address social justice and inequality. Your artistic programs benefit from these politics. We now ask

that they continue and be extended in recognizing the crimes against humanity that the Palestinian people are facing.”

The letter sparked an immediate reaction by major art dealers who began a campaign of intimidation and blacklisting. According to media reports, art dealers contacted artists who had signed the letter and asked them to retract their support. The letter was condemned by dealers for failing to mention the Hamas killing of Israelis on October 7. A letter issued by some of these individuals called for the arts community to stand against terrorism and Hamas, and while it urged empathy for civilians, both Israeli and Palestinian, it made no mention of the savage campaign of extermination by the Israeli state in Gaza.

Some art collectors are preparing to conduct a campaign with museums to blacklist pro-Palestinian artists. The *Times* cited a discussion on a WhatsApp chat in which Sarah Lehat Blumenstein, a fundraiser for the Louvre in Paris, said, “We have a deaccession plan” that would “diminish the [pro-Palestinian] artists’ status.”

The *Intercept* has noted that soon “after the letter was posted, Martin Eisenberg, a high-profile collector and inheritor of the now-bankrupt Bed Bath & Beyond fortune, began contacting famous art world figures on the list whose work he had championed to express his objections to the letter.” One artist told the website that a collector, “offended by the *Artforum* letter returned a work by the artist to a dealer. The collector did not contact the artist prior to returning the work, according to the artist, who asked for anonymity to protect their livelihood.”

According to the *New York Times*, collectors contacted Ohio State University’s Wexner Center for the Arts and asked it to shut down an exhibition of Jumana Manna, a Palestinian artist who signed the open letter. The Wexner

Center has so far refused.

Artforum is owned by Penske Media Corporation, a conglomerate that also owns *Artnews*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, *Rolling Stone* and other publications. Velasco was summoned to a meeting with Jay Penske, the owner of the company and son of billionaire Roger Penske, where he was fired.

The firing of Velasco by a man who controls leading publications in the arts and entertainment world and the pressure put on artist and museum by wealthy collectors underscores the fact that cultural life is held in the vise-grip of the super-rich.

The horrific events in Gaza are exposing the social rot in the United States, not the least of which is a cultural edifice that stymies the open and democratic airing of views at every point. Artists, students, educators have had their jobs, careers and futures threatened for speaking out against these monstrous crimes.

The incident at *Artforum* is part of the wave of anti-Palestinian censorship that includes, among many other incidents, the cancellation by the 92NY in New York City earlier this month of an appearance by writer Viet Thanh Nguyen. The center, a venue famous for its hosting of writers' readings and interviews, disinvited Nguyen from an appearance for the crime of signing a petition similar to the one posted by Velasco in defense of the Palestinian people. As with *Artforum*, the action prompted staff resignations and the withdrawal from events by other writers.

Artistic freedom, much less the right by artists to openly oppose the slaughter in Gaza, has run up against the brick wall of the private ownership of the means of communication and the control by the very wealthy of museums and other cultural institutions. The defense of the Palestinian people, and the struggle against war, requires an end to capitalist sway over the art world.

Artists, whether they produce work that speaks of social struggle or not, must defend their right to speak.



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