



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

Karola Kraus
General Director
Museum of Modern Art Ludwig Foundation (Mumok)

By e-mail: karola.kraus@mumok.at

Mag. Dr. Johan F. Harthe
Rector
Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna

By e-mail: rektor@akbild.ac.at

30 May 2022

Dear Karola Kraus

Dear Mag. Dr Harthe

We are writing on behalf of the Italian Society of Middle East Studies SeSaMO (www.sesamoitalia.it) to express our concern and dismay in relation to the cancellation of a talk Dr Walaa Alqaisiya was supposed to give today, 30 of May 2022, at the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies. The lecture was scheduled as part of the Institute's Spring Curatorial Programme 2022, "Art Geographies", jointly organized by Verein K, by the Academy of Fine Arts, and by Mumok.

As the sole Italian scholarly association devoted to the study of the Middle Eastern region across all discipline and historical periods, SeSaMO's mission entails the defense of academic freedom and freedom of expression both within the region and globally, that is in all contexts whereby scholars advancing knowledge in and about the region are targeted for their views and intellectual endeavours.

Dr Walaa Alqaisiya is an internationally recognized scholar currently affiliated as Marie Curie Research Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), at the London School of Economics Middle East Centre (UK) and at Columbia University (USA). Dr Alqaisiya's research focuses on issues of critical theory, feminism, and decoloniality in multiple indigenous locales, Palestine included. All the institutions Dr Alqaisiya is affiliated with hold the most rigorous codes of practice against anti-Semitism, as does the European Commission, the main sponsor of Dr Alqaisiya's research.

We came to know that the Institute of Art Theory and Cultural Studies invited Dr Alqaisiya to take part in its Spring Curatorial Programme 2022, from May 23 to June 1 2022, by contributing to the main feminist decolonial focus of the conference a lecture based on her forthcoming book "Decolonial Queering in Palestine" (Routledge, 2022). The topic of the lecture had been duly agreed and all travel arrangements made when Dr Alqaisiya was informed by the organizers about the cancellation of her talk. As a reason for this, the organizers mentioned pressures from groups such as the Council of Jewish Students in Austria and KESHET Austria. It seems these organizations lodged complaints based on the alleged anti-Semitism of Dr Alqaisiya. At present the grounds upon which such defamatory accusations have been made are totally unspecified, thus preventing Dr Alqaisiya from being able to rebut them.

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While none of the organizing bodies shared information about how they reached their decision over the talk cancellation, they proposed Dr Alqaisiya to hold a students' session on academic freedom at the very same institution cancelling the lecture, something we deem ludicrous given the easiness with which the organizers were ready to being complicit in silencing Dr Alqaisiya's work, therefore normalizing the hideous accusations being leveled at her. This is even more serious as the host organization's action and the accusations themselves seem not only to target Palestinian scholarship as such. They prevent Dr Alqaisiya from standing her ground against accusations potentially tarnishing her reputation as a scholar, and even more so in consideration of her being an early scholar women of color trying to establish her credentials in a deeply hierarchical and misogynistic environment as the Academia.

Being deeply concerned with the potential such accusations have to operate as a form of censorship towards Palestinian intellectuals and, more generally, towards all researchers who are critical of Israeli governmental policies, and to undermine legitimate accusations of anti-Semitism at a time when this is a serious issue, particularly among Europe's far right organizations including those in Austria, Sesamo calls upon the organizers to rescind their decision about the cancellation of Dr AlQaisiya's talk and issue a full apology. Moreover, SeSaMO urges the organizers to inform Dr Alqaisiya in writing about the nature of the accusations raised against her; communicate the regulations and processes that led to the decision to cancel her lecture, and the grounds available to appeal and redress the decision.

Sincerely

SeSaMO's Steering Committee

CC

Walaa Alqaisiya, Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy)

Jelena Petrovic, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna