

PALETTEN

The background of the cover is a painting. It depicts a man in a dark, textured suit and a light-colored shirt, holding a rifle. He stands in a landscape with mountains in the background, some with snow. There are trees with yellow and orange foliage. In the foreground, there are several other figures: a woman with long red hair in a dark dress, a woman in a red dress, and a woman in a white headscarf. The style is expressive and somewhat abstract, with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette.

Art and Contemporary Fascism?

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The Noise of History

Gabriel Bogossian

Since Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023 and the Israeli regime's genocidal campaign, *Paletten* has reflected on what this means for art and society. The most visible consequences have unfolded in Germany. Here, Gabriel Bogossian instead turns to Austria. Moving between a historical episode and the present, he reads the art scene in Vienna against a wider political horizon of cultural censorship in light of Gaza. Rather than offering clear answers, he asks what role art can take in a moment shaped by pressure, fear, and conflict, and what remains possible within these limits.

In November 1889, six days before the military coup that would depose the Brazilian emperor and establish a republic in the country, the monarch hosted a gala known as the "Fiscal Island Ball". The intent was to celebrate the Empire against republican conspiracies and to project power in a moment of frailty; instead, the event went down in history as "The Last Ball of the Empire" – a symptom of the alienation of the aristocratic elites ruling the country.

September 2025, and walking around the main art spaces in Vienna in the context of the *Curated By* festival has a bit of a "last ball" flavour, with most shows ignoring the turbulence of History, past and present.¹ The sound of music at this Viennese ball of sorts effectively overshadowing any noise coming from the outside. This time, the noise was not from political changes in a peripheral nation of the global South, but the economic, military and territorial re-ordering of the world initiated by far-right governments.

The greatest noise was being produced in Gaza. In light of the death toll and scale of material destruction, it was already clear that ethnic cleansing was happening.² Demonstrations against it have been

AARC ARCHIVE THE ARCHIVE OF AUSTRIAN REPRESSION AND COMPLICITY

The AARC Archive. Courtesy: Dusty Whistles.

organized globally alongside flotillas and other aid initiatives to Palestinians, boycotts to Israeli companies and cultural presence, and even petitions signed by celebrities of the western cultural industry. Gaza was everywhere, but not in Vienna.

The quietness was partially the result of censorship. Austrian art and academic institutions have been following their US, UK, and German counterparts in silencing even minor statements of support for Palestinians in cultural events and academic debates. It was as if these statements were being placed in the realm of the obscene³ – that which cannot be said in the open scene of public debates in the streets, universities, or art shows. The expression of solidarity became not only a crime, but something disturbing, that could threaten professional positions if said openly.

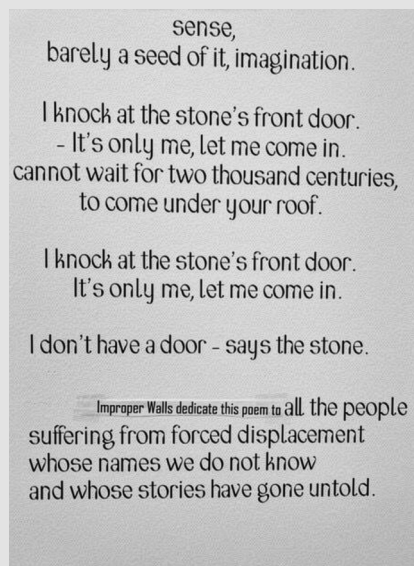
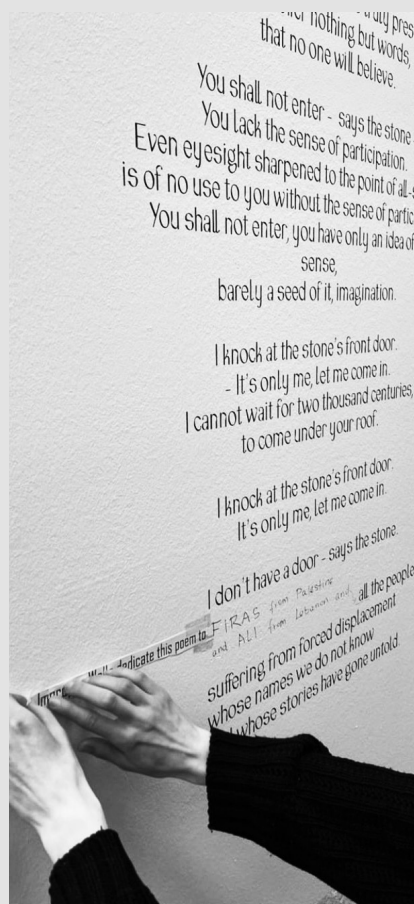
Among the numerous examples catalogued by the AARC Archive – The Archive of Austrian Repression and Complicity,⁴ organized by the artist Dusty Whistles, three are illustrative of the intention to discipline both artists and the public debate. Nour Shantout, a Syrian-Palestinian PhD candidate and artist, was fired in October 2024 by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna

for reposting a story on Instagram, consequently losing her scholarship. Shantout sued the University and regained her position later.

Rabyya Naseer had her solo show at Belvedere 21 converted into a retrospective by the institution under the pretext that the four proposals presented by the artist were “too difficult” or “too pro-Palestinian” to realize. The show was ultimately cancelled. Also at Belvedere 21, the crossed-out fragment in the text “~~Dedicated to Firas from Palestine and Ali from Lebanon, and all the people suffering from forced displacement whose names we do not know and whose stories have gone untold~~”, part of an installation by Joanna Zabielska, Zosia Hołubowska, and Alma Bektas in collaboration with Improper Walls in 2023, was summarily erased by the institution and replaced with “Improper Walls dedicate this poem to”. The artists and Improper Walls, the independent art space curating the section where the work was, remade the erased text and protested during the opening, closing access to the work and explaining to the audience what happened. The following day they ended their participation and dismantled the work.

Censorship produces a noise of its own kind. It does not only bar public debate on the Palestinian issue, but obscures the relationship between institutions and their audiences, as well as with the artistic community. Having occurred, it becomes legitimate to ask if exhibitions of queer artists at Belvedere 21 are not merely a form of queer-washing. Viewed through the often problematic power dynamics between different actors in the art field, it exposes the disproportionate influence of the patronage practiced by public and private players. Considering that the entire art system is based on artistic production, the numerous cases of censorship could be a good excuse to put in debate the governance of these institutions – at least the public ones – making artistic freedom not only a pact that can be suspended but a statutory commitment.

But in the face of all this noise – genocide in Gaza, censorship and violent repression



The dedication of Zabielska, Hołubowska, and Bektas' work erased and remade. Courtesy: Improper Walls.

all over – it is also worth asking what role art professionals and institutions wish to play: to be guests at the ball, or to disturb the chorus of those content with the current state of things. This is an ethical question with political unfoldings. It does not mean projecting a political hope onto art professionals, institutions and their practices. I do not believe we can resist the erosion of the public sphere by ourselves, not only because we are highly sensitive to economic and political pressures, but because this is a political, not artistic, matter; our agency is limited.

But art might still speak of the obscene and challenge the politics of fear that fuels far-right agendas. Political battles will not be won in exhibition spaces, but there is a landscape of political affects to be contested; and without wanting to sound too much like a proselytizer, there is always room for this exercise of political imagination that conceiving futures is.

The ominous voice haunting this text, however, reminds us that recognizing a positive field for action does not mean that acting is simple and will necessarily take us somewhere. The voice says more: that artists and institutions do not share moral standards, let alone a political agenda; that censorship is actually one of the songs being played at the ball, a reminder that power within the art system has never been shared; that public institutions are managed by a state that never abandons its role as the political instrument of a ruling class. Tolerance for dissonant positions in western democracies is narrowing, but was never generous in the first place – as evidenced by the histories of suffragists, labour unions, and anti-racist movements.

The positive field of action is littered with mines, the voice concludes. It concedes however that history has no predetermined direction and that our destiny is not decided, contrary to the claims of the various strains of accelerationists – as much as the ball will go on, our future is, against all odds, open; and most certainly will be noisy.⁵

1 This of course was a general observation. The group shows *The Silence of the Volcano*, curated by Andrea Ancira, and *A Piece of Our Life in Each Yellow Nugget*, curated by the artist duo doplgenger, among few other examples, dealt with the background noise.

2 As a United Nations report stated, four of the five genocidal acts defined under international law have been perpetrated.

3 From Latin *obscaenus* “ill-omened or abominable”, according to the Oxford Dictionary.

4 See @aarc.archive on Instagram. Accessed March 20th, 2026.

5 This text is part of the cooperation between *Paletten Art Journal* and the residency program *Visiting Critics Vienna 2025*, organised by the Vienna-based arts organisation *Verein K – Kunst, Kultur, Kritik*.