

Artists protest ongoing censorship of Palestinian culture in the UK

David Walsh
19 December 2023

Over 1,000 British and international artists have protested the decision by the Arnolfini International Centre for Contemporary Arts in Bristol to cancel film and poetry events scheduled for December 2 and programmed by the Bristol Palestine Film Festival.

Among the signatories are musician Brian Eno, writers Raymond Antrobus, Isabel Waidner, Lola Olufemi and Huw Lemmey, performance artist Colin Self and actor Juliet Stevenson, artist and musician Robert del Naja, poet Alice Oswald, author and screenwriter Nikesh Shukla, writer and journalist Shon Faye, performance artist Travis Alabanza and Eleanor Marx biographer Rachel Holmes. Many local Bristol artists signed the letter as well.

The first planned event was a screening of *Farha* (about Israeli atrocities in 1948), the debut feature film by Jordanian-Palestinian writer-director Darin Sallam, which the WSWS has reviewed, followed by a panel discussion on the film with Palestinian doctor and writer Ghada Karmi and British activist and rapper Lowkey. The second event scheduled for the same day was a spoken word event “Poetry on Palestine” with Raise the Bar, also featuring Lowkey.

The Arnolfini, which promotes itself as “one of Europe’s leading centres for the contemporary arts,” issued a hypocritical and deceitful statement purporting to explain its decision to exclude the Palestinian events. “We recognise that this has led to a variety of views,” it begins. The center then claims the reasons for “making this challenging decision” were based on the difficulty for arts charities hosting events that might be construed as “political activity” and that hosting events “which combine film, performance and discussion panels meant we could not be confident that the event would not stray into political activity.”

More than 20,000 human beings, more than half of them women and children, have been slaughtered by the Israeli military in Gaza in one of the worst crimes against

humanity in our time. Would the Arnolfini officials have responded in the same manner to the Nazi suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising? “Well, this is really not our cup of tea, we’ll have to consult government guidelines on campaigning and political activity by charities.”

Various commentators responded with outrage on Instagram: “This is disgusting and disappointing. At a time where voices must be amplified, you are responsible for shutting them down. It is utterly shameful.” “An absolutely shameful decision. Palestinian voices need to be heard now more than ever! #freepalestine #savegaza.” “Disgraceful. We love Bristol and are regular visitors of your awesome city and you let them down hugely!” “Shame on your business. This is THE time to stand up and support #palestine and the arts of all. #freepalestine.” “History is watching.”

The artists’ open letter pointed to the dishonest comments about unacceptable “political activity,” noting that this has “not been a serious concern in all the previous years that Arnolfini hosted the [Palestine] film festival.” Nor has it been a problem with many other exhibitions and public programs on such subjects as decolonization and Black Lives Matter, feminism and “gender liberation,” refugee and asylum seekers’ rights. All such events “have all taken place without being seen to fall outside the venue’s ‘charitable purpose.’”

Even more tellingly, exposing the right-wing political agenda of the centre’s officialdom, Artists for Palestine UK observed that last year “Arnolfini hosted an event that opposed Russia’s war crimes in Ukraine, with part of the ticket sales going to the Disasters Emergency Committee Ukraine”!

The open letter expressed “incredulity” in response to the centre’s explanation for its act of blatant censorship and, in practice, support for the Israeli genocide.

The letter cited the comment by one opponent of the censorship that the purpose of art is “to hold space for as

many voices as possible, not to silence them. Removing events platforming Palestinian experiences IS a political move.” Another said, “If you only show artists’ work that focuses on oppression when it suits you, it’s called exploitation.”

The letter continues, “The decision by a publicly funded venue to censor Palestinian film and poetry events is a particularly concerning part of an alarming pattern of censorship and repression within the arts sector.

“In recent weeks, dozens of UN experts and hundreds of legal scholars have warned of ‘a genocide in the making’ in Gaza,” the open letter argues, adding that many “Palestinian cultural institutions and over 100 heritage sites have been completely or partially destroyed by Israeli airstrikes. That the Arnolfini would choose to silence Palestinian voices and narratives at this exact moment is not merely a betrayal of the fundamental principles of pluralism and freedom in the arts, it is also inhumane.”

The artists conclude by insisting that until the Arnolfini leadership “publicly commits to consistently uphold freedom of expression, with no exception for Palestine, and genuinely engages with Bristol’s arts community to rectify the harm it has caused, we must, reluctantly, refuse cooperation with the arts centre and will not participate in any of its events.”

A parallel, Bristol-organized open letter has collected more than 2,300 signatures. It explains that the canceled events “were intended to explore the issue of increasing silencing and censorship of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices in the arts, featuring two artists—Darin Sallam and Lowkey—who have faced censorship and calls for cancellation due to their pro-Palestinian stance. We find it particularly ironic and disappointing that Arnolfini has chosen to withdraw from these events, indicating its unwillingness to take a stand against such censorship in arts and culture.”

The Bristol letter concludes that unless the center explains its reasons for withdrawing from the two events, “it will unfortunately appear that the decision to pull out of hosting these events at the current time must be due to an unwillingness on the part of Arnolfini to stand with Palestinians and against the war crimes and genocide being committed in Gaza.”

Arts Help reported December 18 on another example of the “current censorship against pro-Palestinian artists.” It noted that the paintings of Ayman Ba’albaki, a Lebanese artist and painter, were recently withdrawn from Christie’s annual auction after “complaints for reasons

that are still unclear.” The two paintings, which depict “revolutionary figures,” were withdrawn only days before the auction. One of the pieces is a 2012 painting that depicts a man “whose face is covered in a bright red keffiyeh,” and the other is a portrait “of a man in a gas mask with a red band around his head bearing the word ‘thaeroun’ in Arabic, which can translate as ‘rebels.’”

The *National*, published in Abu Dhabi, observed that emails and text messages from Christie’s “indicate the two paintings were withdrawn following multiple complaints. The nature of the complaints was not disclosed.”

The artist told the *National* how the second painting, of the man in a gas mask, “was inspired by protestors during the Arab uprisings.” The publication went on, “When asked if he found the withdrawal problematic, Ba’albaki said it is ‘censorship of an image, of culture.’ He added: ‘It reminds me of the degenerate art movement.’”

This of course is a reference to the “Degenerate Art” exhibition organized by the Nazis in Munich in 1937, intended to turn the German public against modern art, which supposedly showed such qualities as “weakness of character,” “mental disease” and “racial impurity.” Works by primarily German artists were shown and derided, including by figures such as Georg Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde and Otto Dix, along with international artists such as Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall and Wassily Kandinsky.

The Lebanese artist’s reference to the Nazi campaign of repression and censorship is entirely apt under the present circumstances, in which opposition to genocide is being illegalized and slandered as “antisemitism.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)