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Study of Perspective HoP Courtesy of the artist, a/political

This Wikileaks and a/political show exposes dark truths of modern politics

A new exhibition, States of Violence, places top secret documents alongside art by Vivienne Westwood and Ai Weiwei – here, the curators talk to Dazed about risking legal action in the name of free speech.

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Thom Waite

Back in 2020, the late Vivienne Westwood was suspended in a giant cage outside London's Old Bailey, dressed as a canary. Why? As a protest against plans to extradite Julian Assange – the Wikileaks founder credited with bringing to light millions of censored government documents involving war crimes, spying and corruption – to the US, where he faces the possibility of a 175-year prison sentence.

Westwood wasn't alone. Amid deportation attempts, assassination plots, and other efforts to silence Assange since the US government launched a criminal investigation in 2010, a number of artists and agitators have voiced their support, tapping into a long tradition of art and activism going hand-in-hand. In 2019, M.I.A. performed in front of the Home Office in his name, and Pamela Anderson publicly condemned his imprisonment. Last year, Ai Weiwei created an homage out of the treadmill Assange sent him in 2016.

Despite the public outcry, however, Assange remains looked up in Belmarsh Prison (AKA "Britain's Guantanamo Bay"), where he was moved in 2019 after several years of taking refuge in the Ecuador Embassy. There, the fight for his extradition continues, mirroring a disturbing decline of free speech and human rights in the UK.

States of Violence, a new exhibition curated by the art and activist organization a/political, is set to bring together much of the creative work that has been created in response to the persecution of Assange, and the campaign against government oppression – from war and torture, to police brutality and surveillance – that he has come to represent. Featured works, from the likes of Ai Weiwei, Vivienne Westwood, Dread Scott, and Andrei Molodkin, will aim to shine a light on global power structures, laying bare "the darkest truths of our contemporary reality".

Art is far from the most provocative part of the show, though. For the first time ever in the UK, *States of Violence* will also present "SECRET+NOFORN" (2022), a body of work by the Institute for Dissent and Datalove that represents the largest-ever hardcopy publication of top secret government cables uncovered by WikiLeaks in 2010. Technically, even looking at these documents could make you complicit with Assange's alleged crimes under the Espionage Act, but according to a/political it's a risk that's worth taking.

How did this unprecedented collaboration with WikiLeaks first come about?

a/political: The collaboration [was] a meeting of minds between two independent organizations who prioritize freedom of speech, and felt a state of emergency. Many of the artists that a/political work with stand alongside Wikileaks and renounce the persecution of journalists and whistleblowers. The artists, have, themselves, been intimidated, censored or imprisoned for their ideas. With Julian Assange fighting extradition in Belmarsh Prison, we understood the impact this case has on journalism, globally, and decided now was the time for this collective statement.

Is it true that visitors could technically be prosecuted for viewing some of the materials included in the exhibition? Why, in your opinion, should they take that risk?

a/political: We are showing 'SECRET+NOFORN' (2022) by the Institute for Dissent and Datalove, which comprises all of the 'Cablegate' US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks classified 'SECRET' or 'SECRET//NOFORN' in chronological order. These cables can all be accessed online, and many media outlets have used them as the basis for their articles and reports. However, by showing them in physical form, we wanted to highlight the extreme and perverse nature of the Espionage Act 1917, the specific law Julian Assange was indicted under in 2019.

The law is so wide-reaching that if you obtain information from these cables – actively or passively – you're complicit in the crime. We will push this further by handing the public a copy of one of the documents that have resulted in Assange's indictment. Let's remember that people take this risk every day when they access the WikiLeaks website. It's no different in [a] cultural setting.

How did you navigate these sorts of legal issues when putting the show together? Are there still fears of censorship ahead of the opening?

a/political: As an organisation there are always prickly parts to the projects we work on. The question we ask ourselves is: 'Is the statement worth the risk?' For us, there is nothing more important than fighting for free speech, and the case against Assange will change the future of press freedom irrevocably.

We will be showing work that has been censored elsewhere. Every day the artists we work with put themselves on the line for the art they produce. We are stronger when we stand together.

Why was it important to place the work of iconic artworks alongside the political documents in this exhibition?

a/political: Rather than 'exhibition', let us call this a collective objection against government oppression. Contemporary art, investigative journalism, and these political documents all speak truth. By placing them together as one gesture, artists, agitators, icons, and investigative journalists are coming together to unveil abuse of power, and tactics used to intimidate and suppress those that are quite simply telling the truth. While some artworks reveal information, others work to protest our current situation and posit a world where we are not burdened by [an] imperialist agenda.

Are there any individual artworks you'd like to highlight – perhaps ones of particular historical significance?

CRISTIN TIERNEY

a/political: 'Political Prisoners in Contemporary Spain' by Santiago Sierra comprises 24 black-and-white photographs of politicians, activists, artists and journalists who are supporting Catalan independence and are under arrest or have faced charges for sedition. The work created international headlines when it was removed from ARCO Madrid before the opening 'to avoid controversies'. Here, not only the work of art but the consequences of its exhibition powerfully revealed the political climate. Within *States of Violence*, it also points to the political agenda of Assange's incarceration.



Obliterated Power Pentagon Courtesy of the artist, a/political

Freedom of speech is at the center of a notoriously complex and controversial debate – what do you consider the greatest threats to free speech in 2023?

a/political: The imprisonment and possible extradition of Julian Assange is the greatest threat to freedom of speech in modern times. We will be displaying a map created by the independent, journalistic outlet *Declassified* that details conflicts of interest and irregularities in the British court proceedings around this case. There were plans to assassinate him in the Embassy, surveillance of privileged conversations, and even attempts to steal the nappies of his children for their DNA. These are the acts of governments that claim to be democracies with press freedom.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

If Julian is extradited this would have a chilling effect on journalism, not just in the UK and US, but all over the world. It sends a signal to other countries that [it] is OK to torture and imprison a journalist for telling the truth, revealing war crimes, [and] speaking out against illegal state violence that [was] hidden from the public.

Is there more freedom to talk about controversial or classified issues in the art world, compared with the political or journalistic spheres?

a/political: Just like journalism and politics, the art world can be corrupted by power. In politics, there is a revolving door system that allows for fossil fuel execs to enter government and be responsible for climate change policy. We have a system of mass media that rewards journalists for following the government line and punishes those who expose war crimes. Articles about war are sponsored by Lockheed Martin and The Grammys are brought to you by Pfizer. However, crucially, in the art world, just like in journalism and politics, there are those who are unafraid to speak out. Those are the voices that we stand beside.

What do you hope visitors will take away from *States of Violence*?

a/political: As the artist Kendell Geers states: 'Art changes the world, one perception at a time.'

States of Violence will be on view at a/political, The Bacon Factory, 6 Stannary Street, SE11 from March 24 to April 8, 2023.