

agreements.⁶ The suffocation of spaces for discussion and debate accompanied by a burgeoning culture of self-censorship suggests a worrying turn towards authoritarianism.

While in Singapore the Bureau came to focus on migrant labour, in Berlin it is concerned with creative labour. “Creativity” is a neoliberal term, affiliated with an individual’s capacity to innovate, to produce novelty and to come up with something new that can then be monetized, commercialized and even financialized. It is a kind of immaterial labour that involves generating ideas and communicating them, which requires a certain “virtuosity” with language, signs, symbols and codes, and with reference to philosopher Paolo Virno.⁷ Sociologist Pascal Gielen points out that while artists, designers and “creatives” may produce material outcomes, these are nonetheless framed within discourse that differentiates one outcome, product or experience from another.⁸ So creative labour is inherently about communication, persuasion and thus performance. Furthermore, it is a kind of “mental work” that cannot be left behind in the office or studio. After all, who knows when a good idea will arise? As such, creatives are at work all the time.

It’s not uncommon for artists to present themselves as entrepreneurs, leveraging their ethnicity, gender disposition or other identity markers as a marketable quality, often via by self-identifying performances on social media. Around 2019 I was talking with a (white) German curator who told me that he was seeking “a black woman, preferably queer and with a PhD” to talk on a panel about climate change. This made me wonder about how artists seeking to professionalise must perform to these kinds of representational criteria and prove their authenticity. Are artists self-exoticising, playing up their race, minority status or even traumas to get gigs? Now as we are witnessing the limits of so-called “wokeness”, are different struggles being played off each other, hedging German racism behind the spectacle of competitive victimhood? To recall a Bureau participant in Singapore: as distinctions between work, life, leisure, self-expression and self-promotion dissolve, it seems that also in Berlin, stereotypes have become an unwelcome way of life.

Sumugan Sivanesan, January 2025.

6 Anu Shukla, 2024. Berlin venue Oyou to be evicted after year-long legal battle against ‘state intimidation’, RA, 10 December. <https://ra.co/news/81774>

7 Paolo Virno, 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis Of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles & New York.

8 Pascal Gielen, 2009. *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Politics and Post-Fordism*, Valiz, Amsterdam.

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Cover photo: Cultural workers protest Senator Joe Chialo’s proposed anti-discrimination bill, Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 8 January 2024.

Bureau of Race Neutrality Berlin



Creative Labour

The Bureau of Race Neutrality is a participatory artwork, collective think tank and collaborative consultancy that seeks to divest from race as a category of difference. It was initiated during a residency at the Singapore Art Museum's SAM Residencies programme, May 2024

Founded as a British trading port in 1819, Singapore retained racial categories from the colonial period as a means to govern, following independence in 1965. In the first colonial census in 1871, the British identified 33 races which have since been streamlined into four: Chinese, Malay-Muslim, Indian and Others (CMIO). Citizens and permanent residents are assigned a race according to paternal lineage, which determines access to public education, housing and social services. One's race is required for many seemingly unrelated tasks, such as opening a bank account, prompting one participant to remark that Singapore's racial categories have made "stereotypes into a way of life."

Race is a social construct, often determined according to visible physical differences (phenotypes) such as skin colour. Places of origin, ancestry, language and cultural practices also contribute to racialisation. "Scientific racism" — that certain hereditary characteristics predispose particular groups of people to certain attributes, eg. intelligence, or to certain kinds of behaviour, eg. criminality — has been discredited. Indeed, the recent mapping of the human genome found that humans are genetically 99.6–99.9% similar, prompting the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to advise scientists to avoid using racial categories.¹

Philosopher Michel Foucault described two functions of racism in the modern state. The first is to "fragment" and "create caesuras within the biological continuum" of the human species, in order to differentiate and govern. The second follows a fundamental logic of war: "In order to live, you must destroy your enemies." As in colonialism and slavery, certain races are thought to be less developed, biologically inferior and less-than-human. Foucault noted how race legitimises the sovereign's right to kill, however in the modern regulatory state, this does not necessarily mean to put the racialised to death, but can also mean to expose them to injury and illness by subjecting them to greater risk.²

Police violence demonstrates how the state racialises. Following the Hamas attacks in Israel, 7 October 2023, and Israel's subsequent war of reprisal, anti-Arab and

anti-Muslim sentiments were evoked in Berlin by an intimidating police presence in areas where many Arab-speaking people live. Berlin is home to significant communities with ties to both Palestine and Israel, who both organised demonstrations to voice their positions and make demands on the German state. Germany's remembrance culture of the Nazi extermination of Jewish people compels it to support Israel unwaveringly — its *Staatsräson* — and thus the Palestinian anticolonial struggle is rendered as anti-Semitic. As political scientist A. Dirk Moses usefully points out, in Germany anti-Semitism is beyond racism; it is incomparable with racisms like Islamophobia or anti-Blackness, and to do so would be anti-Semitic.³

Germany's default pro-Zionism resulted in anti-war demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine having their permits cancelled and being subject to police violence. Consequently, the criminalisation of public assembly, protest and other forms of politically-motivated non-violent direct action is of interest to the Bureau. In cultural spheres, German pro-Zionism manifests as the cancellation of Palestinian artists alongside others who might seem to be sympathetic with their struggles, notably those from Muslim majority states including Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Jewish voices critical of Zionism have also been targeted, policed and accused of anti-Semitism, and for emphatically "not heeding to German sensibilities."⁴

Cancellations intensify the precariousness of artists, especially migrants, freelancing in Germany's cultural and creative sectors and those expressing solidarity for Palestine have come under scrutiny. *Archive of Silence*⁵ is a crowd-sourced public ledger of those who have been defunded, had their contracts terminated and awards withdrawn, often for "likes" or opinions shared on social media. Berlin's Senator for Culture and Social Cohesion, Joe Chialo, caused further frictions and anxieties with his campaign to have Senate funding conditional on agreeing to a controversial IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of anti-Semitism.

His decision to defund and effectively shut down progressive cultural space, Oyouun, whom he accused of harbouring "hidden anti-Semitism", was challenged in courts. While assessments found no evidence of anti-Semitism, the funding cancellation was eventually upheld late in 2024, because the signed digital agreement was decided to be not legally binding. This directly impacted the under-represented communities Oyouun supported, notably cultural workers whose residence permits are reliant on work contracts and

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023. *Using Population Descriptors in Genetics and Genomics Research: A New Framework for an Evolving Field*, The National Academies Press, Washington, DC. <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26902/using-population-descriptors-in-genetics-and-genomics-research-a-new>

² Michel Foucault, trans: David Macey, 2003. "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, Picador, New York, pp 254–55.

³ A. Dirk Moses, 2021. "The German Catechism", *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 23 May. <https://geschichtedergewegung.ch/the-german-catechism/>

⁴ See Ana Teixeira Pinto, 2024. "Shrinking Horizons: The German Struggle against Universalism", *Third Text*, 26 July. <http://www.thirdtext.org/thinkinggaza-teixeirapinto-shrinkinghorizons>

⁵ <https://linktr.ee/archiveofsilence>