#FreeAssange

Every visitor to *States of Violence* violates the American Espionage Act. Hagai Ulrich on the a/political and *WikiLeaks* joint project in London, and the "colossal participatory art" of Julian Assange.

Essay / Hagai Ulrich June 28, 2023

For two weeks in March and April 2023, the Bacon Factory in London exhibited *States of Violence*, a group show addressing various situations of violence that states and their institutions organize: from torture to war, from manipulating the law and silencing dissent to the obliteration of civil liberties and the surveillance of citizens. The show has been curated by a/political, a non-profit organization working in England, with the participation of *WikiLeaks*,1 the whistleblowing website that publishes leaks of highly-critical public interest, founded in 2006 by Julian Assange. The exhibition also included works created in response to the political persecution of journalist and publisher Julian Assange, who has been held under harsh conditions since April 2019 at Belmarsh, the highest-security prison in the United Kingdom (after seeking political asylum in June 2012 and secluding himself at the Ecuadorian embassy in London).2 Assange is being held in Belmarsh until the conclusion of the legal proceedings against him, following the demand of the United States to extradite him on charges of violating the "Espionage Act of 1917." He could be facing 175 years in prison.

1200px-Julian_Assange_in_Ecuadorian_Embassy.jpg



[1]Julian Assange speaking on the balcony of the Ecuadorian embassy in London, August 19, 2012

Public domain [2]

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The exhibition featured 16 artists, collectives, and organizations, most of whom suffered harassment by their own countries due to their work and political positions. Ai Weiwei, for instance, who has been persecuted by the Chinese authorities, exhibited works from *Study of Perspective* [3] (1995-2003), a photography series in which he waves his middle finger in the center of photographs showing sites of political, cultural, economic, or religious hegemony. The finger points to the Renaissance perspective's vanishing point. Kendell Geers, once expelled from South Africa because of his opposition to Apartheid, displayed a wood and mirror panel inscribed with the pun *Here Lies Truth*. Other artists included Santiago Sierra, Andrey Molodkin, Peter Kennard, and Forensic Architecture.

Kendell Geers - Wonderland.jpg **[4]**



[5]Kendell Geers, Wonderland, 2014/2022
Courtesy of a/political and Kendell Geers

Ai WeiWei - Study of Perspective HoP-2.jpg **[6]**



[7]Ai Weiwei, Study of Perspective: Houses of Parliament, London, United Kingdom, 2005
Courtesy of a/political and Ai Weiwei

The installation *SECRET+NOFORN* (2022), by The Institute for Dissent and Datalove, featured 66 books containing segments of the *WikiLeaks* publications known as *Cablegate* [8] - some three million US State Department confidential cables circulated between 1966 and 2010 and published in 2010-2011, after having been leaked to *WikiLeaks* in 2010 by Chelsea (formerly Bradly) Manning, an American soldier serving in Iraq at the time. Following *Cablegate* and other leaks, Assange was indicted in 2019 for violating the American Espionage Act of 1917, passed to preclude local dissent of US participation in World War I. The law prohibits obtaining, copying, or describing any information that could allegedly harm the US's state security. However, alongside the discrepancies between the public statements of officials and their behavior behind closed doors, *Cablegate* revealed a vast amount of corruption, not having anything to do with harming the State and everything to do with the public interest: the extent to which the US spies on its allies and the UN, the deliberate turning of a blind eye to human rights violations, undisclosed deals of the political and economic kind, officials' lobbying for corporations, and much more.

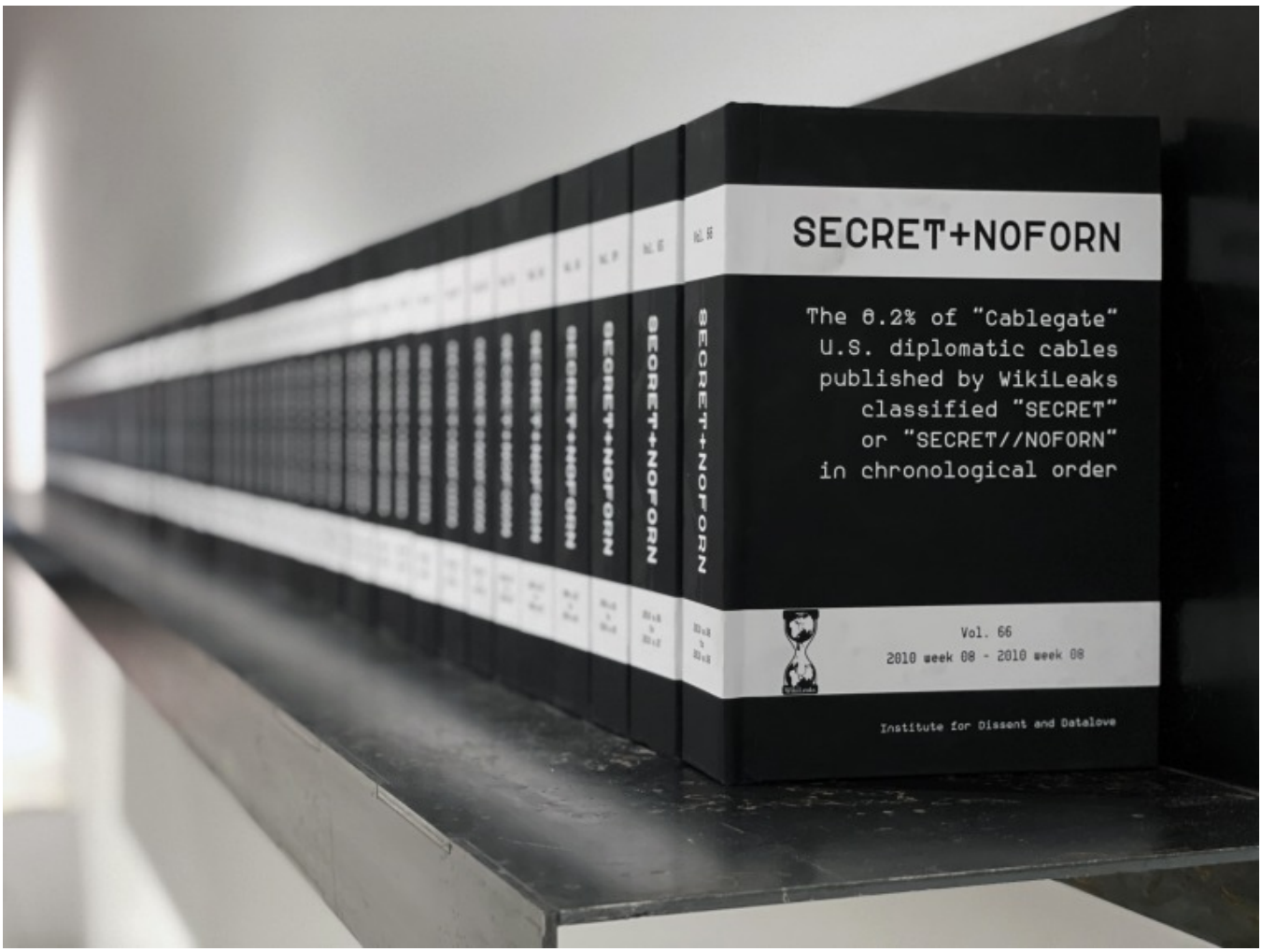
03_SECRET_NOFORM_Institute for Dissent and Datalove_2022_crop.jpg
[9]



[10]Installation view of SECRET+NOFORN, 2022, by the Institute for Dissent and Datalove

From: States of Violence, curators:a/political, WikiLeaks, 24.3.23-8.4.23, Bacon Factory, London
Photo: Petr Davydtchenko. Courtesy of a/political and the Institute for Dissent and Datalove

[6. SECRET+NOFORN (2022), Institute for Dissent and Datalove_ Photo - Petr Davydtchenko.jpg](#) **[11]**



