

# Gaza Genocide, German Cultural Politics and the Inadequacy of Form: An Interview with Jumana Manna

T J Demos

Jumana Manna is a visual artist and filmmaker. Her work explores how power is articulated, focusing on the body, land and materiality in relation to colonial inheritances and histories of place. Through sculpture, filmmaking and occasional writing, Manna deals with the paradoxes of preservation practices, particularly within the fields of architecture, agriculture and law. Her practice considers the tension between the modernist traditions of categorisation and conservation and the unruliness of ruination, life and its regeneration. Jumana lives in Jerusalem and Berlin.

---

**T J Demos:** In a recent interview with Fadi Bardawil, you suggested that ‘the attack on Palestine is a gateway to authoritarianism, part of a broader surge of right-wing politicians who build their careers by demonising migrants and anyone they classify as non-white’.<sup>1</sup> This tracks with current developments in the US, where under Trump’s extreme right-wing regime, antisemitism is being weaponised as a tool not just to silence critics of Israel’s genocide but to dismantle civil rights, suppress anti-racism efforts, restructure universities and eliminate DEI [Diversity, Equality and Inclusion] initiatives, critical race theory, gender and feminist studies, as well as trans rights. All of this is unfolding rapidly within a larger context of demolishing the social welfare state, weakening the federal workforce, targeting migrants, and accelerating billionaire-driven privatisation and wealth accumulation. How do you interpret this situation, and what’s the role of Zionism – or the settler-colonial project of Jewish ethno-nationalism – at this historical moment, particularly in relation to right-wing extremism?

**Jumana Manna:** As shocking as the descent into right-wing extremism and authoritarianism is today, we need to look beneath it, to unpack the complicity of the whole liberal order with the genocide in Gaza and the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestine, as well as the decline of the democratic order more globally. Vulgar ethno-nationalism, one of the drivers of right-wing extremism, is a European phenomenon par excellence. It is bound up with the history of capitalism and European coloniality, which birthed Zionism and the state of Israel. As a nineteenth-century movement, Zionism emerged precisely from the failure of Europe to respond

---

<sup>1</sup> Published in Arabic in *Megaphone*, 13 January 2024, <https://megaphone.news/oped/الحدود-الديمقراطية-الألمانية>, accessed 23 April 2025

to the plurality of its societies, and its inability to guarantee safety to its Jewish communities as well as other minorities. But in a twist of logic, Zionism reproduced antisemitism's basic premise that Jews did not belong in Europe and therefore needed to find a place of refuge elsewhere: resettlement in Palestine. The history and growth of the Zionist movement was internally diverse, with different strands like cultural Zionism and binational Zionism on the 'left' and revisionist Zionism (of Jabotinsky) on the right, about which the non-Jewish European left and right were also divided. Yet support for their settler-colonial project – meaning the erasure or replacement of the native Palestinians for the purpose of achieving a Jewish majority on Palestinian land – ultimately brought the various branches of Zionism together.

What gets overlooked in this history is precisely labour Zionism's alliance with the European political centre, or even centre-left, that led to the Nakba. The erasure of Palestine and the rendering of the majority of its population stateless refugees, was facilitated by human rights discourse, which, on the one hand, speaks of important values, such as inclusivity, anti-racist struggle, parity, etc, but, on the other, ultimately translates that into a doctrine of 'never again' for some and sustained oppression and persecution for others. This complicity of the liberal order is what the present moment has so severely exposed. Our problem is not simply the rise of the right as such, but how this rise aligns with the liberal centre when it comes to the question of Palestine. So, the attack on Palestine is not only a gateway to authoritarianism, but also a gateway to expose and undo the liberal order, which has proven time and again to be rotten at its core.

**TJD:** And this authoritarianism is increasingly global.

**JM:** Absolutely. Israel's genocidal policies serve as a model for various right-wing movements, each adopting elements to reinforce their own narratives and advance (il)liberal politics in their respective contexts. Certainly, today Zionism aligns many international rightwing varieties, from white supremacy broadly, Christian evangelicals and neo-feudal tech billionaires, to Hindu Nationalists led by India's Narendra Modi, who admires Netanyahu as a model for managing Kashmir. They all share a deep-seated hostility towards the Muslim world and a strategic understanding of how to wield authoritarian power while securing the backing of global hegemonic forces. Perhaps one way to think of this entanglement from a materialist perspective is via the international collaboration and co-operation between police departments, repressive state apparatuses and Israel – as a laboratory of surveillance and repressive practices.

**TJD:** One might think that in today's world, nations can't simply resurrect naked settler colonialism – although we are witnessing eerie echoes of it in current geopolitical shifts, from Israel's expansionism to Trump's desire to assimilate Canada and Greenland for the purposes of resource extraction. It's as if nineteenth-century settler colonialism was clawing its way back into the present.



Jumana Manna, *Your Time Passes and Mine Has No Ends*, 2025, Capitol Modern, courtesy of the artist, Hawai'i Contemporary and Hollybush Gardens, London, photo by Duarte Studios

**JM:** Did settler colonialism ever disappear? Or was it that we simply witnessed its nineteenth-century consolidation, and this moment is merely its structural realignment? Germany has supported the State of Israel, diplomatically, financially and militarily since its foundation. Today, like in the past, support for Israel is framed as a duty, a redemptive atonement for Germany's Nazi past and thereby a demonstration of moral and ethical superiority. But in reality this serves as an inversion for the persecution of Palestinians, and Arabs or Muslims more broadly in Europe, joining a wide spectrum of German political parties, from the Greens to the extreme right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, in pushing their anti-migrant agenda and reviving a form of German ethnonationalism. It's as if a long-suppressed nationalist dream is being realised – a guilt-free celebration of German identity, a ramping up of military power, and even openly discussing the possibility of building a nuclear bomb, something that has been unthinkable since World War II.

**TJD:** Given the recent shocking events in the US – such as the Department of Homeland Security's abduction of Columbia graduate student Mahmood Khalil; and the federal government's \$4 million defunding of Columbia University (now extended to other universities too) as a form of blackmail to enforce stricter security measures and suppress pro-Palestinian activism, following Trump's claims that the university is a hotbed of 'antisemitism' – anti-Zionist groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace argue that it's clear that what's happening on Columbia's campus is not about protecting Jews. The US organisation Jews Against White Supremacy

(JAWS) puts it even more starkly, stating that Zionism turns Jewish safety into a tool of fascism.<sup>2</sup> How do you see this situation, particularly from your vantage point in Germany?

**JM:** This past year has only reinforced what Palestinians and anti-Zionist Jews have always known: Israel's project does not protect Jews; it endangers them. It serves fascist agendas, normalises colonial domination, and entrenches apartheid – while always shifting the blame onto the oppressed, as if Palestinians are the ones rejecting peace. Netanyahu and his circle can now openly declare '*over our dead bodies will there be a Palestinian state*', without even pretending to seek a peace partner – something the Israeli Labour Party at least felt the need to perform for decades. That pretence is no longer necessary.

**TJD:** Emily Dische-Becker's interview on *The Dig* podcast last year stood out to me. She pointed out that not only does Zionism fail to protect Jews in Germany, but it's actually weaponised against anti-Zionist Jews.<sup>3</sup> She mentions how some German converts to Judaism even take it upon themselves to police and discipline Jewish critics of Israel, even accusing them of being antisemitic – a surreal and deeply unsettling dynamic.<sup>4</sup>

**JM:** It's glaringly obvious how these structures of antisemitism persist – Germans dictating to Jewish people how to be Jewish. But honestly, here in Germany, there's also growing fatigue with how this issue is covered in the media. The focus so often centres left-wing anti-Zionist Jews who face cancellation, bullying and defamation, while the much larger reality is overlooked: the majority of those being defamed, cancelled and deported are Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

And so, we risk reproducing the same problem – the same structural inequality – where Palestinian voices are marginalised, their names less recognised, their cases of defamation underreported. The focus shifts instead to the outrage that, in the name of 'protecting Jewish life', even Jewish people can be cancelled. But that outrage only holds if you accept this discourse at face value – when, in reality, it has long been exposed as a fabrication, an ideological construct that Germany has crafted for itself and continues to reinforce through its media and cultural institutions.

---

<sup>2</sup> See the 'Jaws: Jews Against White Supremacy' website: [www.jewsagainstwhitesupremacy.org](http://www.jewsagainstwhitesupremacy.org), accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>3</sup> See 'The German Question w/ Emily Dische-Becker', *The Dig*, 31 January 2024, <https://thedigradio.com/podcast/the-german-question-w-emily-dische-becker>, accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>4</sup> See also George Prochnik, Emily Dische-Becker and Eyal Weizman, 'Once Again, Germany Defines Who Is a Jew', Part I and Part II, *Granta* 165, 23 and 29 November 2023, <https://granta.com/once-again-germany-defines-who-is-a-jew-part-i>, and <https://granta.com/once-again-germany-defines-who-is-a-jew-part-ii>; and Ana Teixeira Pinto, 'Shrinking Horizons: The German Struggle against Universalism', 'Thinking Gaza: Critical Interventions' Forum, *Third Text*, 26 July 2024, [www.thirdtext.org/thinkinggaza-teixeirapinto-shrinkinghorizons](http://www.thirdtext.org/thinkinggaza-teixeirapinto-shrinkinghorizons), accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>5</sup> *Editor's note*: for a crowdsourced archive documenting silenced voices in Germany, see 'Archive of Silence' on Instagram, [www.instagram.com/archive\\_of\\_silence/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/archive_of_silence/?hl=en).

**TJD:** It reminds me of something Noura Erakat, the Palestinian human rights lawyer, said in a recent interview, about how Palestinian suffering is systematically erased.<sup>6</sup> The humanity of Palestinians isn't often recognised, and she argues that it must be – not because they are exceptional, but precisely because they are not. Their repression is part of a broader imperialist agenda that will ultimately be used against all dissenters, anyone who refuses to comply with the terms of neo-fascism. I think what you're pointing to is troubling, even if it also importantly marks a growing site of anti-Zionist Jewish resistance to Israel. But while solidarity between these groups is essential, the centring of Jewish voices at the expense of Palestinian ones reinforces the very erasure that should be resisted.



Jumana Manna, *Freedom Disappeared and its Sun Remains*, 2025, Capitol Modern, Hawai'i Triennial 2025, courtesy of the artist, Hawai'i Contemporary and Hollybush Gardens, London, photo by Duarte Studios

**JM:** I was in Hawai'i recently and noticed how some Americans, even those deeply involved in sovereignty struggles, consciously step back to create space for Native Hawai'ians to take centre stage. In discussions on sovereignty, whether on panels or at events, they ensure that Hawai'ian voices are heard first, positioning themselves as supporters rather than spokespeople, helping in every way except by speaking over those directly affected. It seems there is a growing awareness in the US around Indigenous and Black struggles – an understanding of when to lead

<sup>6</sup> See 'Noura Erakat: Trump's Abuses & Mahmoud Khalil's Arrest Are Products of US Imperialism Coming Home', *Democracy Now!*, 11 March 2025, [www.democracynow.org/2025/3/11/noura\\_erakat\\_palestine\\_mahmoud\\_khalil#transcript](https://www.democracynow.org/2025/3/11/noura_erakat_palestine_mahmoud_khalil#transcript), accessed 23 April 2025



and when to listen. But when it comes to Palestinian narratives and representation, I don't think that level of recognition has been seen yet.

