

San Francisco artists protest Israeli massacres in Gaza by “vandalizing” their own works

David Walsh
23 February 2024

A group of San Francisco artists last week carried out a protest against the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the silence of leading US arts institutions about the horrific crime by altering their own works.

The protest took place during a public event at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), the multidisciplinary contemporary arts venue in San Francisco, on the evening of February 15. Eight artists, whose work was part of *Bay Area Now 9*, a show of 30 Northern California artists and the Center’s triennial exhibition, entered the space and spray-painted or draped pro-Palestinian messages over their own work.

The artists called their protest “Love Letter to GAZA” in response to the February 15 event’s title, “Love Letter to SOMA [South of Market, a neighborhood in San Francisco].” In response, the Center closed its doors for the weekend.

The artists unfurled a banner that read “Stop Funding Genocide.” Several of them went to work on their own art pieces, using fake blood as well as paint. According to KQED public radio, “Ceramic artist Paz G spray painted their sculpture *You Have a Broken Heart* in bright pink letters reading ‘Viva Palestina—Free Palestine.’ Jeffrey Cheung, whose colorful, large-scale paintings of abstracted nude forms hang in the main gallery, hung a sign reading ‘Ceasefire Now!’ over his works.”

In addition, “the artist champoy, along with several people wearing masks and keffiyehs, turned champoy’s boat sculpture into an altar for Gazan people killed in Israeli airstrikes, with their names and ages written on notecards. Tracy Ren laid a banner on their wool rug installation that read ‘No more blood money—ceasefire now.’”

The other exhibition participants who modified their works were Sholeh Asgary, Courtney Desiree Morris, Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo and Leila Weefur. The Center had advertised the “Love Letter to SOMA” in part

by pointing to “a new public artwork by Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo,” as well as “public art works” by Cheung and Weefur, among others.

In addition to the artists’ efforts, supporters dropped leaflets with the artists’ demands from the Center’s upper balcony, bitterly echoing the Israeli military’s practice of alerting the Gazan population they are about to be bombed and killed. Various groups, including Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) Bay Area, Writers Against the War on Gaza (WAWOG), Palestinian Feminist Collective and Bay Area Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM), participated in the protest.

The artists’ demands included:

Stop anti-Palestine censorship

- Call for immediate ceasefire and join the cultural boycott of Israel

Cut ties with Zionist funders

Exhibit and support Palestinian and Arab artists

The artists accused the Center of censoring efforts by Cheung and Branfman-Verissimo in particular to introduce references to the ongoing genocide in Gaza in their work at the *Bay Area Now 9* exhibition. According to a statement by Jewish Voice for Peace: “YBCA censored artist Jeff Cheung from creating a mural in the colors of the Palestinian flag, calling it ‘divisive.’ They invited artist Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo to propose text for their Statement Marquee sign, which is often a centerpiece for dialogue at the museum. But the artist says: ‘I was told that because my text included ‘Free Palestine’ they could not accept it.’”

In a typically mealymouthed statement, the Center’s CEO Sara Fenske Bahat, in response to questions from 48hills, a daily news and culture site, asserted that her organization’s mission was “to be a gathering space for creative expression that fosters meaningful connection for all.” She downplayed the protest, observing that “during our ‘Love Letter to SOMA’ free Thursday night event, a

few of the 30 artists featured in *Bay Area Now 9* altered or covered their exhibited work as part of a demonstration in support of Palestine.” Actually, nearly a third of the artists took part.

Bahat continued, in response to Cheung’s proposal, “public art is both a powerful opportunity, and it also amplifies the need for deliberate care. When it comes to presenting work on the exterior of our building, we have little opportunity to provide context around the authorship and intentions of the work; the audience includes passersby who have not chosen to attend YBCA exhibitions nor programming; and there are stakeholders and partners who may be inadvertently implicated or impacted.” In other words, the Center is most concerned not to offend anyone, especially wealthy donors, even if that means remaining silent about one of the greatest crimes in recent history.

Several of the artists pointed to the hypocrisy of the YBCA and its “progressive” self-promotion, noting that in recent years the Center had supported Black Lives Matter, feminist causes and protests against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sholeh Asgary, an Iranian-born interdisciplinary sound artist, told 48hills that the Center had “embraced these big social justice slogans,” but “when it comes to Gaza, suddenly that’s not allowed.” The artist champoy echoed this, asking, “Why are they silent on the genocide of Palestinians? ... Cultural workers and artists across the Bay are dreaming of a free Palestine. We hope that YBCA would want to be included in that vision, not working against it.”

Leila Weefur, an artist, writer and curator based in Oakland, told 48hills that during the protest, “from my vantage point, we received a lot of support from the crowd that was there. The public feels hungry for institutions to support Gaza and Palestine. YBCA claims to support artists and their extended communities. Our action should fuel the institution to be an agent of change, but their lack of support is glaring.”

Most of the protesting artists had previously signed an open letter of Bay Area artists and cultural workers, now with more than 800 names attached to it, expressing “solidarity with the people of Palestine” and committing “to the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel.” The signatories recognize “the genocide the Palestinian people are currently facing, and the ongoing violence they have experienced over the last century under the Zionist colonial project and establishment of Israel on Palestinian land.” They further acknowledge “Palestinian sovereignty and resistance to Israeli settler

colonialism, which exerts racial violence to dispossess land, ethnically cleanse the Palestinian population and maintain political and social dominance.”

The latest group of protesting artists in San Francisco join the ranks of tens of thousands of visual artists, musicians, actors, directors and others globally who have participated in protests, issued appeals and/or signed open letters opposing the ghastly crimes taking place in Gaza, events that have shaken the consciences of millions.

If artist protests have leveled off somewhat in recent weeks, it is not because the homicidal violence in Gaza has lessened—it is more criminal and threatening than ever—or because public outrage has dissipated—that has unquestionably reached even greater heights.

First, in certain quarters, Hollywood in particular, the official McCarthyite efforts to intimidate and terrorize opposition have had an effect. Every voice raised against mass murder is dubbed “antisemitic” or supportive of “terrorism,” and, in many cases, individuals are threatened with the loss of jobs or income. This filthy smear needs to be rejected and thrown back in the face of the slanderers, those defending policies of Nazi-like saturation bombing of residential areas, intentional starvation of masses of people, destruction of hospitals and infrastructure, torture and death squad executions.

Second, perhaps more significantly, the protesting artists have had to face the harsh fact that every attempt—including through demonstrations worldwide collectively involving tens of millions—to sway the Israeli, US, British and other governments, along with their leading agencies and institutions, has failed utterly. The imperialist regimes, led by the Biden White House, are determined to impose the “Final Solution” of the Palestinian question as part of the reorganization of the Middle East and the globe.

The mass movement against the Gaza genocide has to develop a broader, deeper perspective. These crimes are inseparable from capitalism. The entirely legitimate fury needs to be imbued with a conscious socialist opposition. The artists must turn to the only social force capable of putting an end to these atrocities, the international working class unified in a joint struggle against imperialist barbarism.



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