

Nie ma dumy z ludobójstwa. Współczesna sztuka queerowa, Palestyna i polityka solidarności

No Pride in Genocide. Contemporary Queer Art, Palestine, and the Politics of Solidarity

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ABSTRAKT: Artykuł podaje w wątpliwość uporczywie powtarzane, motywowane politycznie twierdzenie, że solidarność queerowa nie da się pogodzić z solidarnością z Palestyną. Opierając się na badaniach wykazujących powiązania między teorią queerową a ruchami na rzecz wolności Palestyny, dowodzę, że walkę z heteronormatywnością, kolonializmem osadniczym i rasową przemocą państwa łączą głęboko splątana historia i przyszłość. Dla ruchów tych, dalekich od pozostawania w opozycji wobec siebie, wspólną sprawą okazuje się często opór wobec systemów wymazywania, wywłaszczania i kontroli nad ciałami, tożsamością i ziemią. By uzasadnić tę tezę, artykuł analizuje wybrane propalestyńskie prace artystów queerowych od końca XX wieku do dziś. Analizowane studia przypadków pokazują, że sztuka wizualna może być aktem aktywizmu społecznego i budować sojusze między marginalizowanymi społecznościami. W swojej estetyce, kontekstach i odbiorze, prace te wyrażają wspólne zaangażowanie w demontaż opresyjnych struktur. Twierdząc, że środowiska queerowe od dawna postrzegają swoje wyzwolenie jako nierozdzielnie związane z wyzwoleniem innych, od aktywizmu epoki AIDS po współczesne transnarodowe ruchy na rzecz sprawiedliwości. Od początku ludobójstwa w Palestynie, głównie w skrajnie prawicowych kręgach społecznych, narastała tendencja do krytyki antysyjonistycznego aktywizmu środowisk queerowych. Jednocześnie osoby queer znalazły się wśród najbardziej zagorzałych sojuszników Palestyńczyków. Artykuł pokazuje, że sojusz ten sięga XX wieku i wielokrotnie znajdował wyraz w sztukach wizualnych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: sztuka queerowa, teoria queer, Palestyna, solidarność, pinkwashing, aktywizm

KACPER RADNY jest historykiem sztuki i doktorantem w Międzynarodowym Centrum Studiów nad Kulturą (GCSC) w Gießen. Jego badania koncentrują się wokół malarstwa dziewiętnastowiecznego, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem sztuki Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej. Praca doktorska Kacpra stanowi krytyczną analizę przedstawień Ukrainy i Kozaków w sztuce polskiej dziewiętnastego wieku oraz bada ich odbiór i popularność wśród zachodnich kolekcjonerów sztuki tego okresu. Radny jest również aktywny w dziedzinie muzealnictwa i rynku sztuki. Od lutego 2023 roku Kacper jest członkiem Zespołu Studiów Podyplomowych w GCSC i współredaktorem „On_Culture”, interdyscyplinarnego, czasopisma naukowego o otwartym dostępie, publikującego na zasadzie peer-review.

ABSTRACT: This article challenges the persistent and politically motivated claim that queer solidarity is incompatible with Palestinian solidarity. By drawing on studies demonstrating the intersections between queer theory and movements for Palestinian freedom, I demonstrate how struggles against heteronormativity, settler colonialism, and racialized state violence share deeply entangled histories and futures. Far from existing in opposition, these movements often find common cause in their mutual resistance to systems of erasure, dispossession, and control over bodies, identities, and lands. To ground this argument, the article examines a selection of pro-Palestinian works by queer artists from the late twentieth century to the present. Through these case studies the article shows how visual art can take the role of social activism and cultivate alliances among the marginalized communities. In their aesthetics, contexts, and reception, these works enact a shared commitment to dismantling oppressive structures. I contend that queer resistance has long understood its liberation as inseparable from the liberation of others, from AIDS-era activism to contemporary transnational justice movements. Since the start of the genocide in Palestine, there has been a growing tendency, mostly among the far-right social circles, to critique the queer people's anti-Zionist activism. At the same time, queer persons have been among the most outspoken allies of Palestinians. This article shows that this alliance dates back to the twentieth century and has found its expression in visual arts on numeral occasions.

KEYWORDS: queer art, queer theory, Palestine, solidarity, pinkwashing, activism

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Introduction

In recent decades, the entanglement of LGBTQ+ rights discourse with global geopolitics has created new ideological battlegrounds, where the language of liberation is often weaponized to justify violence and uphold imperial projects.¹ Nowhere is this more starkly visible than in the Zionist state's strategic deployment of queer rights. By marketing itself as a haven of LGBTQ+ inclusion in an otherwise "backward" and "homophobic" Middle East, the Zionist state obscures its decades-long occupation and ongoing settler-colonial violence against Palestinians and constructs a moral binary: a modern, tolerant Israel versus a supposedly regressive, homophobic Palestine.² This rhetoric, commonly referred to as pinkwashing, is being deployed to appeal to liberal Western sensibilities, particularly within cultural, academic, and activist spheres, effectively providing justification for the Zionist colonial project.³ Yet, in recent years, the pinkwashing project has been increasingly challenged and rejected by queer communities worldwide, who recognize how it instrumentalizes their struggles for equality in the service of colonial domination.⁴

Since the outbreak of the ongoing genocide in Palestine, many queer artists reject the false binary of LGBTQ+ rights versus Palestinian liberation and explicitly articulate how queerness and anti-colonialism are mutually reinforcing. The mobilization of cultural workers is evidenced by the *Queer Artists for Palestine* initiative, which has garnered over 3,500 signatures from artists pledging to boycott complicit institutions.⁵ This article frames pinkwashing as a mode of settler-colonial ideology and examines how queer art has historically resisted, and continues to resist, this narrative. It argues that queer artistic practices long preceded Zionist pinkwashing efforts of the twenty-first century and offered a counter-discourse to its propaganda by championing solidarity and the shared tropes of marginalized struggles. To develop this argument, the article first demonstrates how queer theory provides critical tools for understanding and dismantling the ideological operations of pinkwashing in the context of Palestine solida-

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- 1 J.K. Puar and A.S. Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots", *Social Text* 2002, v. 20, no. 72, p. 117–148.
 - 2 For numerous instances of queer solidarity with Palestine and its critique, see: G. Z. Hochberg, "Introduction: Israelis, Palestinians, Queers: Points of Departure", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2010, v. 16, no. 4, p. 493–516.
 - 3 J. Puar, "Citation and Censorship: The Politics of Talking About the Sexual Politics of Israel", *Feminist Legal Studies* 2011, v. 19, p. 137–139.
 - 4 S. Lahiri, "Anti-Pinkwashing as Emerging Hope: Queering the Palestinian Liberation Movement in the Context of Institutionalised Neoliberalism", *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* 2020, v. 3, no. 2, p. 53–72.
 - 5 "Queer Artists for Palestine", <<https://www.queerartistsforpalestine.org/>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

riety. It then turns to a selection of pro-Palestinian works by queer artists, examining how they mobilize artistic practice as a powerful medium of resistance and collective affirmation.

In this text, I use the term queer in two interconnected ways. First, it refers to artists who identify as queer. That is, individuals whose identities fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. At the same time, my argument draws on the framework of queer theory, which, while rooted in the struggles of LGBTQ+ communities, extends far beyond questions of gender or sexual identity.⁶ Queer theory, as used here, interrogates structures of power, normalization, and exclusion, emphasizing how forms of marginalization intersect across different axes.⁷ In doing so, I highlight the lived identities of queer artists and the critical perspectives that queer theory offers for thinking about solidarity with Palestine.

While the solidarity movements discussed in this article are part of a transnational phenomenon, the specific visual and theoretical genealogies examined here are predominantly situated within an American socio-political and academic context. This is due to the fact that the case studies, ranging from the photostats of Félix González-Torres to contemporary activist interventions, are deeply intertwined with North American histories of queer resistance, from the AIDS crisis to post-9/11 critiques of the “war on terror”. By focusing on this specific axis, this article does not claim to represent a universal queer experience but invites reflection on how American queer activism and artistic practice have functioned as a critical area for contesting the pinkwashing of state violence.

Queer Theory and Palestine

“We’re here, we’re queer

We’re not going to war.

The road to peace

U.S. out of the Middle East

U.S., Israel, end the occupation

West Bank, Gaza, self-determination

George Bush, you should know

We support the PLO”⁸

6 C.J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1997, v. 3, no. 4, p. 437–465.

7 S. Epstein, “A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality”, *Sociological Theory* 1994, v. 12, no. 2, p. 188–202.

8 ACT UP slogan/poem, authored by an anonymous collective. Quoted after: N. Shahani, “How to Survive the Whitewashing of AIDS: Global Pasts, Transnational Futures”, *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2016, v. 3, no. 1, p. 2.

This part of an anonymous ACT UP chant-poem demonstrates that queer activism during the AIDS pandemic of the late 1980s and early 1990s was deeply entangled with global struggles against imperialism and occupation abroad. Although undated, its references to George Bush, the Gulf War, and Desert Storm firmly situate it within the early 1990s, a moment when ACT UP was at the height of its visibility as a militant force confronting both governmental neglect of the AIDS crisis and the U.S. military-industrial complex.⁹ The chant combines explicit sexual affirmation with political denunciation, collapsing the boundaries between queer identity, anti-war resistance, and international solidarity. Importantly, amid calls to “fight AIDS, not Iraq” and to end U.S. wars in the Middle East, the text insists upon “self-determination for the Palestinian nation,” presenting the issue of Palestine as integral to radical queer politics. The message of the poem can be seen as hauntingly relevant to the current global situation, which prompted many scholars to search for similarities between the AIDS and the Palestinian struggles in the U.S.¹⁰ It is therefore not surprising that the current ACT UP members joined forces with Jewish Voices for Peace in demonstrating against the Zionist state’s unchecked attack on remaining Palestinian lands.¹¹

What was articulated in the heat of AIDS activism now finds theoretical elaboration in queer scholarship, where the affinities between queer theory and Palestinian struggles have become increasingly visible. Just as the queer activists of the 1980s and 1990s blurred the boundaries between queer survival and Palestinian self-determination, recent academic work highlights how both movements confront structures of marginalization. The following discussion turns to this body of scholarship, which builds the theoretical foundations for this text.

The similarities between queer theory and Palestinian struggle have received increasing attention in the last decade. One of the first and most influential contributions to this discourse was a special issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, *Queering Palestine*, published in 2018. The editors of the issue highlight how both queer and Palestinian struggles share experiences of marginalization: “Queers are often perceived to be at the margin of politics and society, in Palestine and far beyond. Such positions of mar-

9 T.W. Carroll, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism*, Chapel Hill 2015, p. 131–161.

10 S. Bhaman + WWHIVDD, “Rhyming with History: Images of AIDS Activism + Palestinian Liberation”, *We Remind You /HIV & Palestine*, 20 March 2024, p. 40–44.

11 S. Escarciga, “Avoidable Mass Death Anywhere Is an Affront to Life Everywhere”, *We Remind You /HIV & Palestine*, 20 March 2024, p. 45–49.

ginality are, in different ways, all too familiar to many Palestinians”.¹² They later argue that the anti-Zionist struggle is “resistance against elimination, which is central to queer politics, and is evident in the Palestinian people’s opposition to Zionism since the late nineteenth century”.¹³ This framing illustrates how struggles across different histories and geographies tend to recognize themselves in one another.

To provide theoretical foundations for such approach, one of the contributors to the issue, Heike Schotten, draws on Edward Said’s *The Question of Palestine* to unpack how the very framing of “the question of x” operates as a colonial and exclusionary move that casts the people or place in question as a problem to be solved by outsiders.¹⁴ Said subverts this structure by posing “the question of Palestine” as a Palestinian, asserting Palestinian presence and resistance as inseparable from existence itself, and directly opposing Zionist erasure. Schotten then turns to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” to explore another refusal: queer theory’s resistance to definition and systematization.¹⁵ For Berlant and Warner, queer theory’s refusal to be made “useful” is a form of resistance to normalization and the administrative neutralization of violence. By placing Said’s reclaiming of the question alongside Berlant and Warner’s anti-systematization, Schotten argues that “in different ways, both Said, on the one hand, and Berlant and Warner, on the other, acknowledge the politics of question asking and seek to evade, refuse, or redeploy those questions in an affirmation and defence of those people and places deemed questionable or problematic”.¹⁶

Similar intervention followed in 2020, with Sa’ed Atshan’s book *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*.¹⁷ This contribution provides a personal and scholarly examination of the Palestinian LGBTQ+ movement, tracing its emergence and evolution amid the pressures of local cultural norms and global political critique. Through an autoethnographic approach, Atshan bridges the personal and political, demonstrating how his academic work and activism are inextricably linked to his lived experiences, something that the artworks discussed later in this text will reiterate.

Among the most recent contributions to the field of queer studies and Palestinian studies is Walaa Alqaisiya’s *Decolonial Queering in Palestine*,

12 L. Farsakh, R. Kanaaneh, and S. Seikaly, “Special Issue: Queering Palestine”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2018, v. 47, no. 3, p. 7.

13 Ibidem, p. 8–9.

14 E.W. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, New York 1992, p. 4–8.

15 L. Berlant and M. Warner, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?”, *PMLA* 1995, v. 110, no. 3, p. 343–349.

16 C.H. Schotten, “To Exist Is to Resist: Palestine and the Question of Queer Theory”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2018, v. 47, no. 3, p. 15.

17 S. Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, Redwood City 2020.

which offers a compelling exploration of how queer identities and politics intertwine with the struggle against settler colonialism in Palestine.¹⁸ It is primarily grounded in the author’s extensive fieldwork with Palestinian queer activists, especially the organization *alQaws*, Palestine’s key queer rights group.¹⁹ In her earlier work centred on *alQaws*, she has shown how Palestinian feminist queer spaces advance decolonization by challenging colonial and heteronormative oppression. She critiqued pinkwashing by saying that “by highlighting the limitations of mainstream Western LGBTQ+ approaches in the context of Palestine, *alQaws*’s decolonial queering unmask[s] the epistemic violence implicit in the depiction of homophobia as the ‘specific property of Arab/Muslim society’”.²⁰ She continues: “In addition, it reveals how the logic of development legitimates the ontological violence of the Israeli colonial order, which promotes itself as a civilizing mission spreading democracy where it is otherwise deemed lacking”.²¹

A slightly different perspective on queer and Palestinian solidarities, insofar as it focuses on the pre-9/11 context, has been offered by Umayyah Cable.²² In their text, the author draws upon Adrienne Rich’s influential 1980 essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, which introduced the concept of compulsory heterosexuality to describe the structural and cultural forces that assume heterosexuality as the natural and desirable orientation, while erasing or punishing queer identities.²³ This framework has been paralleled by the more recent notion of *compulsory Zionism*, which refers to the pervasive expectation, particularly in Western political, cultural, and professional contexts, that individuals must affirm Zionism and the legitimacy of the Israeli state in its current form.²⁴ In this system, dissent is routinely stigmatized or sanctioned, with anti-Zionist positions framed as illegitimate, antisemitic, or extremist, effectively erasing Palestinian narratives from the realm of acceptable discourse.²⁵ Cable argues that

18 W. Alqaisiya, *Decolonial Queering in Palestine*, New York 2022.

19 W. Alqaisiya, “Decolonial Queering”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2018, v. 47, no. 3, p. 29–44.

20 Ibidem, p. 33.

21 Ibidem.

22 U. Cable, “An Uprising at *The Perfect Moment*: Palestine in the 1990s Culture Wars”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2020, v. 26, no. 2, p. 243–272.

23 A. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, *Signs* 1980, v. 5, p. 631–660.

24 E. Shadmi, “Women, Palestinians, Zionism: A Personal View”, *News from Within* 1992, v. 8, no. 10–11, p. 13–16.

25 Unsurprisingly. Adrienne Rich later endorsed the academic and cultural boycott of Israel. A. Rich, “Why Support the U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel?”, *MR Online*, 8 February 2009, <<https://mronline.org/2009/02/08/why-support-the-u-s-campaign-for-the-academic-and-cultural-boycott-of-israel/>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

the early 2000s Zionist campaign of pinkwashing emerged as a response to the U.S. 1990s politics, which championed LGBTQ+ rights and Palestinian self-determination. Yet the trajectories of the two have sharply diverged. Over the past three decades, LGBTQ+ persons, particularly in the United States, have witnessed substantial gains in legal rights, visibility, and cultural acceptance. Meanwhile, the space for articulating anti-Zionist perspectives has remained severely constrained and, in many cases, has narrowed further under intensifying political and institutional pressures.

While scholarly engagement with Palestinian queer studies is a relatively recent development within the Western academy, it has rapidly reframed the intersections of sexual identity and anti-colonial struggle. These theoretical frameworks are often formalized through North American critical genealogies and represent an academic codification of solidarities long articulated in the visual arts. To understand the stakes of these artistic interventions, it is necessary to move beyond the alliances themselves and examine the specific state-level mechanics of pinkwashing that they seek to dismantle.

“In the Name of Love”: Pinkwashing and the Spectacle of Colonial Benevolence

At the end of 2023, a disturbing image began circulating on social media platforms. In the photograph, an IOF soldier stands amidst the rubble of Gaza, smiling widely and holding up a rainbow flag. On the flag, historically associated with liberation, resistance, and queer solidarity, the words “In the Name of Love” were hastily scrawled. The background of the photograph is filled with scenes of utter destruction: desolate ground, razed buildings, and tanks in motion. The photo was reposted by the official Israeli government X account and accompanied by a caption, reading: “Yoav Atzmoni who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community wanted to send a message of hope to the people of Gaza living under Hamas brutality. His intention was to raise the first pride flag in Gaza as a call for peace and freedom”.²⁶ This image and its accompanying message encapsulate the twisted logic of pinkwashing in its most performative form. This grotesque photograph serves as a visual manifesto of settler-colonial ideology masked as liberal inclusion, as it attempts to recode a military occupation as a humanitarian intervention and to reframe settler violence as an act of queer solidarity. To Palestinian queers, such interventions are not new.²⁷

26 Israel’s official X account, 13 November 2023, <<https://x.com/Israel/status/1723971340825186754>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

27 *alQaws*, “Beyond Propaganda: Pinkwashing as Colonial Violence”, 18 October 2020, <https://www.alqaws.org/articles/Beyond-Propaganda-Pinkwashing-as-Colonial-Violence?category_id=0> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

The term pinkwashing was introduced to political discourse by Sarah Schulman, most notably in her 2011 *New York Times* opinion piece. Schulman brought the term to a larger public consciousness, describing it as “a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians’ human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life”.²⁸ It was a direct response to Israel’s strategic efforts to reshape its international image amid ongoing conflict and occupation. In 2007, the Israeli government officially launched the Brand Israel campaign, allocating nearly \$20 million to a professional PR initiative aimed at revitalizing the state’s global reputation. This multifaceted campaign sought to portray Israel as a modern, progressive democracy, despite its apartheid-like policies toward Palestinians.²⁹ One of the central tactics of Brand Israel has been the promotion of Israel as a haven for LGBTQ+ rights in the Middle East. This approach strategically contrasts Israel’s image of tolerance with the portrayal of Palestinian society as homophobic and regressive.³⁰ Heike Shotten defines pinkwashing as “an activist term of art that names and condemns Israel’s official, well-funded, Brand Israel international marketing campaign, a central plank of which is the attempt to present the country as gay friendly. Refurbishing the tired trope of Israel as ‘the only democracy in the Middle East’, Brand Israel presents the Jewish state as a shining oasis of tolerance amid a sea of hostile and homophobic Arab and Muslim barbarism, with Tel Aviv a ‘gay mecca’ vacation destination for international travelers”.³¹ The intellectual groundwork for understanding this phenomenon was laid earlier by scholar Jasbir Puar, who in 2007 introduced the concept of “homonationalism,” the alignment of nationalist politics with LGBTQ+ rights narratives to justify exclusionary and imperialist agendas.³² Since then, pinkwashing has become a central focus in critiques of Israel’s international public relations strategy, prompting continued activism, scholarship, and artistic resistance that challenges the false narratives

28 S. Schulman, “Pinkwashing and Israel’s Use of Gays as a Messaging Tool”, *The New York Times*, 23 November 2011, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html>> [accessed: 22.08.2025]

29 See: N. Elia, “Gay Rights with a Side of Apartheid”, *Settler Colonial Studies* 2012, v. 2, no. 2, p. 49–68; S. Papantonopoulou, “‘Even a Freak Like You Would Be Safe in Tel Aviv’: Transgender Subjects, Wounded Attachments, and the Zionist Economy of Gratitude”, *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 2014, v. 42, no. 1/2, p. 278–293.

30 C. Jankovic, “*You Can’t Film Here: Queer Political Fantasy and Thin Critique of Israeli Occupation in the Bubble*”, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2013, v. 22, no. 2, p. 97–119.

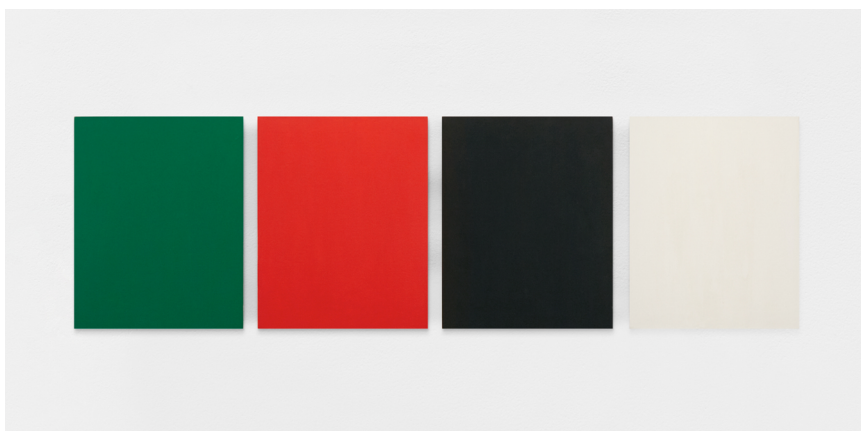
31 C.H. Schotten, op. cit., p. 20.

32 J.K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham 2007.

underlying this form of settler-colonial propaganda.³³ Contemporary queer artists have increasingly mobilized their work to reject these frameworks. Many engage explicitly with Palestinian liberation, either by addressing the material realities of occupation, by exploring the contradictions of queer visibility within Zionist narratives, or by forging transnational solidarities that refuse the politics of exceptionality.

As an art historical study, this article is particularly interested in how visual culture contributes to this political discourse. In the context of pinkwashing, art becomes a battleground and a refuge where dominant narratives can be challenged, and where silenced perspectives can find recognition. Queer art, in particular, has long been a space for the articulation of marginality and utopian desire. The artists discussed in this text are of different nationalities but unified by a shared refusal to allow queer politics to be co-opted by the Zionist settler-colonial regime.

Queer Art for Palestine



Félix González-Torres. *Forbidden Colors*. 1988.
Acrylic on panel, 50,8 × 40,6 cm, four parts: 50,8 × 40,6 cm each

One of the earlier examples of queer artists taking a stand in the face of Palestinian oppression is Félix González-Torres's *Forbidden Colors*, finished in 1988 and first exhibited in the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Through its minimalist, politically charged use of the Palestinian flag's banned colours, González-Torres enacts a powerful gesture of solidarity. This

33 L. Darwich and H. Maikey, "The Road from Antipinkwashing Activism to the Decolonization of Palestine", *Women's Studies Quarterly* 2014, v. 42, no. 3/4, p. 281–285; G. Shafie, K.R. Chávez, "Pinkwashing and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Campaign", *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 2019, v. 5, no. 5, p. 32–48.

work, featured in several exhibitions since its debut, continues to resist erasure under oppression and models a form of queer politics deeply intertwined with decolonial struggle, long before the concept of pinkwashing and decolonialism established themselves in public discourse.

Félix González-Torres was born in 1957 in Guáimaro, Cuba, and later migrated to Spain and Puerto Rico, before settling in New York City. The experiences of displacement and adaptation, as well as racism and homophobia, fundamentally shaped his artistic practice. An analysis of a short autobiography written in 1993, three years before his death, reveals that González-Torres maintained an acute awareness of global struggles, including an interest in the Middle East. A section of the text reads: “1992 the forces of hate and ignorance are alive and well in Oregon and Colorado, among other places 1993 Sam Nunn is such a sissy, peace might be possible in the Middle East”.³⁴ However, the most formative, as well as tragic, element of his life was the HIV epidemic, which led to the demise of his life partner, Ross, in 1990. The AIDS crisis permeated much of his work and consciousness until his own death in 1996. Torres’ art poignantly explores themes of love, loss, memory, and resistance, creating spaces of connection across different forms of erasure.

In *Forbidden Colors*, the panels arranged left to right in green, red, black, and white, are the direct reference to the colours of the Palestinian flag at a time when Palestinian national symbols were criminalized under Israeli occupation.³⁵ In the original exhibition, *Forbidden Colors* was given its own wall to amplify its contemplative force. On an adjacent side wall, González-Torres presented black photostats with white text that juxtaposed seemingly disparate references: official statements from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the U.S. agency symbolically responsible for the state’s neglect of the HIV/AIDS crisis, alongside fragments of queer joy, such as “gogo boots” and “Barbie”. By placing these elements in proximity, the artist linked two struggles: the human toll of AIDS and the fight for Palestinian freedom. The CDC’s bureaucratic language stood against the vibrancy and sensuality of queer nightlife, often scapegoated for the epidemic, while the Palestinian flag’s colours radiated their own quiet defiance.

González-Torres clarified his own approach to the piece in a statement that he was asked to write for the purpose of the original exhibition:

34 F. Gonzalez-Torres, “Biography”, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Los Angeles 1993, <<https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/attachment/en/5b844b306a-a72cea5f8b4567/DownloadableItem/5ec3f65e49a62c16367e2a07>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

35 I. Shahak, “Banning the ‘Terrible’ White, Black, Green, and Red”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 March 1981, <<https://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0303/030324.html>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

This work is about my exclusion from the circle of power where social and cultural values are elaborated and about my rejection of the imposed and established order.

It is a fact people are discriminated against for being HIV positive. It is a fact the majority of the Nazi industrialists retained their wealth after the war. It is a fact the night belongs to Michelob and Coke is real. It is a fact the color of your skin matters. It is a fact Crazy Eddie's prices are insane. It is a fact that four colors—red, black, green and white—placed next to each other in any form are strictly forbidden by the Israeli army in the occupied Palestinian territories. This color combination can cause an arrest, a beating, a curfew, a shooting, or a news photograph. Yet it is a fact that these forbidden colors, presented as a solitary act of consciousness here in Soho, will not precipitate a similar reaction.³⁶

Thus, González-Torres built a solidarity of relation: a deliberate affinity between communities marked by systemic silencing. The work was exhibited at a moment when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had declared Jerusalem its capital, and when queer lives, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS, were being devalued in the United States. *Forbidden Colors* became both a memorial and a proposition: how to create points of connection through shared dispossession, how to repair the loss of kin, land, and home, and whether such reparative gestures can begin through artistic representation.

For queer audiences in 1988, this gesture resonated with their own precarious realities. The AIDS crisis had rendered queer bodies subject to neglect and stigma from cultural narratives, not unlike the attempted erasure of Palestinian identity under occupation.³⁷ In both contexts, power operated through control over visibility: deciding which lives could be seen, grieved, and valued. Long before the term “pinkwashing” entered political discourse, González-Torres demonstrated that queer liberation was inseparable from decolonial struggle.³⁸ His work refused the assimilationist narrative that queer identity could thrive under structures of occupation and oppression. This finds confirmation in Umayyah Cable's previously mentioned article, in which they argue that the contemporary queer Palestinian activism's overwhelming focus on the post-9/11 era “dehistoricizes the development of gay and lesbian and Palestinian relational politics

36 F. González-Torres, artist's statement for the exhibition *The Workspace: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, September 16 – November 20, 1988, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/exhibitions/the-workspace-felix-gonzalez-torres> [accessed August 22, 2025].

37 C.H. Schotten, op. cit.

38 M. Stelder, “Other Scenes of Speaking”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2018, v. 47, no. 3, p. 45–61.

that *predate* the rise of Israeli pinkwashing”.³⁹ They continue claiming that “Israeli pinkwashing must be understood as a *response* to the increased visibility of relational politics between gay and lesbian and Palestinian artists and activists in the 1990s”.⁴⁰ This undermines the assumption that Zionist pro-LGBTQ+ propaganda of the early 2000s was merely a public relations project. Cable's claim suggests instead that it was designed to counter the pro-Palestinian rhetoric gaining traction among queer people in the 1980s and 1990s, including, for example, González-Torres.

González-Torres's *Forbidden Colors* continues to enjoy popularity, a resonance that has only intensified in light of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. Recently, the work was featured on the cover of the journal *Jewish Currents*.⁴¹ It was also selected as the centrepiece of the seventh instalment of Pilot Press's *Responses* series.⁴² Pilot Press is an initiative set up by a queer artist, Richard Porter. Its website reads: “started in 2017 to shed light on contemporary queer lives, the press is inspired by the collaborative, intersectional spirit of the gay liberation movement and the radical, subversive history of artist's DIY publishing”.⁴³ The *Responses* series published by Porter regularly seeks contemporary responses to works of art made during the AIDS crisis. With the book published in November 2023, the publisher shared that “The anthology was assembled and published very quickly via an open call in the weeks after October 7 when it became clear what the apartheid regime's intentions were”.⁴⁴ The publication featured a selection of visual works, for example, Elektra KB's *Watermelon Healing Veil* and Mark Armijo McKnight's *From the River to the Sea*.

Another artwork discussed in this article also centers on the colours of the Palestinian flag, this time through a reworking of Robert Indiana's iconic LOVE motif. Kyle Goen has consistently dedicated his practice to acts of solidarity with marginalized communities, queer people, people of colour, and the Palestinian struggle. His projects often fuse the language of protest with the visual strategies of pop and conceptual art, transforming recognizable signs into calls for collective action.

IN GAZA, Goen arranges the four letters into a bold, geometric square composition, rendered in the red, green, black, and white of the Palestinian flag. By referencing Indiana's *LOVE* (1964), Goen situates GAZA within a lineage of art-as-protest. Although the original reference is unmistakable,

39 U. Cable, op. cit., p. 248.

40 Ibidem p. 267.

41 *Jewish Currents*, v. 75, no. 3, 2021.

42 *Responses to “Forbidden Colours” (1988) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, London 2023.

43 “About”, *Pilot Press*, <<https://www.pilotpress.co.uk/about>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

44 Private communication with Richard Porter, 16 August 2025.



from the river to the sea

Left: Elektra KB. *Watermelon Healing Veil*. 2023. Right: Mark Armijo McKnight. *From the River to the Sea*. 2023
Kyle Goen. *GAZA*. 2014



the artist reveals that his piece “was more influenced by General Idea’s AIDS piece and Rage Against The Machine’s *Renegades* album cover than Robert Indiana’s original work”.⁴⁵ Indiana’s original, which became one of the most recognizable images of the twentieth century, was a seemingly apolitical celebration of love that was nonetheless embraced during the Vietnam War era as a symbol of peace. Here, the irony of the layered lineage ought to be discussed. Indiana himself was a queer artist whose work was frequently sanitized by the mainstream, yet his actions were marked by a clear Zionist alignment. This has perhaps most visibly crystallized in his Hebrew-language iteration of the LOVE piece, *Ahava* (אהבה, Hebrew for “love,” 1978), which he gifted to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. By doing so, he effectively integrated his “universal” icon into the state’s own institutional narrative. It is perhaps Indiana’s alignment with the policies of the occupying regime that motivated Goen’s explicit reluctance to cite LOVE as the primary inspiration for GAZA.

Because Indiana failed to effectively copyright his iconic design, its ubiquity invited widespread appropriation by various groups and institutions. In the 1980s, the Canadian collective General Idea reworked it into AIDS (1987), turning a language of affection into a call for public health activism at the height of the AIDS crisis.⁴⁶ Shortly thereafter, Gran Fury’s RIOT (1988) channelled the same typographic template into direct action messaging around queer liberation and state neglect.⁴⁷ Each iteration mobilized Indiana’s structure to confront a different front of systemic violence: war, epidemic, police brutality, racial injustice. Goen’s version continues the tradition of reclaiming pop iconography as a means of contesting violence and silencing. Since its creation, GAZA has been used widely, appearing on banners and posters at Pride marches as well as demonstrations for Palestinian liberation. Recently, Goen’s artwork has been featured alongside *Queer|Art’s* Statement of Solidarity with Palestine, in which the organisation renews its commitment to the BDS movement.⁴⁸ The artwork’s continued presence in both queer and pro-Palestinian contexts affirms Goen’s commitment

45 Plazm, “Gaza Love: Artist Series N°48 by Kyle Goen”, *Medium*, 25 November 2023, <<https://magazine.plazm.com/gaza-love-41eaf5efbcb4>>, [accessed: 22.08.2025].

46 J. Decter, “Infect the Public Domain with an Imagevirus: General Idea’s AIDS Project”, *Afterall* 2007, v. 15, p. 96–105; M. Wyrick, “Collaborative AIDS Art and Activism: Content for Multicultural Art Education”, *Visual Arts Research* 1993, v. 19, no. 2, p. 44–54.

47 A. Rounthwaite, *Asking the Audience: Participatory Art in 1980s New York*, Minneapolis 2017, p. 155–201.

48 *Queer|Art*, “Statement of Solidarity with Palestine”, <<https://www.queer-art.org/blog/statement-of-solidarity-with-palestine>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].



La Lola Rizo. *La Lola Rizo sees fire*. 2024. Photography. Skirt by Sergio Lopez (Masaya), photograph by Alexandra Herrera

to linking struggles across lines of sexuality, race, and colonial occupation, insisting on a shared visual politics of resistance.

Since October 2023, the engagement of queer artists with the political situation in Palestine has intensified. Across visual arts, performance, music, and digital media, queer voices have mobilized to condemn Zionist violence. As shown above, this wave of creative resistance was not new, but was expanded as a continuation of the long history of queer and Palestinian solidarities. One such mobilization of solidarity was *Through the Window's* fifth edition entitled *We Sees Fire: Queer Art Against Genocide*.⁴⁹

Through the Window (TTW) began in 2020 as an online gathering space for queer artists, thinkers, and nightlife workers from Turkey and the Netherlands, a response to the double pressure of pandemic isolation and increasing state repression.⁵⁰ What started as a modest platform for connection and visibility quickly grew into a transnational network, bringing together voices from across the globe. TTW organises annual online exhibitions, with each edition tackling urgent political realities. Its fifth installment, launched in 2025 and featuring nearly thirty queer artists, turned explicitly toward Palestine. Through a wide array of artworks, including installations, performances, and sound pieces, TTW artists drew on both personal and collective histories to forge new links between global struggles. Familiar symbols of resistance, the watermelon, the keffiyeh,

49 A. Turan, "We Sees Fire: Queer Art Against Genocide", *Metropolis M*, 26 July 2024, <<https://metropolism.com/nl/feature/we-sees-fire-queer-art-against-genocide/>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

50 "About", *Through the Window*, <<https://throughthewindow.community/en/hakkinda/>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

the Palestinian flag, were re-imagined and set alongside Indigenous knowledge and diasporic memory, creating a shared language of defiance.

One of the most striking contributions to this year's *Through the Window* came from La Lola Rizo, a Nicaraguan artist, educator, and performer whose practice bridges political drag, cabaret, and experimental performance. In their piece, photographed against the volcanic landscape of Nicaragua, Rizo wears a sweeping skirt in the colours of the watermelon, transforming their body into a living banner of solidarity. The gesture connects queer and decolonial struggles across geographies, invoking memory and futurity in a single stance. Rizo's work insists on art as an embodied practice of resistance. Their ongoing trajectory, recognized by awards including the Bial en Resistencia Award (2019) and the Prince Claus Seed Award (2023), amplifies the voices of Central American queer communities while aligning with global movements for justice.

The watermelon has long been used as a surrogate for the Palestinian flag, especially in contexts where the display of the flag itself is criminalized or suppressed. Its red, green, white, and black colours replicate the composition of the Palestinian flag, and its use in visual activism has become a coded, yet highly recognizable, form of protest. Rizo's choice to clothe themselves in this symbol reasserts its significance. The setting of the image, Momotombo, further deepens its political resonance. The volcano, located in Rizo's native Nicaragua, is a natural monument known for its symbolic weight as a site of indigenous memory. By positioning themselves before this landscape, Rizo forges a connection between the history of Central American anti-imperialist resistance and the current fight for Palestinian liberation. In this context, the landscape becomes an active participant in the narrative of resistance. *La Lola Rizo sees fire* is a powerful articulation of queer decolonial aesthetics. It subverts the notion that queerness must be tethered to Western liberal ideals of visibility and progress as it aligns queerness with ancestral knowledge and global resistance. This radically differs from the narratives often mobilized in pinkwashing rhetoric.

Conclusion

In July 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a white heterosexual man, addressed the U.S. Congress, a majority of which are also white heterosexual men. During his speech, he mockingly referred to the queer people expressing their solidarity with Palestine as "Chickens for KFC," which drew chuckles and timid applause.⁵¹ By that time, Netanyahu was already under the International Criminal Court's investigation, and a few months

51 Israeli Government, "PM Netanyahu's Address to a Joint Meeting of the US Congress", *Government of Israel*, 24 July 2024, <<https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-congress240724>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

later, an arrest warrant was issued against him for alleged war crimes in Gaza.⁵² What his quip attempted to erase is the long and consistent history of queer solidarity with Palestine, a lineage that has persisted for decades despite the state of Israel's systematic pinkwashing campaigns. Far from being naïve or co-opted, queer communities across the globe have resolutely aligned their struggles with Palestinian liberation, recognizing in the shared logics of militarism, occupation, and social exclusion a mirror of their own fights for survival and visibility.⁵³ Despite the Zionist state's efforts, since October 2023, Palestinian flags have become integral elements of Pride marches, and similar symbols of solidarity have been featured in art. This quest for visibility is not confined to the queer movement. As recent ethnographic research indicates, Palestine solidarity protests have become a crucial arena for a wide array of marginalized communities to collectively assert their presence, transforming a shared experience of political exclusion into a potent, transregional exercise of belonging.⁵⁴

In tracing this trajectory, this article has mapped a foundational genealogy of coalitional practice, moving from the quiet, site-specific interventions of the late 1980s to the expansive, transregional visual protests of the present day. While this study focused on a select archive of artworks, it sought to establish a critical framework for future research at the urgent intersection of queer aesthetics, activist archives, and the ongoing struggle for Palestinian liberation. By identifying how these visual strategies have historically opposed the fragmentation of social justice movements, this article has demonstrated that queer solidarity is not a reactive impulse, but a structured, long-term political methodology.

Returning to Félix González-Torres's *Forbidden Colors*, it can be observed that a single gesture can hold multiple worlds of resistance. Four monochrome panels become a quiet act of defiance, smuggling the criminalized colours of the Palestinian flag into the pristine walls of a New York gallery. González-Torres forged a deliberate link between the Zionist project and the AIDS-era realities of queer disappearance in the United Sta-

52 International Criminal Court, "Situation in the State of Palestine: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I rejects the State of Israel's challenges to jurisdiction and issues warrants of arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant", 24 July 2024. <<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

53 D. Cowen et al., "Queer Palestinian Solidarity Work: Coalition, Encampments, and Affective Activisms", *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 2025, v. 50, p. 119–136, <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/964510>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

54 J.J. Grimm, L. Mauthofer and T. Sixta, "If Gaza Burns, Berlin Burns—Transregional Solidarity Between Appeal, Accountability and Belonging", *Middle East Critique* 2026, March, p. 1–22.

tes.⁵⁵ His work makes clear that solidarity is not an optional extra, but an ethical necessity born of recognizing the shared conditions of dispossession. This article traced the persistence of that imperative into the twenty-first century, showing how contemporary queer artists have carried forward and expanded upon the coalitional vision González-Torres embodied. From interventions that reject the pinkwashing narrative to works that foreground Palestinian voices, histories, and struggles, queer artists have refused the severing of their liberation from others'. In documenting these practices, this article sought to prove that queer resistance to pinkwashing is by no means an invention of recent years, but part of a longer historical continuum. From the AIDS crisis to the present, queer communities have recognized in Palestine's struggle a mirror of their own fights for survival and dignity. Time and time again, it is through visual art that these connections are made visible. If *Forbidden Colors* offered one quiet wall of refusal in 1988, today's queer artists expand that wall into a global chorus, making it harder for erasure to succeed. Standing at the intersection of these struggles, they demonstrate that liberation cannot be partitioned and that the fight against genocide, dispossession, and erasure is often one and the same fight.

55 J. Sánchez Cruz. "Forbidden Colors (1988): Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Remnants of Solidarity", *ASAP/Review*, 28 October 2024, <<https://asapjournal.com/review/forbidden-colors-1988-felix-gonzalez-torres-remnants-of-solidarity/>> [accessed: 22.08.2025].

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