

## **Al Majalla Newspaper**

Interview by Osama Esber

English Translation

Link to article in Arabic: [Al Majaala](#)

### **1. What inspired you to compile this book? What message do you wish to convey to readers through it?**

*Art of Defiance* is rooted in the prophetic vision of the directors of The Freedom Theater, who declared that the third intifada would be fought not only in the streets but through theater, music, visual art, and poetry. This book is a tribute to that vision – an archive of creative resistance that honors and amplifies the voices of those confronting occupation, displacement, and genocide with imagination and resolve.

All our lives, artists are told that art doesn't really make a difference. I refute that. Like many artists, I still ask myself: Does what I do really matter? But then I ask: What would this world be without artists who resist? Neither question is quantifiable.

The book's central message is that art matters – that art is a force of defiance that can prompt the political imagination. It helps us confront complicity, challenge dominant narratives, and sustain life under impossible conditions.

Anyone who has participated in a movement for social change knows that art is not an accessory – it's essential. It creates symbols for organizing, gives form to critique, forges coalitions, invites reflection, and offers visions of what's possible. Press images and protest posters don't just document – they mark turning points, circulate slogans that become lived truths, and shape how we remember. Art can provoke, unsettle, clarify, and can succeed where logic may falter. It can give language to what is often unspeakable.

### **2. The book features solidarity and protest posters. What role do these posters play?**

The posters featured in *Art of Defiance* are visual weapons of resistance – against Israeli settler colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and the distortions of mainstream media. They address intersecting oppressions while centering Palestinian identity, resilience, and the urgent call for justice. They draw from a long tradition of agitprop and political graphics, functioning to mobilize, provoke, inspire, and bear witness.

There has never been a social movement without artistic production. From the Black Panthers to ACT UP to anti-globalization uprisings, graphic art has always walked hand-in-hand with organizing. These posters are not ornamentation – they are part of the infrastructure of resistance. They also serve as durable documents of their time. People sometimes ask: How much should we expect from a work of art? I say: expect a lot, but don't ask it to do everything. My version of the serenity prayer is Grant me the wisdom to know when to make art and when to stand in the picket line. If you're truly invested in art's role in social change, you need to be in the world – volunteering, organizing, connecting – not just representing struggle, but being part of it.

Being a living, breathing artist in motion is essential. It nurtures a culture where art isn't relegated to the margins but thrives in the heart of public life.

### **3. In the introduction, you discuss the historical role of graphic art from ancient Egypt to the present. What role does it play now in the Palestinian cause?**

Graphic art today plays a dual role: it functions as both a living record of Palestinian resistance and a medium of global solidarity. It builds on a long lineage of visual protest – from the graffiti of Pompeii and Renaissance placards to the illustrated broadsheets of the Reformation and the posters of 20th-century liberation movements.

Martin Luther's challenge to the Catholic Church was powered by illustrated leaflets – woodcuts by artists like Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein. Political cartoons in the 19th century helped ignite revolution. Later, AIDS-era collectives like ACT UP/Gran Fury and Group Material brilliantly and successfully used graphic art to critique public health policy and systemic neglect.

In solidarity with Palestine, my visual resistance draws from this lineage and reshapes it for the present. It confronts genocide and displacement not only by denouncing ethnic cleansing, but by asserting cultural survival. These works form a visual counter-archive to erasure – an alternative media that keeps memory and struggle alive.

### **4. Why did you choose to combine poetry with graphic art and posters?**

*Art of Defiance* unites visual culture and poetry to challenge colonialism, capitalism, and carceral logic.

My practice and teaching have long been rooted in the interplay between image and text. That relationship began in my undergraduate days, though at the time it was considered taboo in the art academy. Despite the ubiquity of text-image juxtapositions in our daily lives – from newspapers to digital feeds – art institutions were slow to embrace the power of this hybrid language. That began to shift in the 1990s.

In this book, combining poetry and visual art allows for a dialogue between image and word – a convergence of visceral protest with the emotional depth, tenderness, sorrow, and outrage of verse. The pairing insists that aesthetics and activism are not separate spheres – they are mutually reinforcing. Together, they create a multidimensional portrait of Palestinian life and resistance.

**5. You have played a role in founding several collectives such as LOUDER THAN WORDS and THINK AGAIN. How do they contribute to social and political change?**

Both THINK AGAIN (1997–2010) and LOUDER THAN WORDS (2013–2025) were born of necessity, responding to injustice in the U.S. THINK AGAIN was co-founded with David John Attyah, and LOUDER THAN WORDS with Neda Moridpour. These collectives use creative practice as a catalyst for public address and political resistance.

My solo work (1984–1997) examined representations of whiteness – what gets sold as the American Dream – in mass media shaped by patriarchy and consumer capitalism. But the 1990s marked a shift. Amid neoliberal policy changes – Clinton’s NAFTA, welfare reform, the Crime Bill – THINK AGAIN emerged to challenge the criminalization of poverty, the corporate takeover of pride parades, and the erasure of intersectionality in dominant feminism.

Working at the nexus of art and social justice, both collectives are dedicated to amplifying marginalized voices and confronting racism, patriarchy, imperialism, immigration injustice, animal exploitation, and the propaganda of corporate media.

We’ve organized public interventions such as guerrilla outdoor projections and mobile billboard trucks with interior education spaces, while also creating free, distributable visual tools – posters, postcards, books, and billboards – for use in protests, classrooms, and campaigns. Our goal is always to combine visually

provocative imagery with cultural theory and critical analysis. We use humor, research, and visual literacy to spark dialogue and support those organizing on the ground.

We operate from the belief that art can't control outcomes, but it can shape perception, influence ideology, and help shift culture.

## **6. What motivated your transnational solidarity on a personal level?**

My political formation began early. I came of age during the Vietnam War and the second wave of the women's rights movement. At thirteen, I was deeply affected by the 1970 Kent State Massacre. Later, I was fortunate to be part of a politically engaged public high school program. In college, I studied with radical media scholars and political theorists who helped me understand how visual culture and power operate in tandem.

Cuba's revolutionary cultural production – its posters, films, and educational campaigns – also had a profound influence. Cuban artists expressed powerful solidarity with Vietnam through hundreds of posters denouncing U.S. imperialism with stunning clarity. At home, movements for Black liberation, labor rights, and feminist justice formed unexpected coalitions grounded in dissent.

That sense of interconnected struggle has never left me. I strive to develop a visual language for public life – one that underscores injustice but also offers tools for intervention, understanding, and transformation.

## **7. Why do you think protest movements in the U.S. remain largely confined to academic spaces?**

While *Art of Defiance* doesn't directly address this, it critiques societal complicity and the ways in which dissent is increasingly suppressed, distorted, and disciplined – including within the university. There was a time when academic spaces allowed for some degree of radical inquiry. I could teach courses on settler colonialism, imperialism, and structural violence, assign critical readings, mount public exhibitions, and co-create activist projects with students. Today, those very same materials and actions could be grounds for termination.

The university – long imagined as a limited site of dissent, though historically funded by the medical, military, and tech industries – has always been tethered to the

establishment. What we are seeing now is not a rupture, but an escalation: a full alignment with state and corporate power, enforcing ideological conformity under the guise of neutrality and order. Whatever the limitations of the university were in the past, the level of repression we are witnessing in 2025 is unprecedented. We are living through the full force of what scholars have called the “Palestine exception to free speech,” a systematic suppression of Palestinian advocacy targeting students, artists, and educators. Students are being doxxed, blacklisted, and suspended. Faculty are censured or dismissed for signing petitions, teaching critical content, or refusing to remain silent. Entire departments are under surveillance.

This crackdown is not limited to Palestine solidarity. There is also a broader backlash against DEI initiatives, ethnic studies, and any pedagogy that confronts structural inequality. Across the U.S., state legislatures are introducing bills to ban so-called “divisive concepts,” defund DEI programs, and penalize educators for speaking out on social justice issues. These efforts are not about academic freedom – they are about control over language, memory, dissent, and imagination.

So, while protest may still emerge within academic spaces, those spaces are increasingly embattled. The conditions for organizing, teaching, and creating with integrity are eroding. And yet, this moment underscores exactly what *Art of Defiance* insists on: that dissent is not optional – it is essential. It must be practiced, protected, and amplified, especially when institutions once entrusted to safeguard critical thought are among its most powerful suppressors.

The question, then, is how we extend protest beyond the university – into streets, communities, everyday life, and the corridors of power. And how we ensure that critique is not only spoken, but embodied and enacted.

### **8. How does Arundhati Roy’s quote–“The only thing worth making universal is dissent”–relate to your book?**

This quote perfectly encapsulates the spirit of *Art of Defiance*. The book is an embodiment of dissent as a universal ethical stance. It brings together artists and poets – many of whom have paid dearly for their defiance – to insist that dissent is not merely opposition, but visionary. It is the refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice, and the insistence on imagining otherwise.

Arundhati Roy is a long-time heroine and inspiration. In her nonfiction—particularly *Field Notes on Democracy* and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*—she has written eloquently and unsparingly about the brutalities of late consumer capitalism, the global architecture of white supremacy, and the betrayal of democratic ideals by neoliberal states. Her work doesn't just analyze power; it makes a moral demand. That same spirit pulses through this book. Like Roy, I seek not only to expose structures of violence, but to amplify the voices that survive and resist them.

### **9. What do you hope to achieve through the artistic diversity in the book?**

Most importantly, *Art of Defiance* amplifies Palestinian expression, and it is fully translated into Arabic.

Hopefully, the book's diversity – of perspectives, forms, and media – will allow it to speak across cultures, borders, and movements. It challenges the idea that art must be neutral or apolitical. Instead, it offers intersectional, complex, and politically grounded resistance.

I share what many others have said, everything is connected. Whether in Palestine, Sudan, Congo, or Haiti, we witness the same forces – colonialism, land theft, resource extraction, and imperialist greed. One of my recent posters drew connections between Gaza and Los Angeles, between IOF raids and ICE raids, and between environmental collapse and militarized violence.

UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese – my newest heroine – was recently chastised by Zionists for amplifying a post that said, “The fires burning in Palestine and Los Angeles today are symptoms of the same disease, a system that values conquest over conservation, profit over people, and expansion over existence.”

### **10. How do you balance artistic aesthetics with a political message in your work?**

The supposed divide between aesthetics and politics has always seemed false to me – in contrast to the feminist recognition that the personal is political, which I've always found deeply accurate. Our most intimate decisions are dictated by law and social convention. Abortion is one of many examples. For me, aesthetics and politics are inseparable – each shape, reflect, and reinforce the other.

My work is built on the belief that aesthetics deepen politics. Dynamic visuals, haunting poetry, precise language – these are not embellishments. They amplify the urgency of the message. They offer entry points into struggle.

That said, I made peace long ago with the fact that activist art often sits outside conventional recognition. Once I committed to activist collaboration with THINK AGAIN, I knew that access to awards, funding, and institutional validation would narrow. Political art was shunned – until a brief period of flourishing in the late 1980s and 1990s, followed by the backlash of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Later, the “social practice” movement would institutionalize activist art, but under academic, discursive, institutional control.

Still, my goal has never been to get into MoMA (Museum of Modern Art.) I want the work to live on refrigerators, be wheatpasted to interrupt public space, and be present in protests and community centers – where it can breathe, ignite dialogue, and inspire action.