Even in well-meaning circles, discussions about Palestine are often framed through Jewish and other voices speaking about Palestinians – despite the fact that there is no shortage of Palestinians and Arabs who can speak for themselves. I see this happening regularly in Germany, especially among those who have yet to fully unlearn whiteness and break free from the deeply ingrained German socialisation that is both ideological and affective.



Jumana Manna (second left), with Ma'an Odeh, Mahina Kaomea and Kauwila Mahi at the Hawai'i Triennial 2025 opening, reading letters from prison by Layan Kayed and Walid Daqqa, in Arabic and English, as well as passages in Ōlelo Hawai'i translated by Mahina and Kauwila

**TJD:** Can you say more about how it was in Hawai'i?

**JM:** I experienced an understanding of resistance and solidarity in a way that is rare to come by in Germany. I led a workshop at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, attended by SFJP (Students and Faculty for Justice in Palestine) members, as well as other students, and organisers engaged in the Native Hawai'ian sovereignty struggle, and there was something deeply moving about how solidarity is lived there – not as discourse, but as an embodied reality. When I shared Palestinian films and texts, I felt an intuitive and resonant understanding – Palestinian culture wasn't just analysed but *felt*. The connection wasn't theoretical; it was rooted in shared histories of dispossession, a collective struggle against empire and settler colonialism. To be on the other

side of the world, in Polynesia, and feel that depth of recognition from communities who don't just unpack these histories intellectually but carry them in their flesh and bone was profound, enriching and affirming.

Presenting my banners installation in that context, in the 2025 Hawai'i Triennial, was similarly rewarding. The curators focused on Indigenous artists and struggles, and the audience wasn't looking to 'include' Palestinian voices as a token gesture. They resonated with the work on a fundamental level because it reflected their own principles, history, and legacies of resistance. At the opening, we read writings from Layan Kayed, a Palestinian student activist arrested multiple times and last freed with the prisoner-hostage exchange in January of this year, and from Walid Daqqa, the longtime jailed Palestinian political prisoner and writer who was martyred in prison last year due to negligence of medical care, alongside reflections from Kanaka Maoli artists Kauwila Mahi and Mahina Kaomea, drawing direct connections between our struggles.<sup>7</sup> It was an incredibly meaningful exchange, which made returning to Germany all the more jarring. How do you translate that experience to people who don't share this positionality, and don't *feel* these things in their bodies?

**TJD:** Back in Germany, are there any places actively working to centre Palestinian lives, particularly within the cultural sphere?

**JM:** There are a few I can think of. There is an initiative called Kilmé that is organising a series of monthly talks featuring Palestinian scholars and artists.<sup>8</sup> They recently featured Sami Khatib, Sherene Seikaly, Yasmin Daher and Oraib Toukan, among others, as speakers. There's also the Spore Initiative, which supports cultural projects at the intersection of climate justice, ecological regeneration, and education.<sup>9</sup> They have engaged a lot with Palestine since the genocide and have become a hub of sorts for Palestine solidarity and events that other institutions have cancelled. There are other initiatives as well that have not worked solely to centre Palestinian lives but have kept their doors open for fundraisers and events in relation to Palestine and Lebanon: the concert and club venue, 90mil, and cinemas like Wolf Kino and Sinema Transtopia.

Within the German university and cultural spheres, there are efforts to acknowledge and address the country's restrictions on freedom of speech and opinion.<sup>10</sup> However, aside from

---

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see 'Exclusive Extract: The Prison As a Text by Layan Kayed, translated by Roba AlSalibi', *Wasafiri*, 6 June 2024; and Walid Daqqa and Dalia Taha, "'A Place Without a Door" and "Uncle Give me a Cigarette" – Two Essays by Palestinian Political Prisoner, Walid Daqqa', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 11 July 2023, <https://merip.org/2023/07/a-place-without-a-door-and-uncle-give-me-a-cigarette-two-essays-by-palestinian-political-prisoner-walid-daqqa/>, accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>8</sup> See Kilmé Talks on Instagram: [www.instagram.com/kilme\\_talks](https://www.instagram.com/kilme_talks)

<sup>9</sup> See the Spore Initiative website: [www.spore-initiative.org/en](https://www.spore-initiative.org/en), accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>10</sup> *Editor's note:* see, for instance, Students for Palestine FU Berlin on Instagram: [www.instagram.com/studentsforpalestine\\_fu](https://www.instagram.com/studentsforpalestine_fu)

individual-led efforts within classrooms, the public discussions I'm thinking about are still largely framed through the lens of Germany and Jewish identity. It's exhausting, and I no longer find these conversations inspiring or productive. At worst, they only serve to reinforce the status quo.

**TJD:** In the US, repression seems to be intensifying. Noura Erakat critiques liberal institutions – universities like Columbia and Harvard, as well as cultural institutions – for laying the groundwork for neofascist assaults through what she calls 'anticipatory obedience'.<sup>11</sup> In an attempt to shield themselves from right-wing attacks, and instead of taking a stand, these institutions pre-emptively suppress dissent, particularly pro-Palestine speech. The result is a disturbing dynamic where any expression opposing genocide in Gaza is automatically labelled antisemitic, creating an absurd logic in which condemning mass killing is framed as an act of racism.

Dylan Rodriguez, a member of the recently created Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism in the US, discusses this as a form of *liberal and progressive counterinsurgency* – a form of pacification, isolation and domestication deployed by philanthropic organisations, think tanks, universities and museums, extending beyond and in advance of direct state repression and actual police violence.<sup>12</sup> This dynamic is unmistakably at play today, as liberal and progressive institutions attempt to appease rising fascism rather than confront it directly. History has shown that such strategies only lead to disaster, right? And now we are facing that very danger once again.

**JM:** That has been our experience here in Germany as well, the anticipation of the inevitable right-wing backlash and its mechanisms. Yet, instead of resisting, which should be the role of the left, so-called liberals pre-emptively retreat. Rather than pushing back, they throw up barriers – not against fascism, but against critical voices, effectively clearing the path for the very forces they claim to oppose. Before the backlash even arrives, they have already removed the obstacles – silencing Palestinians, erasing dissent. It is an all-too-familiar reality in Germany.

**TJD:** And you've had some personal experience with this.

**JM:** At this point, it's almost comical. Someone will invite me to screen a film, and I'll ask, *Are you sure? Are you willing to protect me against the backlash you might face for hosting me?* And their

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Noura Erakat: Trump's Abuses & Mahmoud Khalil's Arrest Are Products of US Imperialism Coming Home', op cit, [www.democracynow.org/2025/3/11/noura\\_erakat\\_palestine\\_mahmoud\\_khalil#transcript](https://www.democracynow.org/2025/3/11/noura_erakat_palestine_mahmoud_khalil#transcript); also see Noura Erakat, 'The Boomerang Comes Back', Boston Review, 5 February 2025, [www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-boomerang-comes-back](https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-boomerang-comes-back), accessed 23 April 2025.

<sup>12</sup> See the Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism: <https://criticalzionismstudies.org/>; and Dylan Rodríguez and Roberto Sirvent, 'Cops, Colleges, and Counterinsurgency: An Interview with Dylan Rodríguez', *Black Agenda Report*, 13 September 2023, <https://www.blackagendareport.com/cops-colleges-and-counterinsurgency-interview-dylan-rodriguez>, accessed 23 April 2025



response will be, *Well, have you ever said anything publicly about BDS* [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions]? That's when it becomes clear – they are performing the work of repression themselves. They are doing the job of the police! Attempting to enforce an unconstitutional anti-BDS motion that Germany refuses to formalise into law, precisely to avoid violating its own constitutional protections on freedom of opinion. It is a farcical yet deeply insidious form of self-policing and censorship, where institutions pre-emptively silence dissent to avoid controversy, doing the work of the repressive state before the state even needs to intervene. Who needs the rightwing when so-called progressives – Die Linke voters, Green Party supporters – are already excluding Palestinian and Arab voices from cultural spaces? This began long before the genocide, as early as 2019, when institutions, to avoid controversy, quietly started deplatforming individuals remotely associated with the principles of BDS.<sup>13</sup>

This normalisation of censorship has been driven not by the right alone but by liberals and segments of the left – paralysed by fear, lacking vision, unwilling to take a stand. From 2019 to documenta's collapse in 2022, and now with the avalanche of repression since the genocide, it has been the same pattern. The majority of institutions that invited me and then cancelled did so under the same excuse: *We can't risk our funding. We have to protect our colleagues.* In reality, they shift blame onto the victims, saying *you* are putting *us* at risk, justifying their own cowardice.

**TJD:** Turning to documenta, I would love to hear your thoughts on its new Code of Conduct announced in February 2025 and approved by the institution's Managing Director (Andreas Hoffmann), shareholders and the Supervisory Board.<sup>14</sup> The framework explicitly endorses the IHRA definition of antisemitism – which problematically conflates criticism of Israel with anti-Jewish racism – and grants a 'scientific advisory board' the authority to assess potential violations.<sup>15</sup> The Code emphasises the need to prevent what it terms 'group-related misanthropy', including antisemitism, while simultaneously claiming to uphold 'humanistic, liberal, and democratic values'. Can these principles co-exist?

---

<sup>13</sup> *Editor's note:* responding to the parliamentary BDS resolution by the Bundestag that labelled the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (see [www.bdsmovement.net](http://www.bdsmovement.net)) campaign to be 'antisemitic' on 17 May 2019, some German institutions established the *Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit* (world-openness initiative) to counter repression and the foreclosure of critical discussion 'triggered by the parliamentary anti-BDS resolution'. As the 'Statement by the Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit' puts it: 'We reject the BDS boycott of Israel since we consider cultural and scientific exchange to be essential. At the same time, we consider the logic of counter-boycott, triggered by the parliamentary anti-BDS resolution, to be dangerous. By invoking this resolution, accusations of antisemitism are being misused to push aside important voices and to distort critical positions. For this reason, we have established the "Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit" (world-openness) to consolidate our expertise and efforts in order to defend a climate of diverse voices, critical reflection and an appreciation of difference.' The statement and list of institutional signatories can be found here: [www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/en/about-us/profile/gg53weltoffenheit](http://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/en/about-us/profile/gg53weltoffenheit), accessed 23 April 2025.

<sup>14</sup> See [www.documenta.de/en/code-of-conduct](http://www.documenta.de/en/code-of-conduct), accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>15</sup> See the first issue of the *Journal for the Critical Study of Zionism*, vol 1 no 1, Fall 2024, <https://criticalzionismstudies.org/jcsz-volume-1-issue-1-fall-2024>, accessed 23 April 2025

**JM:** It's absolute nonsense. Honestly, I can't fathom why anyone from outside Germany would take this job – what are they walking into? We've seen the avalanche of cancellations and humiliation of critical voices in the cultural sector and how the IHRA definition has been weaponised in the US, Germany, the UK and beyond. The idea that critical discourse and humanist values can co-exist with the way the IHRA has been used – as a tool to silence criticism of Israel and Zionism – is, at best, naïve. More realistically, it's a deliberate strategy to uphold Germany's rigid status quo – professing a commitment to free speech and diversity while actively silencing any critical discourse on Israel in the public sphere, including in major art exhibitions.

