

Venice Biennale rejects appeal by 22,000 artists for Israel's exclusion over Gaza genocide

David Walsh
6 March 2024

More than 22,000 artists of every possible description, and figures in related professions, signed a petition calling for the exclusion of Israel from the Venice Biennale, the international cultural exhibition, which runs from April 20 to November 24. The signatories assert that “platforming art representing a state engaged in ongoing atrocities against Palestinians in Gaza is unacceptable. No Genocide Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.” Biennale officials have rejected the appeal out of hand.

The lengthy global list includes designers, architects, visual artists, dancers, writers, museum workers, art students, curators, art historians, publishers, musicians, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, videographers, researchers, educators, costume designers and many others.

The Art Not Genocide Alliance (ANGA) open letter refers to the International Court of Justice’s affirmation that Israel “is plausibly committing genocide” and continues, “Israel’s months- and in fact many-decades-long assault on Gaza continues regardless, while its leaders proclaim they are above International Law and boldly advertise their genocidal intent.”

ANGA notes that the Biennale “discouraged” apartheid South African from exhibiting from 1950 to 1968, and in the latter year officially banned the racist regime, a prohibition that lasted until 1993. The appeal further comments that the Biennale and its curator issued various statements of support for Ukraine in 2022 and blocked the presence “at any of its events of official delegations, institutions or persons tied in any capacity to the Russian government.”

The statement continues strongly:

The Biennale has been silent about Israel’s atrocities against Palestinians. We are appalled by this double standard. Israel’s assault on Gaza constitutes one of the most intense bombardments in history. By the end of October 2023 Israel had

already fired tonnes [metric tons] of explosives on Gaza equal in force to the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan in 1945. In January 2024 it was reported that the daily death rate in Gaza exceeds that of any other major conflict in the 21st century.

The open letter describes the statement by the Israeli pavilion curators and artist, Ruth Patir, “about the necessity of art in dark times” and the need for a “pocket of free expression and creation” as “another double standard.”

The protesting artists insist that:

Euphemisms cannot erase violent truths. Any work that officially represents the state of Israel is an endorsement of its genocidal policies. There is no free expression for the Palestinian poets, artists, and writers murdered, silenced, imprisoned, tortured, and prevented from travelling abroad or internally by Israel...There is no free expression in the war crime of cultural genocide.

In response to plans for the Israeli installation, “Fertility Pavilion,” reflecting on contemporary motherhood, the open letter points out that “Israel has murdered more than 12,000 children and destroyed access to reproductive care and medical facilities. As a result, Palestinian women have C-sections without anaesthetic and give birth in the street.”

The list of signatories includes American photographer Nan Goldin, British visual artist Jesse Darling, who won the Turner Prize last year, Moroccan artist Yto Barrada, British artist and writer Hannah Black, Basel-based performance artist Sophie Jung, the Italian curatorial platform LOCALES Project and Karachi Biennale CEO Niilofur Farrukh. *Hyperallergic* writes that the ANGA signers

“include prominent art world figures, past and present Biennale exhibitors, and curators and cultural workers, both Palestinians and Israelis,” among them Carolina Caycedo, Michael Rakowitz, Rehana Zaman and the British-Palestinian artist Rosalind Nashashibi, “known for her celebrated film *Electric Gaza* (2015).”

Among the thousands of protesting artists and cultural workers, *Hyperallergic* adds, “471 have previously worked at or participated in the Venice Biennale, including artists Sin Wai Kin, who was featured in the 2019 edition, and Sophia Al-Maria, who was selected for the event’s 2022 Special Project.”

Artnet reports that the appeal “has also been signed by the Palestine Museum U.S., which had its proposal for ‘Foreigners in their Homeland,’ an exhibition showcasing work by 24 Palestinian artists, rejected by the Biennale as an official collateral event. The show will go ahead at Venice’s Palazzo Mora as an unofficial collateral event, opening on April 20.”

The *New York Times* was pleased to report February 28 that the Biennale had rebuffed the call for Israel’s exclusion. According to the *Times*, exhibition officials, in a statement, asserted “that any country recognized by Italy could request to participate. The Biennale would ‘not take into consideration any petition or call to exclude’ countries, it added.”

Italy’s far-right culture minister issued a provocative and reactionary statement. Outrageously, Gennaro Sangiuliano, Italy’s culture minister, claimed that “Israel not only has the right to express its art, but it has the duty to bear witness to its people precisely at a time like this when it has been ruthlessly struck by merciless terrorists.” Sangiuliano added, in a comment dripping with hypocrisy, that the “Venice Art Biennale will always be a space of freedom, encounter and dialogue and not a space of censorship and intolerance.”

Sangiuliano belongs to a government headed by fascist Giorgia Meloni. As *Deadline* wrote at the time of his appointment as culture minister, “Sangiuliano has never hidden his right-wing political sympathies. Like Meloni, he was a member of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI party) in his youth.” These are Israel’s defenders.

The Brooklyn Museum and PEN America came in for criticism this week for their silence on a Gaza ceasefire. According to *Hyperallergic*, filmmakers Michèle Stephenson and Joe Brewster and writers Nikki Giovanni and Doreen St. Félix withdrew from an event planned for March 1, in which they were scheduled to feature, in protest.

In place of the event, a film screening followed by a talk, activists distributed leaflets to visitors asking, “How many more Palestinians will die before the Brooklyn Museum breaks its silence?” The leaflet encouraged visitors to

demand “the museum issue a statement, according to a joint post by Palestinian advocacy collective Museum and Culture Workers Coalition for Palestine (MCWC), Art Against Displacement (AAD), and arts activist group Decentralize Culture.” (*Hyperallergic*)

In recent months, pro-Palestinian activists have “scrutinized the Brooklyn Museum’s corporate relationships over funders’ financial links to Israeli weapons manufacturing and settlements in Palestine,” the online publication added. As opposed to the museum’s officialdom, “Brooklyn Museum staff have already made their own call for a ceasefire, published in a November 12 missive asking the institution to make a public statement on Gaza.”

PEN America, headed by pro-Zionist Suzanne Nossel, former vice president of strategy and operations for the *Wall Street Journal* and US State Department official, has become notorious for its refusal to denounce Israel’s crimes. The organization occasionally issues toothless statements about the need to oppose censorship and defend freedom of expression.

Typically, PEN America opens its statement, “Free Expression and the Israel-Hamas War,” by arguing that the “most recent war between Israel and Hamas began on Oct. 7, 2023, with Hamas’ murderous attack on civilians in Israel, including the taking of hostages and the targeting of an open-air music festival.” The very notion that this is a “war” between one of the most heavily armed countries in the world, with advanced and lethal weaponry provided by American imperialism and all its predator-allies, and Hamas, is an obscenity. This is a one-sided and sadistically murderous assault on a virtually defenseless population, resulting already in 100,000 dead, missing or wounded.

The claim of “even-handedness” in the face of Israel’s mass slaughter of Palestinians (“The profiles on this page are of writers, artists, journalists, and thinkers caught in the violence of war between Israel and Hamas”) is sickening and deserves to be denounced. PEN America is little more than an extension of the US state and its various operations.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact