

Australian gallery owner dumps artist Mike Parr for opposing Gaza genocide in performance piece

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Australian artist Mike Parr's long-term professional relationship with the high-end Anna Schwartz Gallery was suddenly revoked on December 3, following a blind-painting performance the previous day at the Melbourne city gallery.

The dismissal of the 78-year-old Parr by Anna Schwartz, the gallery owner, was because he dared to paint the words "Israel," "Nazis," "apartheid" and make a reference to "ethnic cleansing" during the four-and-a-half-hour art performance on a 27-metre wall. She falsely claimed that Parr violated the gallery's anti-racist principles.

Titled "Going Home," Parr's performance on December 2 is part of his current *Sunset Claws* exhibition at the gallery. It involved Parr painting various words on the large wall with his eyes closed. His responses were in reaction to selected texts from the *London Review of Books* and other sources read aloud by an assistant. Some of the painted text was obscured when Parr over-painted them with blocks of red colour during the event, with the entire event videoed.

Schwartz told Parr in a two-sentence email that his relationship with the gallery was over because of "a serious breach of trust and differences of values." She directed Parr to remove all his work—decades of artistic material—from the gallery by the end of December, later extending this to March 2024.

Parr has categorically rejected Schwartz's "breach of trust" claims, rightly describing her reaction as censorship and "hysterical," explaining that he had provided her with an overview of the performance piece in advance and that she gave him the go-ahead.

He told the press this week that he had been deeply concerned about a conversation he had with her on November 22 about the ongoing mass demonstrations against Israel's attacks on Gaza. Parr said she patronisingly described the protests as "just young people virtue signalling."

Parr is best known for his art performances, which have included protests over the brutal treatment of asylum seekers, torture of Guantanamo prisoners, climate change, the colonial repression and dispossession of Australia's indigenous population, and numerous other political issues. His work has been widely exhibited internationally, including at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with collections in the National Gallery in Canberra and every other Australian state art gallery.

Schwartz, who has previously been described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as the "kingmaker" of Australian art, has managed and promoted Parr's work for 36 years. Five of her extensive stable of artists have represented Australia at the Venice Biennale.

Schwartz has ludicrously declared that her actions are not censorship. In a 17-minute interview with ABC's Radio National on Monday, she hurled a series of spurious allegations against Parr, accusing him of racism and

declaring that the "co-appearance of the word Nazi with the word Israel made me sick."

Performance art "is not writing hateful slogans on the wall of the gallery," she said, and referred to the murder of her father's relatives in Poland by the Nazis and those of her husband's family in the Holocaust.

"I can't work with an artist who's prepared to hurt me to that degree and to insult my culture and my lived experience, the generations that come before me who have suffered and have been annihilated," she continued.

Schwartz's insistence that Parr's painted text is "hateful" is without foundation, as is her counterposing of her "culture" and "my lived experience" to Parr's deep-going concerns about the mass murder of Palestinian men, women and children.

Her tragic family history is employed to falsely accuse Parr of being callously indifferent to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust and divert attention from Israel's 75-year bloody oppression and dispossession of the Palestinians and its current and ongoing war crimes.

The allegations against Parr, and others voicing their sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians, are a filthy smear and based on a political lie—that Judaism and Zionism are inseparable identities, and that any denunciation of Israel is an antisemitic attack on Jews and their religion.

These falsehoods are refuted by a genuine study of the history of the Jewish people since the late 19th century, who overwhelmingly rejected Zionism and its national exclusivist ideology and whose most conscious elements turned to socialist internationalism, playing leading roles in the revolutionary Marxist movement and other progressive social organisations.

Towards the end of her ABC Radio National interview, Schwartz said she had been criticised on social media for dismissing Parr but declared she was not "a victim" but an "emblem" for many people "too frightened in the current culture to make their opinions known."

"I've had hundreds of emails of support from a really wide range of people," she continued, "from Jewish people to directors of museums to major cultural figures, respecting and empathising with what I did."

Schwartz's message is clear. Museum directors, gallery owners, leading cultural figures, and others "frightened" by the international outpouring of opposition to the Israeli genocide of Palestinians must speak out. In other words, Schwartz's unilateral dumping of Mike Parr should be welcomed and be a rallying cry to fight back.

Mike Parr told the *Age* newspaper that Schwartz's unilateral ending of his relationship with her gallery was overshadowing his efforts to draw attention to the desperate plight of the Palestinians and set a dangerous

precedent, particularly for emerging artists.

“I’m nearly 79 years of age, and I’m at the point where cancellation doesn’t mean very much, but cancellation is very destructive for younger artists,” he said. “It’s very hard for them to take positions they want to take because they run the risk of terminating their careers in some instances.”

