

Interview with Walid Raad About the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

BY BEN DAVIS | JUNE 09, 2011



When it opens, the **Guggenheim Abu Dhabi** will be far and away the largest of all the New York museum's many branches, a symbol of the institution's preeminent place as an important part of the international cultural landscape. Located on the emirate's **Saadiyat Island**, the new Guggenheim will share place with branches of the **Louvre** and **New York University**, and is a high-profile part of the UAE's makeover as a capital of world culture.

Consequently, when a group of international artists going under the name of **Gulflabor** [announced a boycott of the museum in March](#) — squarely in the middle of the festivities surrounding the **Art Dubai** art fair and the **Sharjah Biennale** in neighboring emirates — it sent shock-waves through cultural

circles. The group's action was triggered by concerns over conditions for laborers, largely guest workers from South Asia, first [spotlighted by Human Rights Watch](#). According to Gulflabor's Web site, the high-profile action came after many months of behind-the-scenes conversations with the leaders of Guggenheim about the concerns.

The heads of the Guggenheim, **Richard Armstrong** and **Nancy Spector**, struck back at Gulflabor in [an open letter of their own](#) the week after the boycott's announcement. Personally addressing two of the artists who had helped spearhead the boycott, **Emily Jacir** and **Walid Raad**, Armstrong and Spector expressed dismay that the Guggenheim's active role in helping to improve labor standards in Abu Dhabi was not acknowledged, and accused the artists of disrupting the museum's careful process of advocacy with their public activism.

Progress has indeed been made on some labor issues, with Abu Dhabi's **Tourism Development & Investment Company** (TDIC), vowing to beef up enforcement of its labor standards. A promise to appoint an independent monitor to check up on worker's rights on the Island was fulfilled on May 31, when TDIC announced the appointment of UK-based **PricewaterhouseCoopers** to the post. On June 2, [Gulflabor responded](#) to this news with a letter stating that the group was maintaining its boycott until it received more information about the procedures of the independent monitor.

Via email, **ARTINFO's Ben Davis** recently asked artist Walid Raad some questions about the Gulflabor boycott and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi project. (Raad, however, emphasized that he was speaking as an individual, and not as a representative of the group.) More information about Gulflabor can be found at its [Web site](#).

The Gulflabor group has said that it is not satisfied with the appointment of PricewaterhouseCoopers. Can you speak to your objections to this choice? What is the importance of having a monitor approved by Human Rights Watch and independent of TDIC?

Gulflabor did not say that it was "not satisfied with the appointment of PricewaterhouseCoopers." They stated that in May 2011, before the appointment of PricewaterhouseCoopers, Gulflabor forwarded the Guggenheim and TDIC a list of monitors approved by Human Rights Watch, and that PricewaterhouseCoopers was not on that list. PricewaterhouseCoopers may come up with a rigorous and transparent monitoring program. This remains to be seen.

Gulflabor also suggested that the chosen monitor should have no conflict of interest with regard to the companies it will monitor. Moreover, and in anticipation of the possibility that a monitor that was not on the list provided by Human Rights Watch would be appointed by TDIC and the Guggenheim, Gulflabor advised that one of the Human Rights Watch-recommended monitors be hired as a consultant by the appointed monitor to help them define a rigorous and transparent monitoring program. Gulflabor has tried to articulate a difference between the monitor and the monitoring program that the monitor will develop and implement. What matters in the end is to develop and implement a transparent and rigorous monitoring program, that the monitor's findings be public, and that enforcement mechanisms are in place to address whatever recommendations are made by the monitor.

So far, Gulflabor only has the name of the monitor. Gulflabor has no idea what the monitoring program will look like. Gulflabor does not know if the monitor has any conflicts of interests with the companies they will monitor. Gulflabor does

not know what new enforcement mechanisms are in place so that the monitor's recommendations are not overlooked.

I know that people at the Guggenheim have said they feel unfairly singled out by the activists around their Abu Dhabi project. They also wrote a letter addressing you personally saying that it was unfair to paint the Guggenheim as "passive." How would you respond to this?

I view Gulflabor's actions as consistent with the aims publicly stated by the Guggenheim and TDIC. I take TDIC and the Guggenheim seriously when they say that they wish to have in place irreproachable labor standards on Saadiyat Island. I view Gulflabor's actions as helping TDIC and the Guggenheim achieve their goals. It is because I care about the arts in general, and the arts in the Arab world more specifically, and about the Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, its mission and ideals that I have decided to assist Gulflabor, the Guggenheim, and TDIC in this labor matter. Needless to say, the Guggenheim is not the only museum being built on Saadiyat Island. I hope that Gulflabor's, the Guggenheim's and TDIC's efforts will one day set labor standards that will be Island-wide, maybe even UAE-wide, or beyond.

I would not say that the Guggenheim has been passive on this or other human rights issues. My sense today is that Richard Armstrong, Nancy Spector, and others in the Guggenheim take the labor issue very seriously and are working hard to find concrete solutions. I am certain that the obstacles they face are many. I view Gulflabor's actions as helping them overcome some of these obstacles.

I also especially applaud the Guggenheim's recent quite vocal and public action (the petition the Guggenheim has sponsored) calling for the release of Ai Weiwei. In a way, Gulflabor's petition on labor standards for the building of the

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi shares the same spirit and voice as the Guggenheim's petition on behalf of Ai. I am certain that the Guggenheim is already in touch with the museums, universities, and other institutions being built in Abu Dhabi, and that the Guggenheim will take the lead on the labor issue as it is on the Ai Weiwei matter.

The Guggenheim's response also says that the artists have been put in touch with TDIC and allowed to visit the site. Is this true?

Indeed, the Guggenheim and TDIC have been willing to meet and listen to Gulflabor's concerns. Some of us have visited Saadiyat Island and the labor camps there. Our visit was arranged by TDIC and the Guggenheim. I am not sure that I have digested the visits enough to be able to tell what I learned.

Do you feel like your activism has been effective? Spector and Armstrong have said that real change is "incremental" and that your demands threaten the Guggenheim's careful work in advancing the cause of the workers.

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will be built by 2014 or 2015. That is less than four years from now. Workers are already living and working on the island. I believe that there are over 10,000 workers there already, and that this number will double by next year. I would have hoped that the specific labor standards Gulflabor and others have highlighted (with regards to a third-party independent monitor, a rigorous and transparent monitoring program, enforcement of existing and new labor policies, a concrete solution to ending the payment of recruitment fees by workers) were addressed long before any construction began.

It is important to note that TDIC did publish its own labor policies (EPP), a document which details some labor standards. My sense is that Gulflabor

believes that the EPP policies do not go far enough in addressing TDIC's own ideals on labor standards. My sense is also that Gulflabor considered very carefully the pace of the negotiations, and that the group knows very well that things do not change overnight. In fact, Gulflabor was in conversation with the Guggenheim for nine months before it went public with its petition. Another nine months, and the number of workers on Saadiyat would have doubled, and that many more workers would have been subject — and remain subject — to paying recruitment fees and so on.

Finally, at what point would GulfLabor consider dropping the boycott? What happens if they simply state that PricewaterhouseCoopers is a well-known international monitor, and continue with it, with or without Human Rights Watch's assent?

Please see the Gulflabor website where the goals are stated clearly.