

# Hundreds of artists and cultural workers call on Brooklyn Museum to end silence on Gaza genocide

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In response to this week's opening of *The Brooklyn Artists' Exhibition* at the Brooklyn Museum, celebrating the institution's 200th anniversary, hundreds of artists and cultural workers have signed an open letter demanding that the museum end its silence on the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. The letter reads in part:

For close to a year, the wider Brooklyn Museum community of neighbors, employees, and artists, have repeatedly asked the Museum's administration to make a statement denouncing the ongoing genocide against Palestinians enacted by Israel, to call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Palestine, and to divest from war profiteering. Museum workers published an open letter in support of Palestine on November 12th 2023, recognizing that 'American institutions' silence on this matter contributes to the erasure of this genocide from the historical record' and highlighting contradictions between the Museum's stated values and its silence on the atrocities being committed by Israel. The Museum has since failed to respond to its employees and community while fostering a climate of fear among visitors and staff who support Palestinian liberation.

The open letter calls out the hypocrisy of museum officials:

The Brooklyn Museum's values, as listed on the website, claim that the institution "endeavor(s) to bring attention to issues of social justice through our programming and partnerships, amplifying the voices of those who have been historically marginalized, and hope to inspire action and impact."

The signatories then demand that the museum denounce the genocide, boycott official Israeli cultural institutions, end the

presence of the New York Police Department (NYPD) at the museum, honor free speech and freedom of expression and end its corporate partnership with the New York Bank Mellon, "which has investments in Israeli weapons manufacturer Elbit Systems and has supported the Friends of Israel Defense Force Donor Advised Fund."

Many of the artists whose work is included in *The Brooklyn Artists' Exhibition* signed the letter. One of them, Chitra Ganesh, told *Hyperallergic*, "I remember being deeply inspired as a young artist, seeing [left-wing painter] Leon Golub and Nancy Spero speaking out in front of the Brooklyn Museum in support of artistic freedom around the *Sensation* exhibition in 1999, when Chris Ofili's work was vandalized."

But the days when the museum displayed Golub's paintings of US-supported Latin American military torture or came under attack in 1999, as Ganesh points to, from the city's reactionary mayor Rudolf Giuliani, seem like the distant past.

The initial sentence in the museum's self-description on its website claims, "We are committed to addressing exclusions and erasures of Indigenous peoples, and confronting the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism in the Museum's work." Clearly the Museum should add another phrase to the sentence—"except for the Palestinian people." The page continues, trumpeting the museum's "commitment to exploring, understanding, and appreciating our differences, while acknowledging how structural inequities and systems of oppression impact our work."

In less than a year, this has all been exposed as blather and lies, and the protest letter's six demands read like an indictment not only of the Brooklyn Museum, but of many leading arts institutions in New York City and worldwide, which have suppressed staff members' fundamental right to free speech.

Even such a simple act as wearing a Palestinian scarf, a keffiyeh, to represent sympathy and support for the victims of the relentless Israeli slaughter can get an employee fired from his or her job, as was the case last month with three workers at the Noguchi Museum in Queens.

The Brooklyn Museum itself, which has been an object of protests for months now, has been assisted by the NYPD in

suppressing opposition to its policies.

On June 1, hundreds protested the museum's silence, holding banners that read, "Brooklyn Museum: No Silence on Genocide." The NYPD's Strategic Response Group (SRG), its anti-terrorism unit, not only arrested 34 protesters but brutalized several others.

Later in the month, anti-genocide protesters painted slogans on the homes of several members of its Board of Directors, including that of the director, Anne Pasternak, where protesters wrote in red paint, "Blood on Your Hands." The reaction of the NYPD was to conduct a manhunt and arrest video-journalist Samuel Seligson in August on charges of felony hate crime. Seligson had done no more than film the action.

The crackdown mirrors the mass arrests of anti-genocide protests on college campuses over the last several months and the increasingly brutal police response to pro-Palestine protests in New York City in general.

The Brooklyn Museum's history is instructive.

It was founded in 1823 as the Brooklyn Apprentices' Library, where the poet Walt Whitman would later work as a librarian. The cornerstone of the building was laid in 1825 in a ceremony that included France's Marquis de Lafayette, who had commanded troops that came to the aid of the American Revolution. Whitman remembered seeing the dedication at the age of six.

Like Whitman himself, the founding of the library emerged from the democratic and egalitarian traditions of the American Revolution. In 1823, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter that "the establishment of such libraries in every town ... brings the use of books so much within the means of everyone that ... the public have the right and the understanding to judge for themselves."

The Brooklyn Museum's current building in Eastern Parkway was opened in 1897 just as American imperialism was becoming a world power. The imposing Brooklyn Academy of Music in the nearby Fort Greene neighborhood was opened in 1908.

In this period, the institute gave public lectures on a wide variety of topics open to the public at little or no cost on scientific, artistic and social topics, that were in tune with the interests of the public. For example, in the 1910s, the Institute offered a series of lectures on utopian socialism. The magazine of the museum published articles on subjects such as, "Is democracy possible without socialism?"

The cultural institutions of American capitalism could afford to discuss such questions in a relatively open manner because the US was fast becoming the world's dominant economic power, a position that it held for nearly three decades after World War II.

But American capitalism has lost this primacy and its intellectual self-confidence, while social inequality and other ills have bloomed malignantly since the 1980s in particular. Along with economic decline and political malaise has come a

vast degeneration of the official cultural establishment, as institutions – museums, symphony orchestras, not to say universities – are increasingly dominated by superrich investors either directly or through the corporations and foundations they control.

The inability of museum functionaries around the world to take a stand against the willful slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children in Gaza is the result in part of their deep intertwining with some of the most reactionary social forces and individuals on earth.

As recent events prove, the billionaires and multimillionaires on museum boards, taken as a whole, make up a constituency that stands for world war, genocide and dictatorship. If they defend the indiscriminate destruction of museums, libraries, universities, schools and mosques, along with the murder of scholars, painters, poets and musicians, in Gaza, what prevents them from taking the same attitude toward culture and artistic life in the US?

This is critical for artists and cultural workers to understand. One year of petitions, open letters and mass demonstrations has not stopped a single bomb from falling on Gaza, much less encouraged "cultural leaders" to renounce the funding and support they receive from those complicit in mass murder. Instead, the democratic rights available to museum staff and to artists themselves have come under systematic attack, as they have for university, college and high school students.

A sharply different political orientation is needed, one which repudiates the big business, two-party system and views socialism and the democratic, public control of arts institutions as necessary and achievable goals. The international working class is coming forward on wages, jobs and democratic rights, and that puts it on a collision course with imperialism. Cultural workers must turn toward that class.



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