“When I wear a keffiyeh I am trying to draw attention to horrifying genocide in Palestine”

Former workers at New York City’s Noguchi Museum speak out on museum’s firings, anti-Palestine censorship

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On September 4, the Noguchi Museum in New York City terminated three workers because they refused to remove, according to a suddenly imposed policy, Palestinian scarves—keffiyehs. They wore them in solidarity with the Palestinian people and in opposition to the genocide being committed by Israel and funded by the United States.

The firings came after weeks of turmoil at the museum, during which employees and supporters protested this policy with walkouts and demonstrations. The museum, like many cultural institutions around the world, refused to budge on its ban of symbols of opposition to the genocide, and continues to take funds from Zionist and pro-war sources.

Last week, the museum’s director, Amy Hau, finally released a public statement that avoided any mention of Gaza. Hau insisted that, “I made the decision to update our dress code policy and reemphasize that we do not allow any political statements in the workplace.” As the fired workers explain below, this is patently false and only applies to pro-Palestinian political statements.

Hau says more than she intends to when she asserts that this policy “aligns with best practices as adopted by other museums, cultural institutions, and universities across the U.S.” Indeed, it does follow the anti-democratic and pro-Zionist “best practices” of cultural intuitions and universities. Many of those have now banned any sort of protest against the mass murder, in flagrant violation of First Amendment rights.

Hau disingenuously claims that “because [Isamu] Noguchi [who founded the museum and whose art is displayed there] passed away in 1988, we cannot speak on his behalf or claim to represent his views on today’s complex global issues.”

Perhaps not, but there is little doubt where Noguchi, who was interned by the Roosevelt administration during World War II as a Japanese American and who made monuments to the victims of the American war crimes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, would stand. He would condemn the current Gaza genocide.

Hau speaks for a thin layer of upper middle class museum officials whose job is to raise funds from the super-rich. This layer apes the ignorant and anti-democratic sentiments of its corporate masters. Its goal is to suppress antiwar sentiment in the art world as the United States prepares for a vast expansion of war.

Our first interview was with Q.

I worked at the Noguchi Museum for three years as a gallery assistant, as well as some in the education department.

When I wear a keffiyeh I am trying to draw attention to horrifying genocide in Palestine that is being conducted with our tax dollars. As an American, someone who lives and pays taxes here, and a human that hates all forms of colonialism, white supremacy and subordination, it’s important to me to not be complicit with these acts of violence. For me it’s impossible to not wear those beliefs on my sleeve, that’s something I need to do regardless of the risks it causes me as a worker.

I don’t know why the policy at the museum changed so drastically, but it definitely feels suspicious to me, and I hope the reasons why will come to light. Unfortunately, so much of what happens in museum boardrooms really never does get exposed. They are extremely private and there’s not a lot of accountability to the public or even to the working staff.

This is something that me and my coworkers, and also fellow concerned community members, have been really trying to project: that the museums are political spaces. The Noguchi Museum is full of messages about the horrors of war, about anti-colonialism, and how art can help us grieve.

A big part of Noguchi’s life was spent asking questions about carving out public space meant for mourning, and how we memorialize. He created a series of monuments to the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He also created monuments to workers’ rights in his History of Mexico frieze. In 1953 Noguchi himself said, “though humanity protests, it seems, no lessons may be learned, no warnings given, only gently bury the dead.” He was very actively antiwar.

We asked Q. what they thought were the reasons for the genocide in Gaza.

There are a million reasons for the genocide in Palestine. One million reasons why the West steals resources, systematically underdeveloped nations, orchestrates coups, relies on prison labor, etc., but I think it’s too much to get into in this interview. What I will say is that it makes a lot of sense that both political parties in the US support Israel’s bombings. It makes sense that they also have not

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blinked an eye in the past couple of weeks that the offensive has gone to the West Bank as well.

In some ways now this is a very new political moment because there is more immediacy in how we exchange information. At the same time, I think people are more distracted than before and it's very strange, very dystopian and extremely disturbing that we are living in an era where many of us on social media are being fed images of parties for Fashion Week mixed in with images of people holding their dead children, of children with their faces full of shrapnel. I mean, these images are plaguing me.

Q. is also an artist and we asked them about the role of art in social struggles.

I believe art has a role in revolutionizing. I'm very inspired by [the late African-American author] Toni Cade Bambara, and she says that we are at war with the truth. I believe in the existence of many truths. I think art-making is world-building is truth-telling, as writer Ismatu Gwendolyn likes to say. Art is hardly the be-all and end-all in political struggles, but it is a very powerful tool to use wisely.

