

After 24,000 sign open letter calling for Israel's exclusion from Venice Biennale, artist shuts down exhibition

David Walsh
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Israeli artist Ruth Patir and curators Mira Lapidot and Tamar Margalit announced Tuesday they had decided not to open Patir's exhibition in Israel's national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the major international cultural exposition.

Their decision, reports the Associated Press (AP), "was posted on a sign in the window of the Israeli national pavilion on the first day of media previews, just days before the Biennale contemporary art fair opens Saturday." In English, the announcement read: "The artist and curators of the Israeli pavilion will open the exhibition when a ceasefire and hostage release agreement is reached."

An obviously much relieved Adriano Pedrosa, the Brazilian curator of the main show at the Biennale, applauded the action. "It's a very courageous decision," Pedrosa told the AP. "I think it's a very wise decision as well" because it is "very difficult to present a work in this particular context."

Some 24,000 artists and others had signed an open letter, organized by the Art Not Genocide Alliance (ANGA) calling for Israel's exclusion from this year's Biennale, which runs from April 20 to November 24.

The signatories asserted that "platforming art representing a state engaged in ongoing atrocities against Palestinians in Gaza is unacceptable. No Genocide Pavilion at the Venice Biennale."

The statement continued:

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 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."

Biennale and Italian government officials rejected the appeal out of hand. The country's far-right culture minister Gennaro Sangiuliano, a onetime member of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), issued a

vicious, reactionary statement, claiming 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.” This, in the face of Israel’s official policy of mass murder, starvation and ethnic cleansing.

The Biennale’s original refusal to exclude Israel underlined the bottomless hypocrisy of European and North American institutions and arts and film festivals, whose policies on “human rights” are dictated entirely by the political needs of the given ruling elite. Everywhere Russia has been banned since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but Israel’s genocidal war, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of women and children, merely provokes a wringing of hands and muttered complaints about “censorship” and the need for “freedom, encounter and dialogue.”

In regard to the Israeli artist’s decision to close the Biennale exhibition, the *New York Times* noted that “although many Israelis share Patir’s desire for a cease-fire and hostage deal, a call for a cease-fire from an artist representing the country at an important international event could draw criticism from Israeli lawmakers, said Tamar Margalit, an Israel pavilion curator who reached the decision with Patir and Mira Lapidot, another curator of the pavilion.”

The Netanyahu government, “which has paid about half the pavilion’s costs, was not informed in advance about the protest, Margalit said.”

In an equivocal statement, Patir indicated she and the curators wanted to show solidarity with the families of the Israeli hostages “and the large community in Israel who is calling for change.”

“As an artist and educator, I firmly object to cultural boycott, but I have a significant difficulty in presenting a project that speaks about the vulnerability of life in a time of unfathomed disregard for it,” she asserted.

Lapidot and Margalit added: “It has been six months since the brutal attack on Israel on October 7 and the beginning of the horrific war that is raging in Gaza. ... There is no end in sight, only the promise of more pain, loss and devastation. The exhibition is up and the pavilion is waiting to be opened. The art can wait but the women, children and people living through hell cannot.”

The refusal by the artist and curators to issue a clear denunciation of the Israeli onslaught and genocide in

Gaza prompted sharp criticism from the organizers of the original open letter.

Under the headline, “No business as usual during a genocide,” ANGA asserted that its campaign had “ensured there can be no business as usual at the Venice Biennale while Israel commits genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. The artistic team of the Israeli Pavilion has retreated as a direct consequence of widespread pressure and our collective campaign.”

Contrary to the artistic team’s claims, however, “the pavilion has not been closed. ANGA reiterates its demand to shut down the pavilion in its entirety.”

ANGA does not applaud empty and opportunistic gestures timed for maximum press coverage, and leaving video works on view to the public, while Palestinians are killed by Israel every hour and millions face imminent famine.

ANGA calls for an end to the genocide being perpetrated by Israel against Palestinians in Gaza, ?????an end to the apartheid and an end to the occupation of Palestine.

ANGA calls for all cultural workers of conscience to join us in these explicit demands. We refuse anything less.

Any official representation of the state of Israel on the international cultural stage is an endorsement of its policies and of the genocide in Gaza.

ANGA continues to campaign for Israel’s exclusion from the Venice Biennale. “Shut it down. No death in Venice. No business as usual.”



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