

Australia: NSW gallery cancels public discussion with pro-Palestinian curator

Jason Quill

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In a shameless capitulation to pro-Zionist forces, the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Australia's oldest state-funded art museum, last week suddenly postponed an "In Conversation" event involving gallery director Maud Page and Hoor Al Qasimi, the artistic director of the 2026 Biennale of Sydney. Al Qasimi is a highly regarded contemporary art curator and a well-known public opponent of the Gaza genocide.

The event was to be a discussion on the form and content of next year's biennale program, which is titled *Rememory*. Fifteen Australian artists, including Marian Abboud and Abdul Abdullah, and 22 international artists, as well the Decolonising Art Architecture Project from Palestine, are participating in the biennale.

Scheduled for October 8, the event, and Al Qasimi's participation in it, were subjected to a vicious and targeted attack by the Murdoch-owned media and pro-Zionist gallery donors, supported by the NSW Labor government.

While last week's event may not have planned to discuss artists' responses to the Gaza genocide, the pro-Zionist lobby, which has been hostile to Al Qasimi's appointment as biennale director in May last year was not going to allow anything that might have even slightly ventured in that direction.

Al Qasimi, the daughter of United Arab Emirates (UAE) ruler Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, is president of the International Biennial Association, directs the Sharjah Art Foundation, and is artistic director of Japan's Aichi Triennale, the first non-Japanese person appointed to the role.

Speaking at Aichi Triennale's *Time Between Ashes and Roses* event this year, she emphasised that she would not "shy away from traumatic events." The show included works dealing with the destruction in

Palestine along with art pieces on Hiroshima and indigenous oppression in Japan. Her public commitment to addressing genocide made her an inevitable target for the pro-Israeli elements.

The Zionist agitation against the AGNSW event—like the campaign which resulted in Creative Australia's dumping in February of visual artist Khaled Sabsabi to represent Australia at the next Venice Biennale—started with an article by Yoni Bashan in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper.

Bashan, a lifelong Zionist, began his career at *Australian Jewish News* before working for Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph*, *New York Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Embedded with the Israeli military when it invaded Gaza in October 2023, he has spent the past two years targeting writers, artists and other prominent public figures speaking out against Israel's war crimes.

Bashan's article, which was published on September 30, a week before the AGNSW event, condemned gallery management for being insensitive, implying that it would terrify Jewish patrons. It then denounced Al Qasimi's public support for Palestine and her accurate descriptions of Israel's military operations as "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing."

The article also highlighted her appearance at a recent Japanese arts festival wearing a black t-shirt that said "Palestine," her statement that "none of us will be free until Palestine is free" and her boycott of events with Israeli embassy ties. For Bashan's readers this was "proof" of her antisemitism.

Bashan's story cited anonymous AGNSW donors, described as "heavy hitters," who demanded the event's cancellation and suggested a financial boycott of the gallery, which has just been subjected to yet another round of government budget cuts and job destruction.

Bashan also targeted AGNSW staff, including senior curator Erin Vink and Justin Paton, head of international art, for social media posts opposing Israeli war crimes and supporting Palestinians in Gaza.

Within a week, NSW Arts Minister John Graham had joined the agitation, declaring that the Labor government expected “cultural institutions [to] prioritise social cohesion and make programming decisions that contribute to it”—i.e., prevent any public discussion about Israel’s mass murder, including via starvation, of tens of thousands of Palestinians

Federal Liberal Party opposition spokesman Julian Leeser contacted Sydney biennale organisers expressing his “concerns” and threatening to hold them accountable to their declared values of “inclusion.”

Last week’s postponement of the AGNSW event, and the gallery’s refusal to condemn the witch-hunting of Al Qasimi or defend the rights of its staff, will encourage the pro-Zionist lobby.

The attempts to clamp down on those speaking out against the genocide, spearheaded by the federal Labor government, will not succeed in silencing mass opposition.

The removal of artist Khalid Sabsabi in February from representing Australia at the 2026 Venice Biennale, which happened soon after a phone call to Creative Australia from federal Labor Arts Minister Tony Burke, was overturned in July.

This occurred after 4,350 artists and cultural workers signed petitions, board members resigned, and five other shortlisted artists made clear they would not replace Sabsabi at Venice.

Likewise, the recent attempts to block all discussion about Gaza or other “controversial subjects” at the Bendigo Writers Festival resulted in a fiasco for that event, with a large majority of writers withdrawing and refusing to adhere to the censorious rules imposed by organisers.

The increasingly authoritarian measures, including those targeting artistic freedom, cannot be fought through appeals to the powers-that-be. And critical artists cannot take forward the defence of their rights alone.

Instead, what is required is a turn to the working class and the fight for its independent mobilisation. The genocide in Gaza and the turn to police-state measures by governments internationally are expressions of the

descent by capitalist into barbarism, posing the need for a socialist alternative.



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