

News

Turmoil and Resignations Over Palestine Support at Manhattan's 92NY

Five workers resigned and one lost her job after the organization announced a policy against expressions of “politics or social issues,” which they say disproportionately targets pro-Palestine views.



Isa Farfan September 10, 2024



The 92NY building in Manhattan (photo by Ajay Suresh via Wikimedia Commons)

A staffer of Manhattan's 92NY, formerly known as the 92nd Street Y, lost her job and at least five other workers resigned after the institution implemented a policy prohibiting patron-facing

employees from “expressing any personal views about politics or social issues.” Some workers say the policy disproportionately cracks down on pro-Palestinian sentiment.

Hyperallergic interviewed six former and current 92NY employees and reviewed disciplinary documents, incident reports, and other internal communications between staff and leadership regarding policies explicitly related to pro-Palestinian sentiment. The 92NY denies that any employee has been fired because of noncompliance with the policy.

Hyperallergic verified the former worker’s separation agreement, which came after several warnings that noncompliance with the policy could result in termination.



At least five members of 92NY Art Center faculty, including Will Hogue (above), have resigned after the institution implemented a policy prohibiting patron-facing employees from “expressing any personal views about politics or social issues.” (image courtesy Will Hogue)

The 92nd Street Y is a 150-year-old nonprofit arts and culture community center, founded as a Jewish organization in 1874. While the institution serves a Jewish core base, it now recognizes itself as a “[global center](#),” holding arts education programming and, until recently, a literary series that once hosted authors including Roxane Gay, Margaret Atwood, and Elif Batuman.

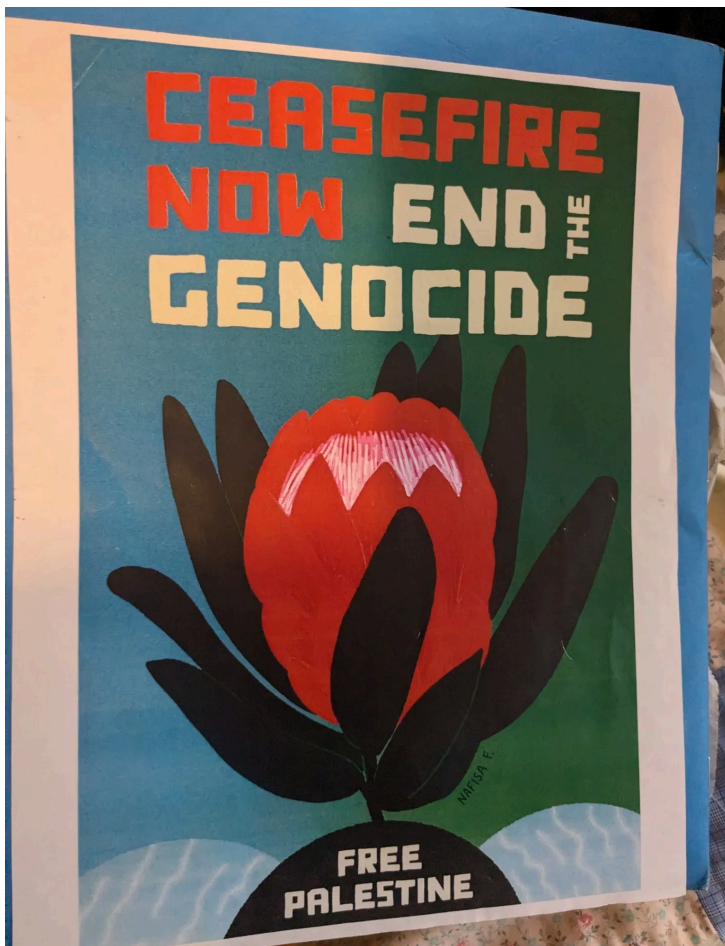
The center came under scrutiny last October when it [canceled](#) Pulitzer-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen’s literary talk after he signed an open letter calling for Israel to halt its attacks on

Gaza. The entire staff of 92NY's Unterberg Poetry Center quit in the wake of the incident and the series was suspended.

The former program manager of the 92NY's Art Center, Siena, who asked to be identified by her first name for fear of legal action, lost her job on August 19 after she received warnings for refusing to remove a watermelon sticker from her ID badge and a poster reading "Ceasefire Now, End the Genocide, Free Palestine" from her workspace, according to disciplinary documents reviewed by *Hyperallergic*.

In mid-July, the museum implemented a new policy banning all forms of political expression for public-facing workers. Even after it took effect, several former and current employees told *Hyperallergic* that an Israeli flag remained hanging in a prominent workspace in the building. They said they were concerned that the policy permitted displays of support for Israel, but not solidarity for Palestine.

Siena was asked five times beginning on July 16 to remove the poster and did not comply, according to a written warning from 92NY's human resources department. Another email informed Siena that her poster, which was in violation of "92NY policy," would be "covered" until she took it down.



The poster Siena said she hung in her classroom (left) and the sticker she allegedly wore on her ID badge (right) (images used with permission)

Siena said she explained to leadership that she found the policy discriminatory, given that 92NY has issued public support for Israel since Hamas's October 7 attack and Israel's escalating violence in Gaza. An Israeli flag still hangs in the lobby, and a donation link for Friends of the IDF disappeared from the organization's website earlier this month. Siena also said she raised concerns to leadership that the policy only targeted employees with pro-Palestinian politics.

On August 13, a human resources officer sent Siena a written warning of termination.

