

Refusing Epistemic Violence: Guernica-Gaza and the 'German Context'



Eltiqaa, Mohammed Al Hawajri, Pause for a Nap – Jean-François Millet (1865), 2010–13. Courtesy the artist

Essay

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Departing from the exhibition presented at documenta fifteen by the Palestinian collectives The Question of Funding and Eltiqaa, Hanan Toukan dissects the institutional contradictions that beset their reception in

Germany, and reads the latter as ‘a site of epistemic violence against cultural workers from Palestine and their allies’ carried out in the name of the country’s post-Holocaust cultural politics.

In December 2023, the Palestinian contemporary art collective behind Eltiqaa Gallery reported that their exhibition space, situated on what was until recently the thriving Omar Al-Mukhtar street in downtown Gaza City, and all the artworks it housed, had been destroyed by an Israeli military airstrike. Known locally in Gaza and amongst the Palestinian art scene simply as Eltiqaa (literally translating into ‘meeting’ in Arabic), the building that housed the art centre is today, along with Gaza’s other contemporary art space Shababeek, one of over two hundred art and cultural sites destroyed by Israeli airstrikes. [01](#)

At this point in Israel’s now eight-month genocidal war on the Palestinian people, every university in Gaza has been destroyed, in full or in part, along with over 350 schools, educational institutions, cultural centres and public libraries. [02](#) This destruction has also included the lethal targeting of countless scholars, intellectuals, poets and artists, as well as journalists, amounting to what has now been recognised by the UN as scholasticide. [03](#) The ruination of art, knowledge, heritage and the memories they hold cannot simply be reduced to a logic of collateral damage in a necessary war to root out Hamas. They are part and parcel of a larger and much longer recorded historical assault on Palestinian archives, memories, knowledge production, intellectual labour and artistic creation. [04](#)

In her 1988 essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak first formulated the concept of epistemic violence to designate the systematic process through which colonised and subaltern social groups are prevented from formulating their own epistemologies, as the latter are deemed inferior or unreliable; thus, they are denied the right and ability to express themselves on their own terms. The conceptualisation of epistemic violence went further with the work of black feminist philosopher Kristie Dobson who outlined the idea of dominant ‘hearers’ who refuse to meet marginalised speakers on common epistemic ground. [05](#) What Dobson calls ‘reliable ignorance’ can be understood as a utilitarian and strategic will to ensure that members of oppressed groups remain unheard or, I would add here, misunderstood. Building on these ideas, Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has introduced the concept of ‘epistemicide’ to describe the actual ‘destruction’ or ‘death’ of what he refers to as ‘knowledges’, whether historical or cultural. [06](#) In recent years, the work of countless other scholars writing on colonialism, neocolonialism and

knowledge production has been framed through these concepts. ⁰⁷ It is no surprise then that 'epistemicide' has been invoked in recent months as a hermeneutic to make sense of what is currently happening in Palestine and its reverberations in Western institutions of culture and knowledge production. ⁰⁸ Yet to speak of epistemicide as an event occurring only within the context of the current ' Hamas-Israel' war is to deny both the protracted nature of the attempt to erase the Palestinian existence in Palestine, at least since the 1948 Nakba, and the ways in which such erasure extends outwards to other countries, especially in the West.

In recent months dissenting voices against the indiscriminate Israeli military onslaught of Gaza in retaliation for the attacks by Hamas on 7 October have been stifled in various ways, when not outright criminalised, across art and educational institutions throughout the Global North. In this context, Germany has quickly come to be identified as one of the most egregious cases of the practice of cancelling, de-platforming, silencing and even intimidating academics, artists and activists that are either Palestinian or have spoken up against what is happening in Palestine. Their demands for a space of critical inquiry have been promptly met with spurious accusations of being hateful, violent, antisemitic, undemocratic, un-European and illiberal. ⁰⁹ Yet, this trend in Germany, and to a lesser extent elsewhere in the West, is far from new. It has been increasingly normalised in the German public sphere through systematic governmental clampdowns and media campaigns against artists, scholars and activists vocal on Israeli Apartheid and the illegal military occupation of Palestinian land, and through a 2019 vote by the German parliament that has defined BDS (Boycott, Divest and Sanction) as antisemitic. ¹⁰ As we shall see, Germany has a vested interest in marginalising, if not entirely reversing, the Palestinian historical narrative by imposing epistemic authorities that penetrate deep into the heart of institutions of knowledge production in the arts, media and education. This enduring form of slow institutional epistemic violence of Palestinian knowledge is deemed acceptable because it doesn't manifest with the extreme physical violence that we currently see unfolding in Gaza. But, as I argue here, it is needed to enable the final stage of violence against knowledge and people that is occurring on the ground. They exist in a continuum. For epistemicide to materialise the international system of weapons transfers to Israel and a protracted war of 'self-defence' driven by an eliminatory logic need to be accepted and normalised by those societies funding the wars. Hence, a certain level of epistemic violence in global institutions of knowledge and cultural production has to exist to fuel the logic of dehumanisation, racialisation and stereotyping that has long been part and parcel of the Palestinian experience. ¹¹ In other words, military domination cannot occur without cultural exclusion, as the latter justifies the former.

Back in the summer of 2022, Mohammed Al Hawajri, a Palestinian artist from Gaza and one of the seven founding members of Eltiqaa, got a taste of this kind of

normalised and customary epistemic violence when he found himself propelled into the treacherous terrain of Germany's *feuilletons* – the pages of its so-called 'intellectual' reporting on all high-culture and art matters. ¹² Together with other members of the Eltiqaa collective, Al Hawajri had been invited to show his work as part of the contribution by Palestinian art collective The Question of Funding (TQOF) to documenta, the world-renowned quinquennial exhibition of contemporary art taking place in Kassel, Germany. For its fifteenth edition in 2022, the Supervisory Board had appointed the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa as artistic directors, following a unanimous nomination by the International Finding Committee. With the exception of one iteration by late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, since its foundation in 1955, all editions of documenta had been presided over by a European curator, even if they had increasingly opened up to exhibit artists from the Arab world and the Global South more generally from the 1990s onwards.

If the appointment of a non-European artist collective was a clear departure from the norm of commissioning European curators, documenta fifteen also broke new grounds with ruangrupa's decision to focus on art collectives from all over the Global South. Through a decentralised artistic curation based on the Indonesian concept of *lumbung* (or rice barn), their approach was based on principles of collectivity, resource building and equal sharing, with collectives invited to invite other collectives and so on. Rather than simply exploring the consequences of colonialism, capitalist exploitation and racism thematically through the works of a multitude of art collectives, this curatorial strategy was meant to propose different ways of working and exhibiting the often-collective processes involved in the making of art as jointly held in the commons, rather than as a finished object of art. However, the appointment of ruangrupa proved to be a contradictory move for the German institution: while documenta has built a reputation for being edgy and experimental, it is still an institution deeply steeped in the Western art world culture of top-down curatorial propositions, governed and fully funded by the German bureaucracy. This contradiction manifested as a site of epistemic violence against cultural workers from Palestine and their allies in the Global South that was enabled and weaponised in the name of a form of German cultural sovereignty based on an exclusive notion of the national past as defined by collective guilt and the need for atonement. In fact, when Al Hawajri unveiled in this context his series of collages titled *Guernica-Gaza* (2010–13), he set off a public storm of moral panic, incitement and indeed racism towards Palestinians in the name of this shared national past and the atonement culture that dominates the present. As part of this process the very reality of living under military occupation and formalised racial segregation was dismissed and strategically conflated with the German history of antisemitism. When uncovered, the story of Al Hawajri's participation in documenta and the outrage it provoked reveals not only a site of epistemic violence but also the ways in which such violence can be countered, rejected and ultimately undone.



Eltiqaa gallery, Gaza City. Courtesy Mohammed Al Hawajri.

MAKING ART IN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATIONS

To the extent that it is known outside of Palestine, Eltiqaa has today become associated with the art collective The Question of Funding and the ‘scandal of antisemitism’ at documenta fifteen, but its portfolio goes way back. Since it was founded by seven local artists in 2002 and until its physical destruction late last year, Eltiqaa remained, along with Shababeek, one of the two main informally organised meeting spaces for young contemporary artists in Gaza. Not only did Eltiqaa offer a gallery space for local artists to exhibit their work, but also free studio spaces and mentorship programmes for aspiring artists that matched them up with their more experienced peers and gave them an opportunity to understand how the ‘art world’ functions and to learn new skills. With its bustling energy, the space was also known and highly regarded for contributing to empower the local public to think about what art can do and, more generally, to enhance the intellectual artistic community.

Artists from Gaza have always had few, if any, opportunities available compared to artists in the Occupied West Bank or indeed anywhere else. After the 2006 takeover of Gaza by Hamas and the ensuing stifling decades-long economic blockade of the Strip imposed by Israel, material for artists – such as the most basic paint, paintbrushes and

canvas – became even more scarce. As a collective Eltiqaa were forced into a malleable model of art responsive to and indeed shaped by the economic strangulation that Gazans had been subjected to for years before the events of 7 October. This model of responding to economic strangulation and dependency was the subject of TQOF's contribution to documenta fifteen.

The collaboration between Eltiqaa and TQOF emerged as part of an already ongoing conversation between the two collectives about what it means to work in the economic margins of the so-called 'contemporary art world', such as in the West Bank and even more in Gaza. Formed in 2019, TQOF are themselves a collective of cultural producers and community organisers from Palestine who seek to question, debate and find alternatives to the constrictive international funding models on which Palestinian cultural institutions continue to depend, particularly since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. ¹³ Much has already been written about the debilitating and depoliticising effects of the NGO-isation process sponsored by international aid to the region – a process that has led to what is described by Palestinians as the collapse of the national liberation project. With globalisation and international cultural markets becoming the norm as elsewhere, artists and their institutions have not only been forced to readdress their role in the politics of the region and the transnational networks they need in order to survive, but also to present Palestine's plight and make contributions to critical global conversations in arts and activism more broadly. Responding to the long-term effects of this predicament, both Eltiqaa and TQOF were interested in how value can be generated by the sources that already exist in the locked-up situation of Gaza and how a system that is non-competitive can be created to source and create art in a more sustainable and less dependent fashion.

In the context of documenta fifteen, TQOF presented a two-part contribution: the proposition of a communal economic model called Dayra (Arabic for 'circle' or 'circling'), based on blockchain technologies and meant to replace Palestinian dependence on international funding; and an exhibition co-curated with Eltiqaa that sought to learn from the economic models of self-sustenance pioneered by the latter. This exhibition explored how one can produce, document, accumulate and disseminate resources and knowledge about cultural practices under conditions of coloniality, where the systems of power in place presuppose a racialised hierarchical order based on Eurocentric understandings of what are considered acceptable forms of knowledge. ¹⁴ Coloniality here refers not just to the broad colonial ideologies and structural asymmetries still present in the global system of contemporary art exhibitions, but also to the specific Palestinian context as defined by Israeli settler-colonial practices of land dispossession, ethnic cleansing, military domination and cultural exclusion.

Supported by an architecture of bureaucratic hurdles and procedures, the Israeli Occupation employs a carefully designed system of legalised, institutionalised and

normalised racial discrimination (or apartheid) to debilitate the freedom of movement of objects, people and ideas that any artistic or cultural institutions of knowledge production requires in order to function. ¹⁵ It was the intricacies of how cultural producers and specifically artists living in Gaza creatively navigate their way around the banality of such everyday military violence that TQOF and Eltiqaa arguably wanted to highlight in their contribution to documenta fifteen. As curator and artist Yazan Khalili, one of the members of TQOF who invited Eltiqaa, asks: 'Can there be apolitical art produced in this context? Were they [Eltiqaa] creating political or apolitical art? Can apolitical art even come out of a place like Gaza?' ¹⁶

The most glaring aspect of the two artist collectives' contributions was how much the Palestinian predicament, and the systematic violence undergone by Gazan artists in particular, represent an intense microcosm of some of the most gripping challenges of our time: including global migration and labour flows, the movement of refugees and their (lack of) human rights, the securitisation of states and the violence of illegitimately constructed borders and walls. This rich body of knowledge, painstakingly excavated through interviews and conversations with artists about how they survive under the twin effects of colonialism and global capitalism in the twenty-first century, was displayed as a process-focussed exhibition, meticulously documenting a detailed art history of Gaza. This included the financial flows of art sales, the training and education of artists in an almost impossible predicament, the Gaza blockade and its effect on artists' access to artistic material, the representation of Palestinian art in Euro-American exhibition spaces, artists' personal stories of border crossing and survival, and so much more. In that sense, the part of TQOF's contribution that focussed on Eltiqaa's history shifted the positioning of Eltiqaa's artists from *narrators* of history to *producers* of knowledge by presenting their works, methodologically speaking, as context-driven, problem-focussed and interdisciplinary in nature. They moved beyond simply narrating the Palestinian predicament of living under Israeli colonial rule to *demonstrating* and *sharing* the kind of knowledge that is produced under conditions of coloniality.





The Question of Funding hosts Eltiqa, 2022, installation view at documenta fifteen, WH22, Kassel, 15 June 2022. Photo: Hanan Toukan

Mohammed Al Hawajri presented five works from his series *Guernica-Gaza*: photomontages of iconic paintings from European modern art history (by Eugène Delacroix, Jean-François Millet, Marc Chagall, Vincent van Gogh and Pablo Picasso), juxtaposed with real-life images of Israeli violence. In the latter, Israeli soldiers or bombs are depicted as threatening a peaceful, mostly pastoral landscape and its people. The works are part of a larger cycle created between 2010 and 2013 – a period that saw several episodes of Israeli bombing and wars. ¹⁷ In the extensive text accompanying these works in the exhibition, Al Hawajri reflected in detail on what it means to live and work as an artist in Gaza and reports on the conditions under which work is produced: '[...] due to the political circumstances, one cannot simply paint flowers, but must also reflect on the surrounding reality.' Almost anticipating the attacks he would receive, TQOF displayed a large text panel adjacent to Al Hawajri's works explaining how he and his fellow artists knew that a 'political meaning will always be projected on to their work, regardless of whether they intended it or not: That is how the "Other" sees them, as political bodies from a politically charged area.'

For those interested in and well acquainted with the entanglements of the history of modernity and colonialism, Al Hawajri's juxtaposed images, read alongside his text exhibited in large format, can be easily understood as an attempt to grapple with the lived reality of Israeli state violence in the form of the illegal blockade imposed on the movement of people and goods in the Gaza Strip since the Hamas takeover in 2007 and the ways it intrudes on everyday life. Simultaneously, they can be seen as an attempt to engage the ironies of the supposedly universal humanism intrinsic to modern European art, as the artist has been taught. In his own words:

Guernica-Gaza is a project consisting of several paintings by famous international artists such as Picasso, Dalí, Van Gogh, Chagall and others. They all left us an important cultural heritage over the last two centuries. Through their paintings, we can discover how they lived, as well as their society and

history. It is in this sense that I would like to introduce my project, in which I present these famous paintings in a contemporary way. I respect and keep their style while adding my own contemporary touch. The reality has changed: daily life, the social, political and economic environments are not the same. This directly and indirectly impacts our creativity, which is what I show in my paintings. [18](#)

As if in premonition of what was to come and indeed as the ongoing war on Gaza continues to show, the liberal universalist claims of defence of human rights and equal justice for all indeed exclude the Palestinian people. When placed within the larger context of TQOF's aims to highlight what it means to make art locally in Palestine, by curating the work of a collective of primarily local painters and narrating their history of funding, as well as by introducing the idea of a supplementary local economy, Hawajri's explanatory texts take on new meaning. In both form and content, the paintings move from representation to decolonised forms of knowledge production that employ a transformative praxis to question the very hierarchies and structures that have conventionally framed the Palestinian as either victim or terrorist, but never as a knowledge producer who can question whether Palestinians can indeed belong to a universal history.

Accordingly, Khalili, as the main curator of Al Hawajri's documenta installation, asks: 'Can the Palestinian belong to a universal history? I don't want to speak on behalf of Mohammad Al Hawajri, but, from our discussions, I understand the whole series to be about looking at Eurocentric art and trying to ask how it works in contemporary contexts outside Europe. Whether we like it or not, European art has become universal; it is the art that we all look at.' [19](#)

Needless to say, all the timely and urgent questions about what kind of aesthetics can be produced under the pressures of neoliberal capital and racialised military domination and how this may impact one's experience of modernity and violence, predictably flew right over the heads of the so-called German cultured literati, proving exactly the point Al Hawajri may have been trying to make all along. The direct engagement with Western Europe's conception of 'Universal History' is not only an instance of Al Hawajri 'speaking back to the empire' within the confines of the exhibition curated by TQOF for documenta. It is equally an intellectual intervention to undo epistemic violence in the very site – *documenta fifteen in Kassel* – that not only has its own connections to the history of Nazi-related violence, [20](#) but during an edition that was also, ironically, giving a platform to artists in the Global South so that they may represent themselves on their own terms. The intervention itself came in the form and content of a project that framed and presented the intricate histories and archives collected and accumulated to show what ordinary life in Gaza entails. The knowledge accumulated (facts, information and skills) was not only about Gaza's

economy of production, but also about the survival of the human spirit in the most atrocious circumstances.



Eltiqaa, Mohammed Al Hawajri, Harvesters Resting – Jean-François Millet (1850), 2010–13. Courtesy the artist

VIOLENCE AND THE 'GERMAN CONTEXT'

The reaction of the German media to Al Hawajri's five collages was predictably, and perhaps, strategically off the mark. Art historian Andreas Mertin complained in the *Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine* about his dichotomous depictions:

The source material for Mohammed al Hawajri's respective works are famous masterpieces of European art history, not randomly selected ones, but always those that strive for humanity and humanism in a specific way. Mohammed al Hawajri takes them up, strips them of their humanitarian character, deconstructs them and turns them into their opposite: the masters of war (the Jews) penetrate the masters of art... Mohammed al Hawajri not only misuses the artists' works, he also turns the great libertarian, liberal and tolerance-oriented narratives of Judaism and Christianity into their opposite. You just have to see it, it is terribly obvious. [21](#)

Others seemed bothered by a 'mediocre collage' that draws a 'crude analogy between the extermination of the population in the Spanish town of Guernica and Israel's settlement policy'. [22](#) Others still described the series as a perpetrator-victim reversal: 'The *Guernica-Gaza* cycle by Mohammed Al Hawajri distorts the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and demonises Israel.' [23](#) Even art historians specialising in antiquity had strong opinions about that one aspect of TQOF's contribution

If the picture [*Harvesters Resting – Jean-François Millet (1850)*] itself speaks an unambiguous language, which is not even picked up by the flimsy accompanying texts, the name of the series 'Guernica Gaza' is nothing less than a mockery of the Jewish dead of the Second World War: equating the extermination of the Basque city by the National Socialists with the military operations in the Gaza Strip ascribes to the Israeli army the role of the Wehrmacht, thus comparing the state of Israel that commands it with Hitler's Reich. Picasso can no longer defend himself against this perverted instrumentalisation of 'Guernica'; he is audibly spinning in his grave. [24](#)

The primary point of contention for the German critics was the title, *Guernica-Gaza*, a reference to Picasso's famous anti-war painting and clearly the only thing they seemed to have taken away from the piece: a title they read as making an equation between the actions of the Israeli Army and the National Socialists. [25](#) Yes, Al Hawajri's work depicted bomb blasts which could be interpreted as Israeli airstrikes in Gaza, and yes, he chose Picasso's *Guernica* as the title of his series and as one of the artists whose work he borrowed from. But Al Hawajri didn't choose this title because he intended to make a parallel between the National Socialists and the Israeli Army, even if one could interpret elements of the work in that way. In reality, Al Hawajri's work is part of a genealogy of Arab Art that has drawn on Picasso's work, for the most part of the twentieth century. From the Art and Liberty surrealist group in 1930s Egypt, to Dia Al-Azzawi's epic painting *Sabra and Shatila Massacre* (1982–83) which has often been compared to Picasso's *Guernica* in its depiction of yet another massacre presided over by the Israeli Army and who was himself nicknamed the 'Picasso of Iraq'; from Iraqi artists like Jewad Selim (1919–61) and Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925–2004) who called Picasso the 'artist of this age' in their 1951 manifesto, to contemporary artists working today like Khaled Hourani's well-known *Picasso in Palestine* (2011), Picasso has inspired, moved and shaped the work of generations of Arab artists experimenting with Arabic calligraphy, animals and symbols to represent mass atrocities and, ultimately, the pursuit of freedom. [26](#) Needless to say, the reductive reading of the analogy Al Hawajri seemed to be making between the abstract depiction of Nazi bombings in 1937 *Guernica* and Israeli air raids on Palestinians was the provincial and uninformed framing that prevailed amongst many of Germany's critics and which then distorted any other possible interpretation of the work.

At the time of the opening of documenta fifteen and in the years leading up to it, already pervasive existential anxieties around German identity in the era of migration and globalisation translated into aggressive claims of cultural authenticity, an exclusive narrative of Germany's history of violence centred on the Holocaust and oblivious to the country's colonial horrors in Africa, and imaginaries of an unfettered cultural sovereignty amidst growing recession and the rise of far-right movements. In this context, the very idea of Palestine, the Palestinians and, ironically, especially their

Jewish supporters were deemed – by their mere presence – to be a threat to the so-called ‘culture of remembrance’ in Germany: the official policy of confronting Nazi-era crimes through acknowledging responsibility for the Holocaust. [27](#)

But the Palestinian ‘question’ had in fact first appeared forcefully on German streets in the early 2000s with the beginning of the Second Intifada, when Palestinians and their supporters protested Israeli annexation threats and the continued building of illegal settlements in the West Bank in contravention of the Oslo Accords. Yet, in the post-9/11 environment, a shift could be detected in how Western European countries dealt with the Palestinians and their claims for equality and sovereignty. This shift was consolidated by two new phenomena. First, the European Union, with Germany at its head, declared the Holocaust a post-national European heritage and renewed its commitment to national memorialisation as a way of consolidating a liberal body politic aiming at atoning for past crimes after the end of the Cold War. Second, the global war on terror targeted Middle Eastern migrant communities by framing them as ‘Muslim’ threats more generally. Surveillance measures, including disciplinary measures targeting speech about Israeli aggressions against Palestinians, were subsequently institutionalised as a form of combating ‘Muslim antisemitism’ in Germany. [28](#)



Top: Eltiqaa, Mohammed Al Hawajri, Liberty Leading the People – Eugène Delacroix (1830), 2010–13. Courtesy the artist

It is no secret that Germany’s relationship to Palestinian liberation and history is often framed in terms of the country’s own genocidal past and its consequent proximity to Israel as the homeland of the Holocaust survivors whose lives it wrecked and whose present it seeks to ameliorate today. Scholar of genocide and political scientist Dirk Moses recently coined the term ‘Catechism Debate’ (2021) to describe Germany’s self-constructed take on its genocidal history and its aftereffects. This term is crucial in thinking about the public and media (non)reactions to Al Hawajri’s work. According to Moses, the German Catechism is founded on the belief that the Holocaust, according

to the state's official 'memory culture', stands as the unsurpassed instantiation of evil in the history of humanity. This has meant that, in its demonstration of remorse, Germany has had to maintain a special loyalty to Israel and a dogmatic take on atonement – as described in the official term *Staatsraison* (or reason of state). ²⁹ This loyalty translates into a remembrance culture that the German state uses as a site to think through its post-Holocaust identity drawing a stark line between two memories of violence: one European and one 'other' (e.g. Syrian, Afghani, Iraqi, Armenian, Ukrainian or Palestinian). All Germans of non-German descent are seen as a potential threat to this post-Holocaust identity precisely because they cannot partake in that shared national heritage of guilt: that agreed-upon authentic experience that embodies what it means to be German. For Germany then, the mere existence of the Palestinians is regarded as an existential threat to Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state and the Zionist dream on which it was founded – and therefore as a threat to Germany's own post-Holocaust top-down politics of guilt and atonement. In this process, Holocaust memorialisation and the unconditional support for Israel, and, by extension, the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, have been purposefully and strategically encouraged. On the other hand, Palestine, the Palestinians and their friends have been painted as the real enemy of the German state, even if officially they are a mere footnote to the larger entangled history of Germany and Israel. The absence of memory on Palestine – generally normalised in German academic and social sensibilities, and institutionalised memory practices – explains why the Palestinian question is deemed a highly offensive distraction to the country's political establishment and regime of intellectual thought.

But this premise – that German national healing is inextricably tied to supporting systemic Israeli violence – has come increasingly under attack. Especially since 2018, these criticisms have become progressively well-articulated and more visible, voiced by a growing group of intersectional social justice activists, scholars, public intellectuals and artists of all backgrounds, including, most alarmingly for the German political and cultural establishment, a very visible Jewish-Palestinian alliance critical of Zionism, part of a larger global solidarity movement for Palestinian human rights. ³⁰ When, in 2015, former chancellor Angela Merkel uttered the famous words 'Wir Schaffen Das' (we can do this), it wasn't anticipated that the 1.5 million refugees resettling in the country would at the same time usher in a class of relatively more empowered, well-connected, vocal and highly educated activists, students, artists, writers, feminists, poets, public intellectuals, musicians and scholars not only from Syria but the entirety of the Muslim-majority world and other Global South contexts. Many refugees also came from a long line of Third World activism that regards Palestine as a metaphor for so many neocolonial struggles that have animated their own countries, leading them to violent revolutions against the status-quo. Hence, for this group of displaced migrants and self-exiled Arabs forced to make new lives in Germany, global revolutionary thought and praxis offered a way to interrogate all constructed nationalisms and the state security apparatuses that defend them, whatever their

geographical location. These new ways of seeing and being in the world are intricately bound up with larger movements for justice like Black Lives Matter, Decolonize This Place, the fight for climate justice and other causes against state violence and oppressions, not just across the Atlantic but in Europe, Africa and Asia too. This list now includes the global Free Palestine movement formed in the wake of the ongoing war on the Palestinian people of Gaza.

Against the backdrop of top-down memory construction and identity-making, German cultural institutions wishing to carve a space in the global contemporary artworld and participate in its postcolonial turn, have given a platform to voices which are critical of Eurocentrism, imperial epistemes, colonial violence and the history of scientific racism – the legacies of which migrant communities still encounter in their daily lived-realities in Germany today. Since the 1990s, Germany, the country that leads the world in federal and local cultural funding for the arts, has heavily relied on the exchange and travel of ideas inspired by the postcolonial turn and often coming from artists and intellectuals located in and/or linked to global majority countries in the South – artists and intellectuals who regard the occupation of Palestine as one of the last remaining colonial fronts. The reliance on Global South connected artists and intellectuals contributed to and indeed safeguarded the country and especially Berlin's international reputation as a tolerant, trendy and experimental site of global postcolonial artistic production as part of the capital's self-reinvention process since Germany's reunification. Yet, this opening to the postcolonial Global South came into contradiction with the imperative of excluding Palestine, and providing justification for it, because of the supposed existential threat it poses to German post-Holocaust memory and atonement culture – a paradox which exploded in the summer of 2022 with the fifteenth edition of documenta.

The 'German Context' is the term often employed, sometimes nonchalantly, by intellectuals and members of the public, to excuse the German people's obvious silence and conformity on the question of equal rights for all when it comes to Israel's colonisation of Palestinians. The resort to this term as a quick fix explanation for the very specific challenge that confronts especially German intellectuals employed as civil servants in universities and cultural institutions, who by virtue of their positions should take a critical stand toward abuses of state power and the curtailment of human rights, is a phenomenon shaped and reinforced by a complex bureaucratic network of cultural, educational and sociopolitical norms, regulations and laws. Together these fields strategically obscure the Palestinian experience of subjugation in the name of atonement for the German past by supporting Israel today. They not only enable but also justify the effacement of the Palestinian reality of occupation and the systematic history of erasure to which they have been subjected, physically on the land and epistemically in institutions of knowledge and cultural production. As such, this self-identified and self-granted state of exceptionalism that is the 'German Context' is

unproblematically and arbitrarily employed to cover racist assumptions and perpetrator-guilt in the name of the state's cultural sovereignty against supposed 'threats' to its national interests, namely atonement for the past. Significantly, the term is also employed to explain away the need to do the real work of collective reckoning with the recent past, which should include not only viewing Palestinians as the indirect victims of Germany's genocidal past alongside the Israelis, but also acknowledging their present reality of living under Israeli military control and the fact that they should not be made to pay for Germany's past crimes.

Yet, Germany's self-understanding that it has a special 'context' which the rest of the world should understand, and which was indeed accepted by the international community including Arab states and their populations for the most part of the last 75 years, is now less and less tolerated. This can be seen most clearly in the police brutality toward the anti-war protestors who have shaken the streets and universities of the German capital and other cities since October 2023. Media discourse has often interpreted these protestors as not being sensitive to the German 'context' and therefore somehow deserving of this violent treatment. Almost the entire lexicon of the global protest movement – from the aspirational slogan 'From the River to the Sea', to terms such as 'genocide', 'apartheid', 'colonialism and settler colonialism' and all other descriptors of the Israeli state's policies – have been banned by the German police in the name of the *Staatsraison*. Arguably distinct from other contexts, the banning of this lexicon has been internalised by a large chunk of the general population precisely because the 'German Context' is assumed to justify the prevalent and explicit dismissal of the need for critical thinking around how to atone for the past without defending or remaining silent on mass atrocities in the present. [31](#)

Recent German history teaches us that the destruction of a people and society does not manifest only in the physical realm by mass murder, but also in the long-term attempt, through an intricate web of bureaucracy and propaganda upheld by compliant technocrats working in government, media and cultural and educational institutions, to eradicate the target community's ability to produce knowledge in and about themselves on their own terms, while normalising the violence needed to do that. This normalisation of violence and erasure occurs through the employment of the 'German Context' which not only accepts but also justifies the harassment and silencing of artists and scholars who produce work that doesn't fall under the logic of *Staatsraison*. [32](#)

In the case of *Guernica-Gaza*, this took the form of critiquing the work, not by engaging with either its aesthetic form or methodological propositions, but by attacking the artist's own lived reality under violent military occupation, in some cases, quite literally, questioning the reality of Israeli rule. In other words, the critics ripped Al Hawajri's work, and indeed that of TQOF, from their historical and political contexts and

demanded they abide by the German *Staatsraison*, even when partaking in a platform celebrating and highlighting perspectives from the Global South. Al Hawajri and other participating artists were named and shamed in the public media; their work was eventually subjected to an Orwellian-type of investigation by a 'scientific committee'. This committee, which included no experts on Arab art but two experts on antisemitism, concluded that Al Hawajri's work was indeed anti-Israeli and bordered on antisemitism. Yet these claims feel so empty, insular and provincial with their narrow focus on Germany's historical experience and disregard for other experiences from the Global South featured in the 2022 iteration of documenta, precisely because they start from the position of dehumanising Al Hawajri and denying his status as a universal subject, while questioning the objective truth of some of the most unspeakable and internationally recognised crimes of the Israeli Occupation.



Eltiqaa, Mohammed Al Hawajri, Above The City – Marc Chagall (1924), 2010–13. Courtesy the artist

GUERNICA-GAZA AS TESTAMENT OF REFUSAL

One may argue that Al Hawajri was naïve in taking Western art history at its word by asking politely for the right to participate in its supposed universality. After all, the critics denied his request so crudely. But we also know that Al Hawajri is a Palestinian from Gaza who probably knows all too well that universal equal rights are a fantasy of the West's self-image. Accordingly, *Guernica-Gaza* can be read as aesthetically intruding, subverting and drawing attention precisely to this baseless fantasy. This is probably why it upset so many critics and endured accusations of antisemitism and other criticisms. Al Hawajri's experience of Israeli violence in successive wars, including the current one, which he analogised with the SS bombing of Guernica in 1937, is a real, lived experience – not a theory or proposition he put forth. That is why a coalition of

unions, political parties and social organisations from the town of Guernica itself memorialised what happened in 1937 at the end of 2023 by forming a human mosaic of more than 30,000 people who held the colours of the Palestinian flag to draw parallels between Guernica's past suffering and the ongoing physical obliteration of Gaza and its people. 'The world and history must not accept a new Guernica' was the message of the event according to its organisers. In their manifesto, the Guernica-Palestine Citizens' Initiative said: 'Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people, this cannot be allowed to happen again'. [33](#)

Besides the ways in which Al Hawajri's work ended up refusing and revealing the provincialism of the 'German Context' employed in the name of the *Staatraison*, his work of poetic knowledge is, above all, a testament to a people on a land and their resilience in the face of a brutal military complex. More, his collaboration with TQOF is an accumulation of useful knowledge about artists' lives and the work they produce – work that challenges the dominant canon of colonial narratives and imaginaries, in this case the German experience of genocide and its repercussions today that erase other indigenous communities' histories of pain, trauma and knowledge contributions to our collective humanity. In that sense, TQOF's and Al Hawajri's refusal to submit their collaborative work to the epistemic violence that is inherent in the German knowledge economy around the Palestinian experience, offered a new avenue of methodological research that focussed on mutual care and respect for self-determination (TQOF bringing the work to documenta fifteen), embracing the usually 'other(ed) ways of knowing' (TQOF's detailed meticulous documentation of the experience of Eltiqaa artists) and embodying transformative praxes in making art (both Eltiqaa and TQOF presenting art as a lived process in motion and revolving around discussion and exchange).

When viewed against the backdrop of the epistemic violence to which Palestinian-related knowledge has been subjected and the context in which the project was received and framed in German media, Guernica-Gaza and the exhibition curated by TQOF are ultimately a rejection of what is passed down as 'standard' knowledge. This rejection is a generative and strategic move. It is ultimately an emancipatory step that demonstrates how we can move from one set of practices and beliefs to another, while creating a capacity for transformational change along the way. Hence, that *Gaza-Guernica* came to documenta and left its mark by demonstrating the provincialism of German media and art discourse, that art and scholarly journals and magazines outside of Germany still want to talk about it, and that small galleries in Germany are still ready to exhibit the work smeared by the country's top connoisseurs of art is testament to it still being alive, despite all the attempts at erasure in the name of German *Staatsraison* and the one-dimensional cultural memory of violence it nurtures. [34](#) Finally, despite the almost literal physical obliteration of the artworks located in the Eltiqaa art studio in Gaza since the beginning of the genocidal war, the documentation of the group's larger

body of works remains alive, more relevant than ever, and unabashedly resistant in its insistence to tell its own story and produce its own forms of knowledge.

Footnotes

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- 02** For the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) interim judgement on South Africa's genocide case against Israel, see Summary of the Order of 26 January 2024, International Court of Justice, available at <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454> (last accessed on 20 June 2024). See also University Network for Human Rights, 'Genocide in Gaza: Analysis of International Law and its Application to Israel's Military Actions since October 7, 2023', 15 May 2024, available at <https://www.humanrightsnetwork.org/genocide-in-gaza> (last accessed on 20 June 2024).
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- 03** 'UN experts deeply concerned over "scholasticide" in Gaza', United Nations Press Releases, 18 April 2024, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza> (last accessed on 12 June 2024). Scholasticide is the term first coined by Professor Karma Nabulsi, an Oxford don and expert on the laws of war. She conceptualised it in the context of the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2009, but also with reference to a pattern of Israeli attacks on Palestinian scholars, students and educational institutions going back to the Nakba of 1948, and expanding after the 1967 war on Palestine and the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. See Scholars Against the War on Palestine, Scholasticide Definition, available at <https://scholarsagainstawar.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Scholasticide-Definition.pdf> (last accessed on 12 June 2024).
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- 04** See Daud Abdullah, 'A Century of Cultural Genocide in Palestine', in Jeffrey Bachman (ed.), *Cultural Genocide: Law, Politics, and Global Manifestations*, London: Routledge, 2019, pp.227–45. On the loss and looting of public or private libraries and archives see Hannah Mermelstein, 'Overdue Books: Returning Palestine's "Abandoned Property" of 1948', *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no.47, 2011; Gish Amit, 'Ownerless Objects? The story of the books Palestinians left behind in 1948', *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no.36, 2009; Sarah Irving, "'Endangered Archives" program opens up priceless Palestinian heritage', *The Electronic Intifada*, 13 May 2014, available at <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/sarah-irving/endangered-archives-program-opens-priceless-palestinian-heritage> (last accessed on 28 May 2024). See also Feras Hammami, 'Rupture in Heritage: Strategies of Dispossession, Elimination and Co-Resistance', *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol.13, no.1, 2023, pp.3–29. On architectural erasure, see Ariel Sophia Bardi, 'The "Architectural Cleansing" of Palestine', *American Anthropologist*, vol.118, no.1, 2016, pp.165–71; Nurhan Abujidi and Han Verschure, 'Military occupation as urbicide by "Construction and Destruction": The case of Nablus', *Palestine in Arab World Geographer*, vol.9, no.2, 2006, pp.126–54; Nur Masalha, 'Settler-Colonialism, Memoricide and Indigenous Toponymic Memory: The Appropriation of Palestinian Place Names by the Israeli State', *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, vol.14, no.1, 2015, pp.3–57. On memoricide as the systematic process of destroying memory and the traces of a community whose survival may recall an undesired past, see Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, London: Oneworld Publications, 2007.
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- 06** Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Three Metaphors for a New Conception of Law: The Frontier, the Baroque and

the South', *Law & Society Review*, vol.29, no.4, 1995, pp.569–84 and *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, London: Routledge, 2014.

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08 See, for example, Abdullah Mowaswes, 'The Epistemicide of the Palestinians: Israel Destroys Pillars of Knowledge', Institute of Palestine Studies [blog post], 2 February 2024, available at <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655161> (last accessed on 18 June 2024); Mohan J. Dutta, 'Resisting an unfolding genocide: reflections from radical struggles in the Global South', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol.110, no.2, 2024, pp.294–304; Ahmed Kabel, 'Pedagogy and Epistemics of Witness: Teaching Palestine in a Time of Genocide', *Social Text*, 14 May 2024, available at https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/pedagogy-and-epistemics-of-witness-teaching-palestine-in-a-time-of-genocide/ (last accessed on 15 Jun 2024); Alberto Toscano, 'The War on Education in Gaza and at Home', *In These Times*, 15 February 2024, available at <https://inthesetimes.com/article/campus-wars-gaza-higher-ed-christopher-rufo> (last accessed on 18 June 2024).

09 The literature and reporting on this have been wide and prolific. See, for example, Michael Sappir, 'The spiralling absurdity of Germany's pro-Israel fanaticism', *+972 Magazine*, 21 March 2024, available at <https://www.972mag.com/germany-israel-palestine-solidarity-repression/> (last accessed on 28 May 2024); Sarah March, 'German Accused of Silencing Pro-Palestinian Voices at Human Rights Forum', *Reuters*, 9 November 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/germany-accused-silencing-pro-palestinian-voices-un-rights-forum-2023-11-09/> (last accessed on 18 June 2024); Jakub Guhl, 'From the Danube to the Baltic Sea German Takes an Authoritarian Turn', *Index on Censorship*, 20 December 2023 and Sarah O'Neal, 'Palestine on the Walls of Berlin: Graffiti and Censorship', Institute for Palestine Studies, 30 October 2023.

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11 See for example the recent study of Palestinian representation in sociology textbooks in Melissa F. Weiner, 'Palestinian Erasure and Dehumanization in Introductory Sociology Texts', *Critical Sociology*, vol.49, no.6, 2023, pp.991–1008; M. Muhannad Ayyash, 'The Toxic Other: The Palestinian Critique and Debates About Race and Racism', *Critical Sociology*, vol.49, no.6, 2023, pp.953–66. Hannah Tzubeiru and Nahed Samour, 'The German State and the Creation of Un/Desired Communities', Symposium on the Moral Triangle, 2022, available at <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/theorizing-modernities/the-german-state-and-the-creation-of-un-desired-communities/> (last accessed on 20 June 2024); Even before the current war, Germany's leading political parties have fuelled a public discourse aimed at erasing Palestinian history. See Pauline Ertel, 'Germany: Berlin schools asked to distribute leaflet describing the 1948 Nakba as a "myth"', *Brave New Europe*, 24 February 2024 available at <https://braveneweuropa.com/pauline-ertel-germany-berlin-schools-asked-to-distribute-leaflet-describing-the-1948-nakba-as-a-myth> (last accessed on 20 June 2024); Hebh Jamal, 'How Palestine became a "forbidden word" in German high schools', *+972mag*, 5 December 2022, available at <https://www.972mag.com/germany-education-israel-narrative-palestinians/> (last accessed on 20 June 2024).

12 The other founding members are artists Mohamed Abusal, Abdel Raouf Al Ajouri, Mohamed Dabous, Raed Issa, Dina Matar and Sohail Salem.

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- 15** 'Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and crime against Humanity', Amnesty International, 1 February 2022 available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/> (last accessed on 14 June 2024); 'A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution', Human Rights Watch, 27 April 2021, available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution> (last accessed on 14 June 2024). See also B'Tselem, 'A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is Apartheid', available at <https://www.btselem.org/topic/apartheid> (last accessed on 12 June 2024).
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27 See Sultan Doughan, "'Free Palestine from German Guilt?' Responsibilization, Citizenship, and Social Death', *Errant Journal*, no.6, 2023 and 'Desiring Memorials: Jews, Muslims, and the Human of Citizenship', in Gidley Ben and Everett Samuel (eds.), *Jews and Muslims in Europe: Between Discourse and Experience*, Leiden: Brill, 2022; Jonathon Caitlin (2022), 'A New German Historian's Debate? A conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses and Michael Rothberg, Part I&II', *Journal of the History of Ideas* [blog post], available at <https://www.jhiblog.org/2022/02/02/a-new-german-historians-debate-a-conversation-with-sultan-doughan-a-dirk-moses-and-michael-rothberg-part-i/> (last accessed on 20 June 2024); Emily Dische-Becker, 'The Cost of Germany's Guilt Politics', *Jacobin*, 23 March 2024, available at <https://jacobin.com/2024/03/the-cost-of-germanys-guilt-politics> (last accessed on 13 June 2024).

28 Anna-Esther Younes, 'Fighting Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Germany', *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, vol.5, no.2, Fall 2020, pp.249–66.

29 These forces were reflected in Angela Merkel's now famous 2008 comment that combating antisemitism and prioritising the security of Israel is a central pillar of Germany's post-Holocaust 'raison d'état'. As she put it: 'I want to explicitly stress that every German Government and every German Chancellor before me has shouldered Germany's special historical responsibility for Israel's security. This historical responsibility is part of my country's raison d'état. For me as German Chancellor, therefore, Israel's security will never be open to negotiation.' Angela Merkel, address to the Knesset, 2008. See 'How Germany Became Israel's Key Ally', European Leadership Network, 8 October 2021, available at <https://elnetwork.eu/policypaper/germany-ally/> (last accessed on 13 June 2024).

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31 Interestingly, the doubling down on protestors, artists and scholars critical of both Israel and Germany has neither limited, nor changed the course of the protestors. If anything, it has appeared to have had the opposite effect of increasing the number of protests and the diverse ways and sites of expressing dissent.

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- 33** 'Over 3,000 people form human mosaic in Spain to support Palestine', *Anadolu*, 9 December 2023, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/over-3-000-people-form-human-mosaic-in-spain-to-support-palestine/3077538> (last accessed on 13 June 2024).
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