

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contacts: SmashBySmashWest@protonmail.com;
Alienated Majesty Books: pr@alienatedmajestybooks.com
Tiny Sounds Collective: tinysoundscollective@gmail.com
Brigitte Bandit: itsbrigittebetch@gmail.com

South by Southwest Uses AI Brand Protection Service to Remove Social Media Posts from Artists, Activists, and Critics on Social Media

AUSTIN, TX, March 17th — South by Southwest has used BrandShield, an AI-driven brand protection service, to report and remove Instagram posts by multiple independent Austin arts and music organizations promoting Smash by Smash West, a grassroots counter-festival that challenges SXSW's ties to military contractors, Big Tech, and the real estate developers displacing long-time Austin communities. Organizers have saved screenshots of Instagram removal notifications identifying sxsw@brandshield.com as the reporting party, and have reported both threats of account suspension and that they are no longer able to send collaborator invites on Instagram posts. Posts by independent local organizers—including Alienated Majesty Books, activists with VOCAL-TX, drag performer and LGBTQ+ Quality of Life Commissioner Brigitte Bandit, Trib Relations, and Tiny Sounds Collective—were targeted. Also taken down were some of SmashX's own posts, including an explainer about the festival's mission and an article documenting SXSW's continued collaboration with military and defense industry events despite their promises in 2024 to remove such companies from the festival.

The takedowns follow a pattern of escalating retaliation by SXSW against those who challenge its corporate partnerships, including threatening international artists with visa revocation for performing at unsanctioned showcases and legal threats against the 2024 "War Profiteers Out of SXSW" campaign, which prompted more than 100 artist withdrawals after the festival accepted the U.S. Army as a supersponsor. "A corporation that profits from platforming war profiteers and the tech companies driving displacement in Austin is now using AI surveillance tools to silence the communities most affected," said Bernice, a Smash by Smash West organizer. "Reporting Instagram posts by small local arts collectives is not going to stop people from showing up for each other. If anything, it shows exactly why a festival like this needs to exist."

Smash by Smash West, now in its third year, describes itself as "a radical alternative, an opportunity to rebuild what SXSW has taken from us." The festival, which is organized by a broad, decentralized network of unpaid organizers, is hosting over 100 events across Austin this March, including concerts, film screenings, mutual aid workshops, and community gatherings. "We find it embarrassing that SXSW feels so threatened by critique that they've used an AI damage control company to remove posts promoting alternative events in the city they claim to love," said Alienated Majesty Books in their statement on the removals. They continued to point out that "There are many things SXSW could do to improve their public image, like divesting from military and AI companies, or doing something that actually champions art instead of running what has become a pay-to-play scam." SXSW has been under the controlling ownership of Jay Penske, an LA-based billionaire who has made significant contributions to far-right candidates and causes, since his Penske Media Corporation acquired a majority stake in the festival in 2025. SmashXSmashWest's week of activity continues until March 22nd, with more shows, screenings, workshops, and protests, undeterred by SXSW's censorship, with a full calendar of events and a feed of articles available at smashxsmashwest.noblogs.org.