“Failure to comply with repeated work instructions to remove your poster and ID badge sticker warrants this Written Warning. Your failure to comply with work instructions is also insubordination,” the email said. “Further failure to comply will result in additional disciplinary including suspension, up to and including termination.” Six days later, Siena was asked to sign an agreement stipulating the cessation of her employment.

In response to *Hyperallergic's* request for comment, a 92NY spokesperson said that the organization is “a community center that serves a very diverse patron base” with a primary responsibility to “ensure that people from all backgrounds feel comfortable and welcomed, consistent with the values of the organization.”

The spokesperson's statement continues:

Over the summer, in advance of the national elections and in the midst of various geopolitical conflicts, like many institutions that are not advocacy organizations, we crafted a neutral and wide-ranging policy asking employees in patron-facing roles to refrain from expressing any personal views about politics or social issues. This policy is not directed at what employees advocate in their personal lives or when they are not around patrons at 92NY. It focuses only on what employees express in front of patrons and in public areas of the building, in which context, we ask that they keep their personal politics to themselves. This policy is not about Israel or Palestine, it is a broad policy meant to address political advocacy of any kind in a highly polarized environment. As we have rolled the policy out, we've had conversations with several employees who were advocating for a wide spectrum of causes, asking them to please refrain from doing so. Not a single employee has been fired due to this policy.

A similar statement citing concerns of “unintentionally alienat[ing]” visitorship was provided to *Hyperallergic* last month by the Noguchi Museum in Queens, where three gallery attendants have been **terminated** for failing to comply with a policy banning staff from wearing the Palestinian headscarves known as *keffiyehs*.

Last December, Siena authored an internal letter calling on 92NY executive leadership to permit staff dissent in the face of its public-facing **pro-Israel stance**. The missive, signed by 61

employees, also condemned the cancellation of Nguyen's literary talk as "part of a disturbing trend of punishing writers, artists, and public figures for advocating for Palestinian rights."

"Obviously it's bad for arts institutions to censor ANY form of expression, including pro-Palestinian," Nguyen told *Hyperallergic*.

Executive leadership responded to the letter by offering one-on-one meetings with undersigned employees, according to an email.

Current and former employees told *Hyperallergic* there was no explicit restriction on political icons or posters before July, and some reported wearing the same watermelon sticker as Siena on their badges before the policy took effect.

Will Hogue, a former program coordinator at 92NY who resigned on August 14, attributes the policy to an incident that occurred between himself and a patron while he was wearing pro-Palestinian symbols.

At the end of May, a visitor approached Hogue at his desk while he was wearing a Palestinian flag pin and a watermelon T-shirt, according to an incident report Hogue said he sent to 92NY's lawyers.



The pin Hogue said he often wore to work (image used with permission)

The patron, according to the document, accused Hogue of calling for the “annihilation of all Jews,” would not leave Hogue’s desk, used profanity, and demanded he not pick up his work phone, which was ringing, while the patron was speaking to him. The visitor also told him it was “probably [his] last day” at the 92NY.

Hogue said he reported the verbal altercation to Human Resources as harassment, and he was immediately put on paid leave for seven weeks while lawyers investigated.

When he returned, Hogue said he was told the patron was “in the wrong,” and was notified of the new blanket policy on political expression, which he said included displaying the Palestinian flag.

When Hogue asked if he could wear an Israeli flag pin, he alleges that he was told he could.

The 92NY did not respond to an inquiry from *Hyperallergic* on whether or not displays of Israeli flags in the office are deemed to be in violation of its political expression policy.

Hazel Elsbach, a 92NY jewelry design teaching artist, resigned before Siena’s departure. Elsbach, who is Jewish, said that when she began working at 92NY she thought it was a “really open-minded place for progressive Jewish thought.” But after October 7, the work culture changed, Elsbach said.

“We were kind of dancing on the ice just trying to feel out who it would be safe to talk to,” Elsbach said. A growing dissonance between Elsbach’s beliefs and the organization’s culture led her to resign in early August.

On her last day at 92NY, Siena sent an email out to some of her colleagues.

“I wanted to let you know that I have been effectively terminated from my role as the Art Center Program Manager due to my visible solidarity with the people of Palestine,” she wrote.

Three former and current employees, who spoke to *Hyperallergic* on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation, said they received a call from an art department supervisor who told them there were “inaccuracies” in Siena’s narrative and asked them to agree to “check [their] politics at the door.” The supervisor did not provide additional information about what the inaccuracies were, the employees said.

In her email, Siena also communicated the motives behind her protest, referencing the impact that war has had on her own life.

“I lost my father in 9/11,” Siena told *Hyperallergic*. “Any time innocent people are being killed, especially in some sort of nationalized, politicized, revenge sort of setting, I just have an intimate

understanding of what that sort of loss actually means, and how misguided it is to try to respond with more violence.”

Employees also told *Hyperallergic* that the organization’s status as an arts institution implies a responsibility to foster dissent.

“As a Jewish institution, 92NY should stand up for the sanctity of the lives of Israeli and Palestinian civilians in equal measure,” Siena’s letter to 92NY executive leadership reads. “As a home for arts and culture, it is our role to be a cultural leader in tolerating dissent, making space for meaningful discussions, and accepting discomfort in order to explore tough issues.”

Editor’s note 9/10/24 7:25pm EST: The headline and text of this article were edited for accuracy to reflect that the former program manager of the Art Center lost her job after being asked to sign an agreement stipulating the end of her employment.