**TJD:** Yes, and the only possible outcome would seem to be, to quote Andreas Schlegel in *Kunstkritikk* magazine, a 'zombie documenta': a brain-dead repressive spectacle that has capitulated to the ideology of Zionist ethnonationalism, refusing to see this itself as a form of 'group-related misanthropy'.<sup>16</sup> This marks a profound betrayal of documenta's original mission as an emancipatory project of internationalism, born from the ruins of Nazi fascism's cultural nationalism. The irony is staggering, and perhaps it ultimately reveals the inherent flaws in documenta's vision of internationalism from the very start.

**JM:** A few years ago, the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin hosted a fascinating yet largely overlooked exhibition on documenta's history, 'Documenta. Politics and Art'.<sup>17</sup> The show was critical, revealing unsettling truths about its origins. Documenta co-founder Werner Haftmann, for instance, was not only a Nazi Party member but also a wanted war criminal in Italy, known for hunting, torturing and executing resistance fighters. And recent research further exposes that ten of documenta's original organisers were affiliated with the Nazi Party, the SS, or the SA – Hitler's paramilitary wing. By the second edition, six former Nazis were involved; by the third, that number had risen to fifteen.<sup>18</sup>

So, documenta's emergence as a seeming phoenix from the ashes was, in reality, an American-led effort to reintegrate Germany under its sphere of influence – essentially a geopolitical makeover to declare the country 'denazified'. Yet, those who retained power, in the artworld as in the security apparatuses, were often still antisemites. In its early years, documenta functioned primarily as a showcase for American modernism (and Documenta 3, in 1964, was partly funded by the CIA), serving as a Cold War cultural project to align Germany with the West rather than the Soviet bloc. It framed itself as a symbol of artistic

---

<sup>16</sup> See Andreas Schlaegel, 'Zombie Documenta', *Kunstkritikk/Nordic Art Review*, 4 June 2024, <https://kunstkritikk.com/zombie-documenta-2>, accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>17</sup> For more on 'Documenta. Politics and Art', 18 June 2021 – 9 January 2022, see [www.dhm.de/en/exhibitions/archive/2021/documenta-politics-and-art](http://www.dhm.de/en/exhibitions/archive/2021/documenta-politics-and-art), accessed 23 April 2025.

<sup>18</sup> See Kate Brown, 'A Startling Exhibition on the History of Documenta Reveals the Political Moves – and Nazi Ties – of Its First Curators', *Artnet*, 24 June 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/politics-art-documenta-1982336>, accessed 23 April 2025

freedom, but in truth it was an ideological cover-up, masking the fact that true denazification never fully took place.

Many of the structures of Nazi and right-wing ethnonationalist power in Germany have endured. Yet there was a moment, particularly after reunification and the Cold War, when it seemed like Germany was beginning to engage with the world differently – opening up to perspectives from the Global South. Okwui Enwezor's documenta 11 in 2002 was a pivotal moment in this shift, standing out as one of the most significant editions in the history of this deeply problematic institution. Twenty years ago, there was a real sense that Germany was undergoing a transformation, that it was becoming more inclusive, and that migrant voices might finally be able to reshape its cultural and intellectual discourse.

**TJD:** I went to documenta 11 myself, was powerfully moved by it, and definitely thought something like that was happening, in a very positive way.

**JM:** I've asked my (remaining) German friends what they thought – was it all just an illusion? Was there ever a genuine effort to become a more globalised country, to dismantle white supremacy, antisemitism and xenophobia, or was it merely a fleeting facade? Was there a real attempt that was ultimately crushed? Whatever brief opening existed in the 1990s and 2000s, it feels now as though Germany has regressed, returning to an earlier era.

**TJD:** In Germany, decolonisation as a political force does feel like a fading echo – its momentum stalled within universities, its presence diminished in funded research. If not entirely extinguished, it lingers more as a memory than a living praxis, a vision once urgent, now quietly receding.

**JM:** True decolonisation – one that would mean the abolition of Zionism – is just not on the table. Far from it. Instead, Germany engages in surface-level reconciliations, a performative reckoning with its colonial past in Namibia or a selective embrace of Black lives that often veers into cultural appropriation. They can appoint Joe Chialo as Berlin's cultural senator, but his politics align with staunch Zionism and the suppression of Palestinian solidarity. A similar void – or calculated, enforced silence – reigns at HKW (the cultural space, Haus der Kulturen der Welt) when it comes to Palestine. It feels like decisions are steered by securing funding and legitimacy from those in power. When your mission is to build community how do you justify pre-emptive exclusions?

**TJD:** It does expose the ultimate failure of liberal identity politics. In the UK, recent Conservative Party leaders have been Black British and of South Asian descent; in the US, figures like Barack Obama and Kamala Harris – both complicit in supporting the genocide in Gaza – embody this contradiction. Today, violent colonialism and domination can just as easily be led by people of colour. As Asad Haider argues in his book *Mistaken Identity: Mass*

*Movements and Racial Ideology*, this reveals the deep betrayals and contradictions of liberal identity politics, where representation is hollow without genuine structural change, without material redistribution.<sup>19</sup>

**JM:** Absolutely.

**TJD:** As a potential force against zombie documenta futures, what do you think of Strike Germany and its ‘call to refuse German cultural institutions’ use of McCarthyist policies that suppress freedom of expression, specifically expressions of solidarity with Palestine’?<sup>20</sup>

**JM:** Strike Germany functions as a critical toolbox, I think, emerging at a moment of extreme urgency – when alarm bells needed to be sounded internationally and clear guidelines established for those committed to Palestinian rights, artistic freedom and freedom of speech. It arose from a collective demand to address these issues systematically, especially as censorship and cancellations mounted.

**TJD:** But does it cast its net too wide, targeting *all* of Germany?



Jumana Manna, *Freedom Disappeared and its Sun Remains*, 2025, Capitol Modern, Hawai'i Triennial 2025, courtesy of the artist, Hawai'i Contemporary and Hollybush Gardens, London, photo by Duarte Studios

<sup>19</sup> See Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*, Verso, London, 2018

<sup>20</sup> See the Strike Germany website: <https://strikegermany.org>, accessed 23 April 2025

**JM:** In my view, the initiative has been a significant milestone in resisting censorship, and its core principles are solid: engaging institutions on their stance regarding Palestinian rights and the genocide, pushing them to commit to the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism rather than the IHRA definition, and ensuring Palestinian voices and content are meaningfully included in their programming.<sup>21</sup> Strike Germany operates more as a pressuring mechanism than an outright boycott. It is a strategic tool, urging international cultural workers to stand in solidarity and support those in Germany fighting against policies that suppress freedom of expression.

**TJD:** What other ways do you see artists and cultural workers pushing back, resisting, and organising as an opposition in Germany?

**JM:** They are pushing back in a number of ways. Private micro-grants have emerged to support those who have lost access to institutional funding due to their outspoken solidarity with Palestinian liberation. It has been interesting to witness the growth of these small, independent opportunities, offering space to those whose livelihoods have been affected. At the same time, there has been a noticeable shift away from official cultural institutions, with alternative spaces stepping into the foreground. Previously lesser-known collective studios, magazine offices and other non-public-facing venues are now hosting screenings, talks, symposiums and programmes – creating new platforms for discourse and engagement outside the constraints of mainstream institutions. As repressive university spaces continue to cancel speakers, including UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, alternative venues are filling the gap.

**TJD:** Can you cite more specific examples?

**JM:** For instance, Boom – a relatively unknown space – hosted Albanese, despite being a much smaller venue than what the FU [Freie Universität Berlin] could have provided. I previously mentioned Kilmé, which is hosted at Lettrétage,<sup>22</sup> and Spore Initiative. I recently participated in a panel that was relocated to Spore, originally programmed at the Academy of Leipzig. Ironically, the event that was cancelled by the Academy, due to the revamping of my defamation campaign, was part of a lecture series entitled ‘Facing the Authoritarian Drift: Art Schools as Sites of Critique’. The best part of the event was that many students from Leipzig were able to come and participate in the conversations, screenings and discussions.

**TJD:** There’s also Oyouun, the progressive cultural centre in Berlin’s Neukölln, which faced funding cuts last year after refusing to cancel a pro-Palestinian event by Jewish Voice for a Just

---

<sup>21</sup> See the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism: <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org>, accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>22</sup> See the Lettrétage website: <https://www.lettretage.de/en>, accessed 23 April 2025



Peace (whose bank account was frozen). Oyouun also secured the right to appeal the funding withdrawal imposed by Berlin's conservative senator, Joe Chialo (who recently announced his resignation, in May 2025).<sup>23</sup>

**JM:** But once their funding runs out, they will have to shut down too. There are also smaller venues such as KM28 on Karl-Marx-Straße – a modest space hosting concerts, performances and other events for a few years now, and people can just propose programmes and events.<sup>24</sup> Some cafes and bars still host things. Sinema Transtopia have continued screening Palestinian films despite facing funding cuts and political pressure; they have been organising and pushing back for some years now – a rare example of a space that hasn't fully caved in to censorship. Wolf Kino, another small independent cinema, does some good programming, including hosting screenings from the Strike Berlinale counter-festival. Agit is a public residency space in Berlin that has supported those experiencing repression. I'm probably forgetting some places now, but just to say 'yes', there are still hubs.<sup>25</sup>

**TJD:** What about Hopscotch – the progressive bookstore and social project space?<sup>26</sup>

**JM:** Hopscotch has definitely been one of the spots we've gone to for readings – especially readings. They were an active place of gathering at the start of the genocide, hosting a lot of critical and moving events.

**TJD:** Are people organising? What's happening beyond these event spaces?

**JM:** It feels like things have calmed down – people don't have the same energy they did last year. Understandably, many are trying to get back to work after spending seven or eight months doing almost nothing but organising and protesting. A lot of effort went into mobilising, and over the past months, many have shifted back to their own livelihoods. The fault lines have been drawn, in a way.

**TJD:** Is there any kind of artist union or collective effort where artists are joining forces to push back against what's happening?

**JM:** There's an artist union called BBK [*Berufsverband Bildender Künstler*], the umbrella organisation for professional visual artists in Germany, with state and regional associations

---

<sup>23</sup> See the Oyouun: Kultur NeuDenken website: <https://oyoun.de/en>; and James Jackson, 'Germany Is Seizing Jews' Money Again: It's fine, they're pro-Palestine', *Novara Media*, 28 March 2024, <http://novaramedia.com/2024/03/28/germany-is-seizing-jews-money-again>, accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>24</sup> See the KM28 website: [www.km28.de](http://www.km28.de), accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>25</sup> See the Agit website: <https://aaagit.org>, accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>26</sup> See 'Hopscotch Reading Room' in Instagram: [www.instagram.com/hopscotchreadingroom/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/hopscotchreadingroom/?hl=en)

representing over 10,000 artists and advocating for their interests]. They've been relatively solid – mostly because the elected team includes activists who have been pushing back. For example, they were active in the fight against the cultural ministry's attempt to include the IHRA definition in contracts last year. But it's on us as artists to join and make it a more politicised space, and that's happened to a limited extent. There are also a few groups that formed in the fall of 2023 that are still active – some working within the cultural scene, others focusing more on demonstrations and legal support. One group, 3EZWا عَزْوَة, is raising money to cover the costs of legal aid and the fines people are getting slapped with by police under vague accusations of 'supporting terrorist groups' or other forms of Palestine solidarity scapegoating.<sup>27</sup> They have managed to raise around €100,000 so far, mainly through fundraisers, parties and concerts. Arts and Culture Alliance Berlin (ACAB) still monitor what's going on and put out statements and organise within the cultural sphere.<sup>28</sup> So, yes, there are still networks actively pushing back. Strike Germany is still going strong, too. They're not visible all the time, but they mobilise around big events like the Berlinale film festival, putting out statements and guidelines. Another recent initiative is the Association of Palestinian and Jewish Academics.<sup>29</sup> Institutionalising these efforts is key because when it is just individuals carrying the weight, burnout is inevitable. Having some kind of organisational structure helps sustain the energy needed to keep pushing back. Some of these initiatives have turned into more stable collectives, even if they are not fully institutionalised.

**TJD:** Your work – I'm thinking of *Wild Relatives* (2017) and *Foragers* (2022) – has long engaged with these issues, including land-based struggles in Palestine, political ecology, the diaspora of seeds and people, drawing into powerful aesthetic expression an anticolonial sensibility with ecopolitical critique. Given recent events, is the political situation shifting your work as an artist in any ways that you can identify?

**JM:** Over the past year and a half, with fault lines redrawn, many have been radicalised. There has been a shift with regards to audiences and priorities, especially when it comes to which institutions to collaborate with and support, and which to avoid. As for the work itself, it's still difficult to say. For the Hawai'i Triennial, I created a series of banners inspired by the history of the commons and rituals of mass assembly in Palestine, in which handcrafted flags played a prominent role. One of these was the *Nabi Musa* festival, a week-long procession and encampment between Jerusalem and Jericho, and the site of the first anticolonial protests in 1920. Another was *Nabi Rubin*, a month-long festivity on the coast between Gaza and Jaffa.

<sup>27</sup> See 3EZWا عَزْوَة: <https://3ezwa.de>, accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>28</sup> See 'Arts and Culture Alliance Berlin' on The Left Berlin website: [www.theleftberlin.com/arts-and-culture-alliance-berlin](http://www.theleftberlin.com/arts-and-culture-alliance-berlin), accessed 23 April 2025

<sup>29</sup> See the Association of Palestinian and Jewish Academics website: <https://pia-verein.de>, accessed 23 April 2025



Jumana Manna, still from *Foragers*, 2022, courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London



Nabi Musa, boy scouts and flags, photo from the G Eric and Edith Matson photography collection, first published in 1936, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington DC

Lately, I have been drawn to researching histories of joy, celebration and collective gathering in Palestine – probably because that kind of communal festivity feels so unavailable right now. Both festivals, like others across the region, were syncretic, combining folkloric, Islamic, spontaneous and more official rituals, the closest we get to Palestinian carnival, moments of shared movement, song, dance prayer and celebration that was ruptured with the Nakba. I wanted to think the historical festivities and writings from within prison in relation as two forms of liberatory practices that bear within them modes of resilience against communal fracturing, erasures and effacements.

With incarceration becoming such a huge part of our reality – many friends in prison, the constant fear of being taken into ‘administrative detention’ without knowing how long one might stay in there – prison has become an even more present, tangible threat. It has always been a structuring part of Palestinian life, from the era of the British Mandate onwards, but now it is more widespread, the sentences more extreme and the torture and humiliating conditions more brutal, as it cuts across every class, every discipline.

I have been especially drawn to writers like Bassel al-Araj, Walid Daqqa, Layan Kayed, Aisha Odeh, as I mentioned earlier, as well as the work of Palestinian poet and playwright Dalia Taha, who has been attending to and translating Palestinian political prisoners’ writings for years, and Abdul-Rahim al-Shaikh who has been theorising the experience of incarceration. I sense there has been a growing interest in prison literature all around me. With the sheer intensity of our carceral reality, it feels ever more palpable.

The film I’m writing now is focused on this overwhelming sense of entrapment – how to sustain Palestinian sociality in Jerusalem, the city I grew up in and continue to partially live in, under the shadow of genocide and the aggressive Judaisation of the city. The unprecedented scale of destruction in Gaza, and the sheer acceleration of fascist repression across the Western world, has intensified everything. I think about my film *The Magical Substance* – which was also shot mostly in Jerusalem, and if or how I could have made that film today. Back then, in 2015, I filmed Mizrahi Israeli musicians, exploring how Eastern Jewish communities were absorbed into the Zionist project, and how the potential historical alliance between Palestinians and Arab-Jewish communities was lost. As an artist engaged with emancipatory politics, I find those political stakes are still deeply relevant. But could I enter all those homes and offices now?

**TJD:** One last question: has it been a challenge to find aesthetic form to express the sheer extremity of the conditions in which we are living, in which so many are dying and suffering? What is our responsibility as cultural practitioners to the present in this regard?

**JM:** Looking back at the early months of the 2023–24 genocide, there was a deep struggle to find a form that could hold the weight of what we were experiencing. Language could never fully index or do justice to the violence, and no art form felt adequate in the face of





Jumana Manna, still from *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me*, 2016, courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

such extremes. Yet, at some point, there is an obligation to keep creating – because our movement needs films, music, images and stories. Culture has always been part of resistance. We have always known this, but the sheer shock of those months forced us to re-examine the fundamentals. What am I doing? What relevance does it have? How can I continue working and not be part of this complicit world order? Is my work part of the struggle for liberation or simply a circulating product that upholds the liberal order?

It took some time to regain belief and readiness, but today I feel motivated to continue creating – telling stories that honour those we’ve lost but also celebrate the life that remains. Art, films, music – they’re about capturing our daily existence, how we keep going, just like the trees and plants on our land that keep growing, bearing witness, passing on life and knowledge. Vivien Sansour talks about this beautifully in her artwork, which you mentioned in your recent essay on her work and the Gaza situation.<sup>30</sup> She has this powerful way of showing how Palestinians teach life – through land practices in particular, parents teaching children how to plant trees that will one day give shade to the next generation. It’s about survival, continuity, and keeping the dead spiritually alive.

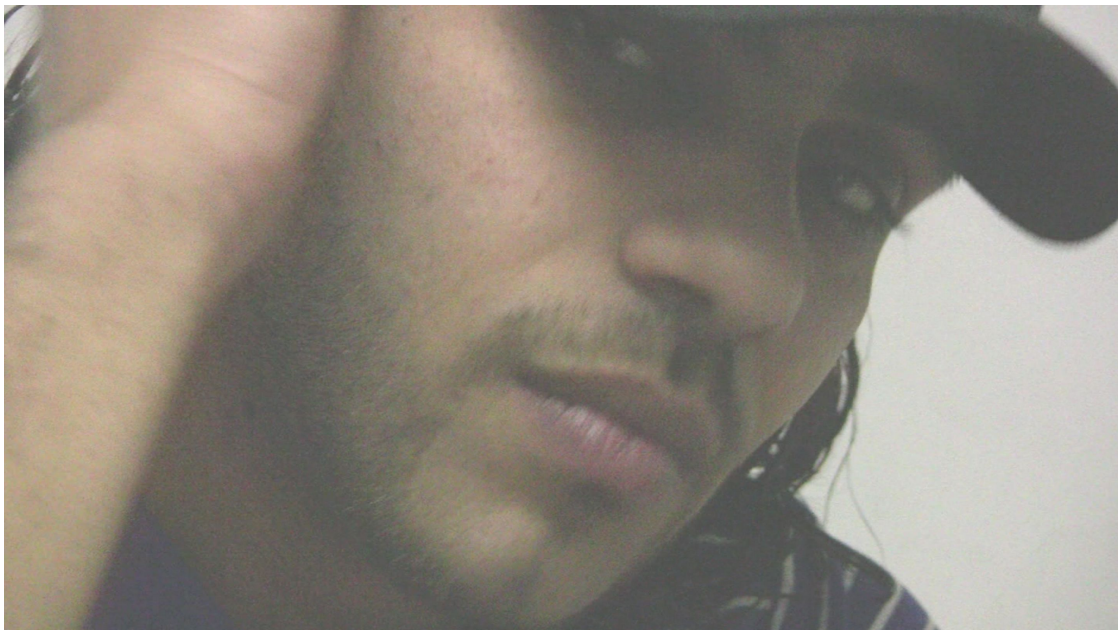
Creative expression in its many forms threads in the long tapestry of persistence and resistance, a way of passing down knowledge, of shaping and reshaping the traditions of the oppressed. We who are born into this predicament are part of this lineage – a living echo of

<sup>30</sup> See [www.viviensansour.com](http://www.viviensansour.com); and T J Demos, ‘Gaza Genocide, Climate Colonialism, and Survival Media: What it would Mean to Repair Loss and Damage’, *Ways of Repair / Loss & Damage Collaboration*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.waysofrepair.com/texts-of-repair-1/gaza-genocide-climate-colonialism-and-survival-media-what-it-would-mean-to-repair-loss-and-damage>, accessed 23 April 2025



histories forged on the land and in exile, in struggle. Like so many before us, from diasporas shaped by slavery and colonialism, we search for form, for language, for seeds to carry these experiences and stories forward. To find a mode of expression for this inheritance is an obligation. It is how we attend to the past and keep it alive, how we bear witness to the present, and how we shape all that remains.

The film I'm working on now takes some of these thoughts as its point of departure and explores how a deep bond with the land endures even when the land itself is taken away. It's about how kinship with animals and plants finds a way to persist, weaving itself into the rhythms of daily life, even in the dense working-class neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem. I'm especially drawn to the social worlds of young men, examining how masculinity navigates and responds to the relentless dehumanisation of Israeli oppression – how tenderness, refusal and defiance take shape in a space where existence as a Palestinian is a minor act of resistance. Western media constantly centres its reporting on women and children, as if the lives of men are somehow disposable. My first film, *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* (2010), focused on Palestinian men, and I find myself returning to questions of masculinity – how it's shaped by the brutal racialisation of boys as young as ten or eleven years old, searched daily by soldiers and police on their way to school.



Jumana Manna, still from *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*, 2010, courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

I'm also exploring how Palestinian sociality takes form in the counter-appropriation of Israeli spaces – how, for example, a shopping mall after hours transforms into a Palestinian gathering space, as Palestinian janitors turn on Arabic music, reclaiming a site of Israeli consumerism in the quiet of the night. These scenes of presence and remaining – quotidian yet profound – exist within a dystopian reality of surveillance and control, yet they sustain a culture of refusal, teaching resistance through the very act of continuing to find refuge in community, living as

Palestinians, even when the material structures that we are forced to build, study in or work for are those of the Occupation.

**TJD:** Will it be feature length, like your recent films?

**JM:** Yes, and hopefully out in 2027.

**TJD:** Many thanks, Jumana. I really look forward to it.

**JM:** Thank you.

---

*This interview took place on 14 March 2025, on Zoom, and was subsequently edited for length and clarity.*

---

**T J Demos** is Professor and Chair in the Department of the History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Director of its Center for Creative Ecologies, and Distinguished Visiting Professor in the VIAD Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg. He writes widely on the intersection of visual culture, radical politics and political ecology – particularly where it opposes racial and colonial capitalism. He is a member of the Editorial Board of **Third Text**.