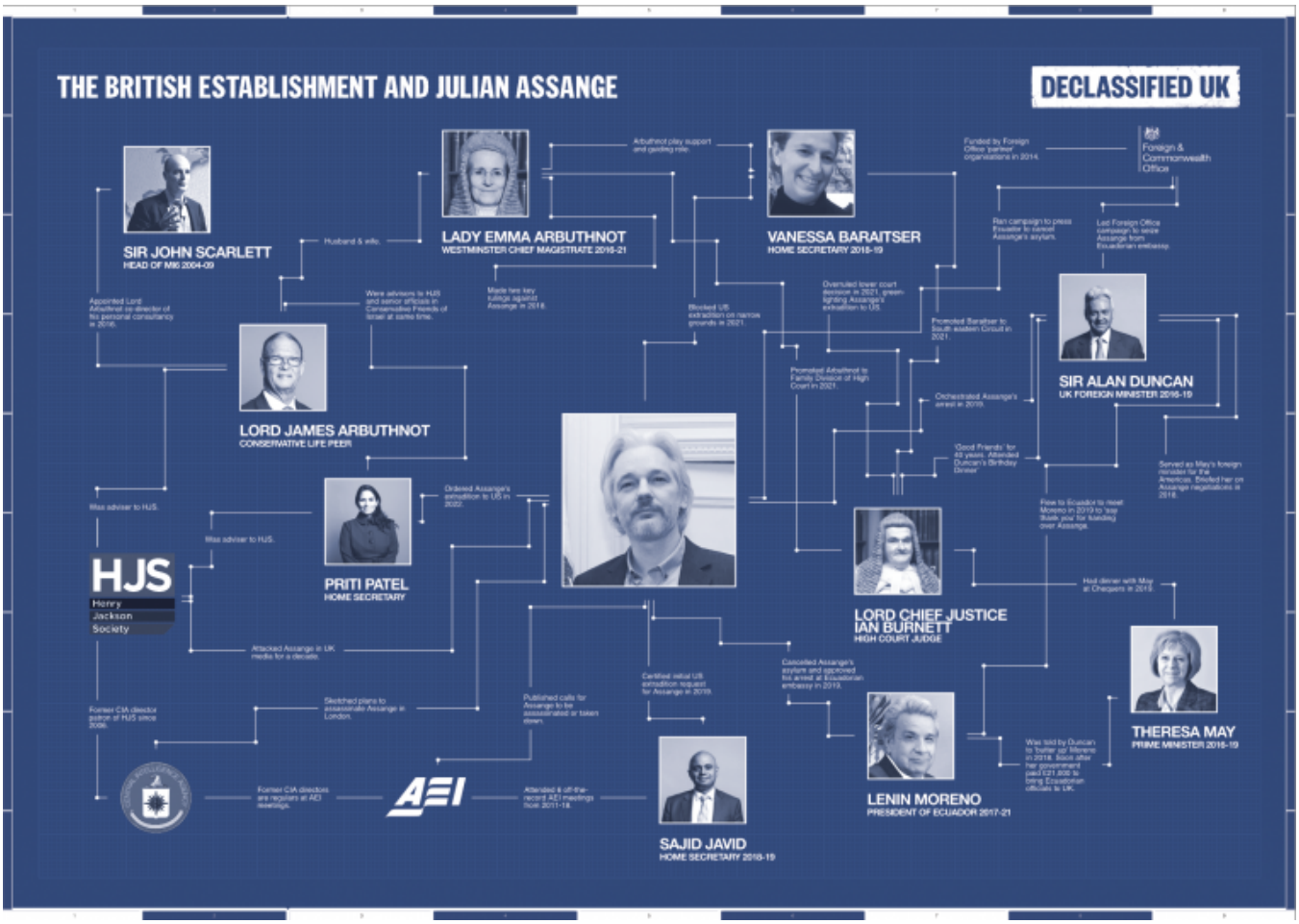
[12]Installation view of SECRET+NOFORN, 2022, by the Institute for Dissent and Datalove

From: States of Violence, curators:a/political, WikiLeaks, 24.3.23-8.4.23, Bacon Factory, London
Photo: Petr Davydtchenko. Courtesy of a/political and the Institute for Dissent and Datalove

If one printed all of *WikiLeak*s's publications, it would amount to approximately 30,000 volumes[3] that would feature torture in the American Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba (*Guantanamo Files*, 2011), war crimes, conflicts of interest in Iraq (*Iraq War Logs*, 2010), the CIA's surveillance capabilities (*Vault 7*, 2017), Russia's spying industry (Spy Files Russia, 2017), the Assad regime in Syria *(Syria Files*, 2012), corruption in Saudi-Arabia (*Saudi Cables*, 2015), as well as many highly significant leaks, concerning almost every country in the world.

The exhibition also presented the viewers with a visual chart created by the independent British journalism organization *Declassified UK* [13]: a schema displaying the irregularities behind Assange's arrest, his imprisonment and extradition demand, and the attempts to ruin his life and harm him in a variety of ways, like the plan by senior US government officials to assassinate him, the wiretapping of his and his associates' conversations, and even the intentions of stealing his children's nappies for DNA samples.

Declassified, JA and the British Establishment.png **[14]**



[15]Chart depicting the British establishment's conspiracy to persecute Assange, 2022, by Declassified UK
From the exhibition States of Violence, curators: A\Political, WikiLeaks, 24.3.23-8.4.23, Bacon Factory, London

Courtesy of a\political and *Declassified UK* [13]

In effect, as the curators of the show emphasize, any individual visiting the art exhibition and browsing *SECRET+NOFORN* was at risk of violating the Espionage Act of 1917, which can be used to criminalize anyone exposed to classified information. However, the charges against Assange are even stranger than this: regardless of the fact that he is an Australian citizen, not an American or a British one, the only thing tying him to the Espionage Act, except his exposure to state secrets, is a 2010 "computer hacking conspiracy" allegation, due to his correspondence with Manning. However, as investigative journalist Matt Taibbi has put it, Assange's "crime" accusation is absurdly thin as well [16]: the charge is that he has tried (but allegedly failed) to help Manning obtain an administrative password that could have allowed her to hide her identity when downloading the data. One remark by Assange: "No luck so far," is the evidence for establishing a draconian indictment with 18 counts, which, according to Taibi, engenders a dangerous precedent that must never be allowed: **the routine journalistic work**4 is part of breaking the law.5

This is not the first time that classified and truthful information by *WikiLeaks* has been exhibited as an art object. In *Living as Form* [17] (2011), curated by Nato Thompson,6 samples of *WikiLeaks* publications, including *Cablegate* [18], were printed and displayed. That wide-ranging exhibition sought to explore the tensions, questions, problems, and uniqueness of socially engaged art, or, by its other names: participatory art, or 'relational aesthetics', the Nicolas Bourriaud term describing the merging of art and life. *Living as Form* presented 100 past projects and some new works, but an important aspect of that exhibition was that alongside artists who produced multi-participant, or collective, social or communal collaborations of the site-specific and “useful” kinds, the exhibition also included social projects carried out by organizations with no intention of creating art, *WikiLeaks* among them.7

In the book that came out following the exhibition, art scholar Claire Bishop described participatory art as the attempt to engage the passive viewers who are unconsciously consuming and being captivated by the spectacle of modern life— Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle." Art's desire to engage viewers is also the drive to free them from a state of alienation and social distancing produced and assimilated into them by the ideological order.8 In his curatorial essay, Thompson mentions the artist Tania Bruguera, who suggested putting Marcel Duchamp's urinal back in the toilet and, thus, ironically, reintroducing a useful, non-passive, and non-spectacular aspect to art. In 2010, she placed a reproduction of Fountain (1917) in the Queens Museum of Art’s toilet, but Thompson asks: “once [the urinal] has been returned, what do we call it? Art or life?" For him, the question of whether such work is or is not art is outdated, and the more urgent, though metaphysical question is "What is life?"9

And “how about the truth?” asked fashion designer and artist Vivienne Westwood, who passed away shortly before her participation in *States of Violence*. Two years before that, in a demonstration in London, she performed in a cage, dressed up in yellow as a canary, which symbolizes whistleblowing, with the inscription "I Am Julian Assange." Westwood defined her work as activism, saying that she wished to "demolish the narrative that has been constructed by spin and the media” about Assange: "The establishment controls the narrative. Maybe they would like to tell a different story; how about the truth?"10

The problematic consequences of merging life and art were one of the major questions raised in *Living as Form*. According to Bishop, a large part of participatory art, which was mostly opposed to neoliberalism and its undemocratic expressions, at a certain point began reflecting the ideological order, be it in democracies or dictatorships, and adopted a variety of tactics associated with it.11 The open nature and usability that characterize participatory art, alongside the possibility of artists shaping the masses, may lead to the strengthening of institutional power, as Hal Foster claimed in the 1990s, in a reference provided by Bishop: the institution itself may take the place of artworks instead of highlighting them; it will become a spectacle, collect the cultural capital, and the curator will become the star.12 And by the same token, in the political reality, when the state and its mainstream media, academia, and cultural institutions take upon themselves the merging of art and life and treat participation as a laboratory experiment, there is a danger that they will shape an alienated and socially-distanced passive reality for us.

12 years after *Living as Form*, *States of Violence* refers to the fusion of art and life as a *fait accompli*. In fact, a/political claim that instead of “an exhibition,” the event may be called a "collective objection against government oppression."13 Moreover, the organizers compare art with investigative journalism in the sense that both disclose truths. Assange is a journalist and publisher, but more than that, not merely due to the precedent in *Living as Form*, he can be considered in the context of participatory art. This is also how former UK Labor leader, Jeremy Corbyn, thought about it after visiting *States of Violence*, claiming that disclosing the truth is a job for artists and that the war crimes’ leaks that Assange helped expose are no different from Picasso's painting *Guernica* [19], which brought public awareness to that war crime,14 and contributed to the formation of an active position against the strengthening of fascism before World War II.

Guernica_(3820712635).jpg **[20]**



[21]Reproduction after Picasso's Guernica, mural, 349*776 cm, placed in the town since 1997
The original painting from 1937 (oil on canvas, 349X776 cm), is currently on display at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid

Public domain [22]

This being an event of participatory art that involves art and life, the question arises: in what way does *States of Violence* break the spectacle? The answer is simple: apart from its opposition to the violent behaviors of states and their institutions, and in addition to uncovering the truth about Assange's persecution, with *SECRET+NOFORN*, the exhibition demonstrated Bishop's solution: art can cause stronger reactions than the event it represents, no matter how horrifying the real event may be. To illustrate how art can do that, she turns to philosopher Jacques Ranciere's concept: "the emancipated spectator". For Rancière, emancipation would be possible when we obliterate the separation between acting and looking, being active or passive, and understand that these binary divisions are part of the system of control over us. Looking is also an action, and interpreting the world is a way of changing it.15 With this concept in mind, Bishop claims it is possible to address the undemocratic expressions that exist in the total fusion of art and life. She also asserts that, to a certain extent, art should create antagonism, because without it, the dominant order that suppresses any discussion or debate will maintain its influence.16

As an example to this claim, Bishop presents the work *Please Love Austria* (*Bitte liebt Österreich*, 2000), Christoph Schlingensief's performance, which was perceived as both art and reality. In this staged and uncontrolled participatory art event using the format of a live reality TV show, the artist invited political asylum seekers in Vienna to compete for a residency visa and called for their

deportation while at the same time deliberately creating doubts about the realness of the event. The work created local public discourse about state institutions that perpetuate xenophobia.17

Untitled-2.jpg **[23]**



[24]Christoph Schlingensif, Please Love Austria, 2000

Photo: Paul Poet. Courtesy of Christoph Schlingensief Estate [25]

In *Please Love Austria*, the effectiveness of the performance relies on it mediating doubt. Its antagonistic nature is freeing the viewers, so to speak, allowing us to be educated about the ways in which institutions subject us to passive participation in various situations of organized violence, and raises doubt within us. A similar situation happened in *States of Violence*, and in the activities of *WikiLeaks* overall, as Corbyn reasonably suggested. When institutions like academia, the mainstream media, or politics (and art institutions, for that matter) leave us without the truth about how we are being manipulated to accept a partial and distorted narrative, they weaken our ability to make informed decisions, establish and project control over us. That is precisely (another) reason for the necessity of *WikiLeaks*. In Assange's words:

> "*[The] absence of educational investigation into how human institutions behave in present time means that people don't know how to manage the modern world," he wrote in 2012, "they don't know how to manage themselves, their organization, their family or their nation, or their civilization. Our ability to affect things is only as good as our understanding. If we make decisions not based on understanding, then what are they based on?*"18

If we look at how *WikiLeaks* behaves in reality— simply, by its very existence— the organization educates us about how geopolitics works, how states and those in power cynically exploit the law,

and how we can develop an awareness of the many aspects of the law, as well as the new technology, the spectacle of the mainstream media, and the modern financial system, and how to use them for the protection, support, and emancipation of the people. Assange is thinking about populations that are gradually becoming educated about the various states of violence they participates in: "I do not mean formal education"19 in an academy which no longer functions like that but about a deeper understanding by individuals and collectives of “how human civilization [really] works at the political, industrial, scientific, and psychological levels.”20 This is another ingredient in the news that Assange's colossal participatory art is ushering in and another cause for his persecution. Beyond this or that side, a fundamental question that surfaces through his extraordinary project is not merely "what is life?" but rather "how to live?"

Julian Assange Ecuador embassy balcony speech in full **[26]**

Video of Julian Assange Ecuador embassy balcony speech in full
Assange speaks on the balcony of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, December 21, 2012

The anonymous and antagonistic *WikiLeaks* publications are intermediaries that do not belong to any party, and this is another way in which they obliterate the spectacle. They do not conform to the binary division of "with us or against us"— they are what they are— and reveal the truth, as art in its various forms can do. Therefore, it’s not surprising that Assange and *WikiLeaks* appear in many artworks, as "Artists for Assange [27]", initiated by the Courage Foundation, an organization that provides support networks for journalists, clearly demonstrated.

So "What’s different about Julian Assange?" asked Corbyn.21 The intermediaries of art and investigative journalism in revealing truths and raising awareness are possible only to the extent that there’s a likelihood of allowing them to antagonize and inquire. However, following Assange’s persecution and many other instances of a deliberate infringement on freedom of speech, censorship, and the cynical use of the law - in the UK, the US, Australia, Canada, and the EU - the freedom of the press and art are under an existential threat, perhaps unparalleled since World War II. According to Ai Weiwei, “[Assange’s] imprisonment marks the collapse of a free and civilized society. [28]”22

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Ai Weiwei (@aiww) [29]

Ai Weiwei and Julian Assange raising the middle finger in 2015
From Ai Weiwei's Instagram account

In times when artists, writers, and publishers are sent to prison and their lives are at risk [30] because they publish the truth, Thompson's metaphysical question "What is life?" takes on a different and frightening meaning.

The urinal from 1917 may have been returned to the toilet because, for a brief moment, in a dormant and passive West, the question "What is art?" seemed no longer relevant. However, the ruin of Assange's life and the demand for his extradition due to the absurd violation of the Espionage Act of the same year, along with countless similar cases of abuse that violently razes freedom of speech, makes the question irrelevant again, but for a different reason: not because it is outdated or has been answered for, but simply for the fact that where there is no liberty, the question cannot be raised at all.

Julian Assange must be freed immediately.

The exhibition *States of Violence* (curators: a\political in collaboration with *WikiLeaks*), was presented between March 24 - April 8, 2023, at the Bacon Factory, London

- 1. The exhibition was organized by a/political, *WikiLeaks*, and the German Wau Holland Stiftung [31].
- 2. In 2012, Assange received political asylum from Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa and was later given Ecuadorian citizenship as well, but in 2017, after a new president was elected, Ecuador had began to change Assange's conditions in the embassy, making it more difficult for *WikiLeaks* to publish, and finally, in 2019, allowed the British police to break into the embassy and arrest him.
- 3. Tariq Ali and Margaret Kunstler, "Introduction," from: Tariq Ali and Margaret Kunstler (Eds.), *In Defense of Julian Assange*. 2019. London: OR Books, p. XVI
- 4. Since 2008, Assange has won over 20 awards for his journalistic work and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In recent years, over 40 freedom of the press, human rights, and individual liberty organizations have issued statements demanding his release from British prison immediately and demanding an end to the process of his extradition to the US, acknowledging the irregularity of his arrest in Britain and the charge of violating the American Espionage Act of 1917.
- 5. Matt Taibbi, "Julian Assange Must Never Be Extradited," (pp. 47-51), from: Ali and Kunstler (Eds.), *In Defense of Julian Assange*, p. 47. The article was previously published on May 30, 2019, in *Rolling Stone*: https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/wikileaks-julian-assange-extradited-taibbi-842292/ [16]
- 6. The research for the *Living as Form* archive was led by Leah Abir, co-editor and co-founder of *Tohu Magazine*.
- 7. Nato Thompson, Ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. New York: Creative Times Books, MIT Press, 246-247
- 8. Claire Bishop, "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?" (pp, 34-45)", from: Ibid, p. 33
- 9. Thompson, Ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, p. 30
- 10. Vivienne Westwood, "If Julian Goes...," from: Ali and Kunstler (Eds.), *In Defense of Julian Assange,* p. 46
- 11. Bishop, from: Thompson, Ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, pp. 36-37
- 12. Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79
- 13. Thom Waite, “This Wikileaks and a/political show exposes dark truths of modern politics,” *Dazed*, March 10, 2023. https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/58398/1/wikileaks-apolitical-julian-assange-weiwei-vivienne-westwood-states-of-violence [32]
- 14. Picasso revealed, on a broad international scale, and perhaps socially-engaged, the destruction of the Basque town in April 1937, by the Nazis, during the Spanish Civil War, and

the slaughter of 1,600 of its inhabitants. The painting was displayed at the entrance to the Spanish pavilion at the Paris World Exhibition in 1937. Picasso, who read about the war crime in the newspaper, did not paint fighter jets but rather used symbolism and cubism, and, thanks to his status, could engage viewers in the US and Europe to take a position against the strengthening of National Socialism and fascism, while the painting turned into an international event in itself.

- 15. Jacques Ranciere, "The Emancipated Spectator," pp. 271-280, *Artforum*, March 2007, p,278
- 16. Bishop, *October* 110
- 17. Schlingensief invited 12 political asylum seekers into a container for one week, and filmed them on CCTV in a "Big Brother" style reality show format, broadcast online. Each day, viewers voted on whom to deport. On top of the container, the artist hung flags of the anti-refugee FPÖ party and a sign proclaiming: "Foreigners out" (“Ausländer raus”). In addition, he stood on the roof and read out loud contradictory messages: "This is a performance" and "This is the truth." The project intended to deliberately provoke controversy, which was not understood as such by all, and the event received sympathetic reactions from both supporters of deporting refugees and supporters of their retention and created doubt about the intentions of the performance. However, according to Bishop, the work was not at all supposed to be instrumental and convert people from one side to the other but emphasized to what extent a representation of incarceration creates many and much stronger reactions than the incarceration itself, which took place a few kilometers away, in a real detention center for political asylum seekers destined for deportation. See Bishop, from: Thompson, Ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, pp. 43-44
- 18. Ai Weiwei, “A Conversation with Julian Assange,” from: Ali and Kunstler (Eds.), *In Defense of Julian Assange*, p. 171
- 19. Julian Assange, “A Cypherpunk in His Own Words,” from: Ali and Kunstler (Eds.), *In Defense of Julian Assange*, p. 212
- 20. Ibid
- 21. Dorian Batycka, "Politician Jeremy Corbyn and Others Attended the Opening of a Radical Exhibition Supporting WikiLeaks and Julian Assange,” *Artnet News*, March 27, 2023 https://news.artnet.com/art-world/wikileaks-exhibition-jeremy-corbyn-london-2275213 [19]
- 22. Avedis Hadjian, "Ai Weiwei Creates a Homage to Julian Assange," *Hyperallergic*, March 27, 2022 https://news.artnet.com/art-world/wikileaks-exhibition-jeremy-corbyn-london-227521 [19]

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[16] https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/wikileaks-julian-assange-extradited-taibbi-842292/
[17] https://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/about.htm
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