

Cloud Studies: Context and Controversy

Note: A copy of the statement below was included in a display cabinet in the Whitworth Art Gallery during the Cloud Studies Exhibition. The references included in the statement to “the case” refer to the display cabinet.

Cloud Studies brings together a body of work by the research agency Forensic Architecture, based at Goldsmiths, University of London. The investigations included in the exhibition address complex international issues on which there is a range of deeply and widely held views within and across communities. We recognise the exhibition can be challenging and that it may create strong reactions and cause discomfort, including from those who disagree with its content. The entrance to the exhibition includes a printed statement authored by Forensic Architecture, titled ‘Forensic Architecture stands with Palestine’. The statement was written by Forensic Architecture and expresses their views.

The Whitworth, as part of The University of Manchester, is a non-political organisation and while respecting the right of the authors to express their views, they should not be considered to represent those of the Whitworth or the University. This case gives voice to some different perspectives on the subject matter raised in Forensic Architecture’s exhibition, and represents the views of the authors of those perspectives.

We are aware that some elements of the statement of Forensic Architecture, and the statements included in this case, have been the subject of scrutiny, with some individuals and groups challenging aspects of the content, asserting that it is inaccurate and/or causes offence.

The statements raise complex issues with diverse and strong views held about the subject matter and how this is described by the authors. We also recognise that there are many different views and perspectives held on these issues, beyond the viewpoints represented here. Some individuals and groups have demanded that the statements are not displayed in our gallery; others have emphasised the importance of them being shown.

Having considered the range of views expressed, we have concluded that it is appropriate for the two statements included in this case to be displayed in our gallery, along with the statement of Forensic Architecture. We explain the key reasons for this below.

Museums and galleries have traditionally been a space of experimentation and challenge and we hope that the Whitworth can be a place where we may be able to debate, discuss and disagree well.

We have an important role in promoting artistic and academic freedom and creating a positive and inclusive environment for our community, which allows for diversity of perspectives and views. We recognise that advancing ideas and learning through debate is a critical part of what we do. We encourage and promote robust debate, which tolerates and understands different viewpoints, even on controversial topics. Seeking to educate, and facilitate understanding, are important to this. Our exhibitions often provide a platform for further enquiry.

In addition, as a university and gallery, there are various rights and duties which apply across our work, including the protection of academic freedom, freedom of speech and expression and duties under equality laws.

Having regard to the above, but again recognising that this is complex, we consider that the best course of action is for the statements to be displayed within our gallery and, in line with the rights and

duties referred to above, to provide our community with information and a safe and empathetic environment which enables reflection and facilitates civil debate and discussion.

One issue which has generated debate is whether or not the statements contain material which is antisemitic. Our University, along with many others, is guided when interpreting and understanding antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition, which is included below:

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

There is some further information about the IHRA definition, including illustrative examples, on the website of the IHRA (www.holocaustremembrance.com). The IHRA definition, and its adoption by universities, have been the subject of much debate, with a range of feelings, often quite strong, expressed on the subject.

We hope that through displaying these statements we are able to support constructive reflection and debate and promote further enquiry into these complex issues for our local and global communities.