Parr’s persecution follows an ongoing and highly orchestrated witch hunt over the past two months against artists, actors and others who have spoken out against Israel’s mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza. Pro-Israeli lobbyists and Murdoch-owned publications have called for the withdrawal of funds, sackings of artists and for economic boycotts of individual artists and arts companies of every genre who have shown support for the Palestinians.

The WSWS has already drawn attention to the vicious denunciations of three young Sydney Theatre Company (STC) actors—Harry Greenwood, Mabel Li and Megan Wilding—for wearing keffiyeh scarfs in solidarity with the Palestinian people during a curtain call at the opening night of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*.

Performances have been interrupted by pro-Israeli patrons, with one yelling “ Hamas Harry ” when Greenwood appeared on stage. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, STC box office staff have also faced hundreds of abusive calls each day over the keffiyeh scarf in solidarity protest and have been given counselling to deal with the problem.

Last month, prominent Australian Zionist Mark Leibler, who is the national chairman of the Australia Israel and Jewish Affairs Council and head of the Arnold Bloch Leibler law firm, ended its long association with the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA).

Leibler ordered NAVA not to publish a “Stop the genocide in Gaza” letter signed by thousands of artists. After NAVA refused and published the letter, the law firm announced that it was ending its pro-bono work for the national peak body for the visual arts.

Arnold Bloch Leibler also withdrew all financial support, including pro bono legal services, from Collingwood Yards, a well-known not-for-profit arts precinct in Melbourne, because it failed, according to the legal firm, to demonstrate “the requisite moral clarity and condemn Hamas and the atrocities it committed on 7 October.”

Speaking with ABC Arts this week, Kate Just, a Melbourne University senior art lecturer, said that artists “critiquing the US or Israeli government or expressing solidarity with Palestinian civilians, are experiencing unprecedented art world censorship, [including] cancelling of their events and exhibitions, personal threats via direct messages, evictions from gallery tenancies, removal of funding, attempts to sell back their artwork, and calls to their galleries to drop them.”

She warned that the growing number of such incidents was “a very real threat to artistic freedom of expression and our rich and important culture of political debate in the arts.”

Hoda Ashfar, an internationally acclaimed Iranian-Australian photographer who is currently exhibiting at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is one of the many who were targeted and accused of antisemitism for opposing the Gaza genocide and expressing her solidarity with the Palestinians.

“These attacks,” she explained on her Instagram account, “began with hostile comments published on my social media posts and sent to me privately. Many of my friends and followers who have responded to my posts have received similar criticisms and intimidating messages...”

“In the last two weeks, galleries have been contacted and criticised for exhibiting my work and presented with demands that my shows be cancelled,” she said, and her gallerist was “interrogated for representing me.”

While the Media Entertainment Arts Alliance have said as little as possible about these escalating pro-Zionist attacks, creative workers

refused to be cowed and are fighting back.

This week over 3,000 Australian artists from across all genres signed a “Creatives for Palestine” open letter calling for collective public actions to demand:

1. An end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine.
2. For the Australian government and Foreign Minister Penny Wong to call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire.
3. For our arts institutions to join the call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire.
4. For the safety and rights of artists to be honoured wherever they may work.

The letter bluntly denounced STC management and other art institutions attempting to silence its artists. “Shame on the STC for commodifying the Black & Brown bodies and stories on their stages for social and financial capital, while demanding they stay silent.

“Shame on contemporary arts institutions that welcome Palestinian artists into their spaces as long as they are silent. Shame on institutions that make moral compromises in preference for coddling their donors and subscribers. We refuse to be ushered into silent complicity,” the letter said.

“Whether graceful, justifiably angry, digital or live—it is increasingly clear that to stand for the right for Palestinians to live liberated and safe, is not only punishable but must be apologised for. The show mustn’t go on as usual when people are being massacred,” it concluded.

As this defiant letter makes clear, the malicious attacks by the Zionist lobby, the corporate media and extreme-right wing elements on pro-Palestinian artists are an expression of their political isolation and weakness in the face of a growing international mass movement against the Israel’s Gaza genocide.

Artists alone cannot defeat the growing assault on their democratic rights for opposing the genocidal slaughter of the Palestinian people by Israel. The fact that every imperialist government, including the Australian Labor government, supports and defends Israel’s right to annihilate an entire population is a stark warning to workers and youth here and internationally. What is revealed in all its horror is capitalism, unvarnished and unedited, which will not be overcome by appealing to the very governments who are ensuring its continued slaughter.

Only by turning to the international working class, the only social force capable of preventing the descent into World War III, can artists and others answer the assault on the democratic rights, which is evidenced by the attempted intimidation and silencing of artists globally. Such a movement must be armed with an international socialist perspective.



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