

Amid crackdown on Gaza protests at US art schools, School of the Art Institute of Chicago students stage walkout over genocide

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On October 24, some 200 students, faculty and staff at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), associated with the city's famed Art Institute, walked out of classes to protest Israeli mass murder in Gaza. The protesters denounced the ongoing genocide and the complicity of the art school and museum.

According to *ARTnews*, “signs bore phrases such as ‘WHEN ISRAEL BOMBS, SAIC PROFITS’ and ‘AIC STAFF SUPPORT SAIC STUDENTS.’”

Students for Palestinian Liberation (SPL), which organized the action, asserted in an Instagram post that the art school “Supports and Benefits from War Criminals and Profiteers.”

SPL referred to the fact that there could be “no ethical education” at an institution “funded by the Crown family.” The reference is to the descendants of Chicago financier Henry Crown, now collectively worth some \$14.7 billion, reports *Forbes* magazine. The original Crown “started a building supplies company in 1919, which merged with General Dynamics in 1959. The family still owns 10% of General Dynamics” (*Forbes*) one of the world's largest arms manufacturers and, the SPL points out, “a supplier of weapons to the Israeli military.”

The anti-genocide group continued

There is no freedom of speech, radical artistic expression, and progressive education while a Crown family member sits on our board of trustees and holds more power than any student or faculty member.

Israel's genocidal campaign is ongoing in Gaza; land theft and settler violence in the West Bank are increasing; and now the Zionist entity is expanding its murderous assault and terror regimes in Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria.

The significant protest in Chicago occurred in the midst of a general crackdown on the right to protest and freedom of speech at art schools across the US. Many of those institutions

witnessed major protests last spring against Israel's war of extermination, including Rhode Island School of Design (RISD); Pratt Institute, Cooper Union, School of Visual Arts, Parsons School of Design and Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York City; California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Santa Clarita, California and Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles; Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia; SAIC in Chicago and Cranbrook Academy of Art in suburban Detroit.

The recent protest at SAIC followed a “a widely publicized pro-Palestine protest at the school in May that led to the mass arrest of around 70 students,” according to *ARTnews*. Subsequently, “a group of 40 museum staffers issued an open letter to museum president James Rondeau, expressing solidarity with the protesters. The letter called on the museum to end ‘financial support of the Palestinian genocide, direct or indirect.’”

Remarkably, following a class walkout in November 2023 over Gaza, “the school's administration sent an email internally to students alleging that the demonstration ‘disturbed the equilibrium.’” (*ARTnews*)

This notion, that university administrations are ready and willing to accept protests as long as the latter don't “disturb the equilibrium,” is presently being codified in the attack on anti-genocide protest and freedom of speech generally.

The purpose of any serious protest is precisely to disturb the equilibrium, in this case to bring the attention of a given campus and the wider public to the commission of an abominable crime, the homicidal “final solution” of the Palestinian question in Gaza and the West Bank.

The *ArtNewspaper* reports that in mid-September hundreds of students rallied at FIT, Parsons, School of Visual Arts and New York University “while large New York Police Department contingents looked on.”

The same article notes that

many protesters are facing fresh obstacles and new consequences on campuses this autumn. In particular,

some of the US's top art schools have updated their policies on demonstrations, tightening restrictions and strengthening penalties ahead of the new term.

At FIT, part of State University of New York (SUNY), the administration issued a lengthy series of “temporary standards and guidelines” in August, couched in police-bureaucratic language, seriously restricting political demonstrations. As the *ArtNewspaper* noted, the new policies

include an expansive list of locations where protests are explicitly prohibited and a total ban on encampments and “overnight demonstrations”—the latter of which “will be considered trespassing and addressed as such.”

The list of dos and don'ts consists principally of *don'ts*. The locations in which demonstrations *may not occur* goes on for six paragraphs (a.-f.), and includes “Classrooms, seminar rooms, auditoriums, or meeting rooms.”

The section in which the administration announces that it “will monitor all assemblies in designated public areas of grounds and buildings and prevent participants from engaging in any of the following...” goes on for nine paragraphs and includes a bewildering array of campus policies that student protesters may not contravene.

Of course, above all, disturbing the equilibrium is prohibited, or as FIT prefers to phrase it, “Disrupting college operations is not permitted.” Any objective reader of the guidelines is likely to conclude that the FIT administration is frightened of and hostile to opposition to the status quo and, in particular, intends to suppress protest against the Israeli mass killings.

At SAIC itself, the latest edition of its student handbook, updated September 4, sets out similarly repressive guidelines for protest, obviously intended to discourage such activity. Once more, the language used is worthy of a police or intelligence agency. The tone of disapproval is striking. Everything is to be done to assist the administration-bureaucracy to narrow or, if possible, eliminate protest:

The 280 Pit is the only space on campus where students are permitted to stage a group demonstration or protest. To facilitate advanced planning for an event, students must reserve the space in advance by completing this form. This form must be submitted at least three business days before the start of the event. Whenever possible, students and/or student groups should give additional advance notice, ideally two weeks or more, to best facilitate planning.[!] The space

is not considered reserved until an official notification is sent to the student organizer. Once notified of an approved demonstration, the student organizer will be assigned a point of contact to assist with managing the event.

The *ArtNewspaper* cited the legitimate comment of an SAIC student, “These new policies are trying to suppress our right to protest, and I won't stand for it ... The administration should be ashamed of themselves.”

At RISD in Providence too, the administration has also suddenly “updated” its policies, as of September 16. The art school's policy on “campus protests and demonstrations” now stipulates that a “protest, rally or demonstration must not interfere with the missions, processes, procedures or functions of the College.” As at the other schools, the guidelines lay great stress on what students may *not do*. “While the College encourages the free exchange of ideas, the College may limit the time, place, and manner of demonstrations.”

The clear intent of the pages and pages of restrictions (and ominous warnings about “corrective action” [!] for those who violate school policy) at RISD, as at the other art schools, is to discourage left-wing opposition and stifle dissent, all of the verbiage backed up by the threat of policemen's batons and handcuffs. Indeed, police last May arrested dozens of anti-genocide protesters at FIT and, as noted above, 68 demonstrators at SAIC.

As the *ArtNewspaper* blandly concludes,

As the war in Gaza enters its second year, students at multiple US arts universities are already facing harsher consequences should they decide to organise—or continue organising—protests in solidarity with Palestinians.



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