We also spoke to Trasonia, another employee who had been fired. They first wanted to explain clearly what they thought about the statement that Amy Hau, the director of the Noguchi Museum, released last week about their and others' firing.

I think it should be noted that the statement that went up on the website is slightly edited from the one she sent to donors. That one was very self-centered and this has been cleaned up a little for public consumption.

Taking Noguchi's legacy to be apolitical is a huge step backwards. In 2020 and 2021 the museum supported BLM [Black Lives Matter] and the Stop Asian Hate movement. It's not what the museum was. It should be stated that Amy Hau has changed the vibe of the museum. The ban lays it out for everyone to see that the Noguchi Museum is a racist entity. This is not the legacy of Isamu Noguchi.

I have heard that since the firings, the museum is now getting gifts from pro-Israel sources. I got this information second-hand, so I can't confirm it.

We asked Trasonia how they had come to understand the situation in Palestine.

I've known about this situation for some time now. My perspective was just, well, that's awful. I think that in the last three to four years, I was more taking the stance of, what Israel is doing is wrong. I started hearing about the settlements [on the West Bank] and I started learning a little bit more about the colonial state of Israel and how it functions, the apartheid conditions, things like that.

The October 7 murder of 1,500 people was awful. But it became very clear very rapidly that Israel wasn't really interested in stopping murder. I don't really care about the excuses they made. The Israeli regime is carrying out massive violence against civilians. As to the US, it seems very much a repetition of what I learned in high school, the appeasement of Nazi Germany. We'll just give them what they want and then eventually they'll stop. You know, obviously, Israel hasn't stopped.

In April, I was given a patch by a coworker and friend, a Free Palestine patch, and I began wearing it on my hat. I wore that hat every day. I was kind of struggling about how to oppose the genocide. I'm a victim of police violence at the hands of NYPD [New York Police Department] and so I felt very wary of going to protests.

And I also had seen how electeds were really corrupted. If the options were to protest or to call your elected, at that point I was hopeless about what I could do.

So I began wearing the patch in mid-June. There was no issue in all that time, and it should be said that my supervisor never said anything to me about the patch. I was told at that point by HR in mid-June, that I was supposed to take off the patch, that I can't wear the patch on the hat because of a [museum] policy against any logos, any words, any images. This was coming, I was told, from Deputy Director Jennifer Lorch. She said that it was a symbol of hate. I just thought, how incredibly ill-informed you are, especially for somebody in a high position in this museum.

From mid-June, I began wearing the keffiyeh, which, like the Free Palestine patch, I wore as a symbol of my faith as a Christian. Sometime in July, my supervisor came to me and said, "Hey, you should know that somebody has taken a photo of you, a guest or someone and it has been circulating online. They're threatening to write an article about the museum allowing Nazi symbols."

Apparently, this was a campaign. Maybe 15 or so emails were sent to the museum complaining about the fact that they allowed employees to wear "symbols of hate." I would have hoped that the museum would have had more of a "let's protect our staff" sentiment about it, but that wasn't the case. Basically, the emails were then used to ban the keffiyeh. The bottom line is that the museum has no problem with political statements, but they do have a problem with Palestinians, and that's the real point.

Four people have lost their jobs over a scarf. Meanwhile, there's a genocide happening. The absurdity of this ban is rivaled only by the horror of the bloodthirsty actions of Israel in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon.

I realize I'm mourning the job I've held for the last three and a half years. But there are children mourning their whole families.

I don't plan on voting for Kamala Harris. You know, I think my generation, we're kind of past the sentiments that a lot of politicians project these days, you know, like, "Now we have a Latina and we have a black person and we have this and we have that." You know, [New York City Mayor] Eric Adams is one of the most repugnant politicians I've experienced in my life. And he's a black man and he ran as a black man saying that he was going to change things from the inside.

I'm 26 years old, and it's hard for me to watch people much older than me, with more experience, more established, who have no principles, who have no values that they stand behind.

The museum is also like this. It did a lot of posturing in 2020. There's the post that they made in 2020 about Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. You can go on their website or on their Instagram. It's probably still up. With the Asian hate thing they started the Banner Project. The banners are still up on the building right now.

The museum does sell Noguchi's Japanese heritage or rather his half-Japanese heritage because, mind you, they don't do the same thing with his Irish heritage. They use it to make money. These nonprofits, that's their job: to get donors to give the money so that they can pay their overhead price, their costs and have fancy parties and benefits.

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