

INTRODUCTION: BOYCOTTS AS OPENINGS

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The figure of the artist, once praised as a solitary genius endowed with the privilege of aesthetic autonomy, has been assigned and reassigned a series of protean roles in the decades since the decline of high modernism. In a perennial riff on Walter Benjamin's politicized conception of the "author as producer," contemporary art discourse has posited the artist as ethnographer, as activist, archivist, historian, witness, critic, educator, and organizer. Such a list could be extended further, but the common thread is clear enough: today all but the most blue-chip contemporary artists are lauded, and critiqued, largely on the basis of their social research and political engagement. At the same time, politically engaged artists are already challenging the role of self-consciously political art at a moment when institutional critique, as the artist Andrea Fraser put it, has become an institution of its own.¹

In an incisive essay titled "Good Intentions," the art critic and *Bidoun* senior editor Negar Azimi asks, "What is the difference between representing politics and actually enacting it?...And what is the good of engaged art—whether it takes the form of governmental critique

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Introduction: Boycotts as Openings

or institutional critique or otherwise—when it is subsumed back into the system?”² Azimi’s text, published too early in 2011 to reflect that year’s radical political upheavals, now reads less as a critique than a premonition. A rising wave of artists are today ensuring that their activism exceeds the bounds of their artistic production by disrupting the system—the funding structures and institutional frameworks—that both facilitates and circumscribes its circulation.

In the past several years, there has been a remarkable surge in protest actions—especially boycotts—targeting art institutions and events that receive corporate or government support tied to politics that exhibiting artists find objectionable.³ This has been a particularly visible development at biennials, at least four of which faced boycotts in the year 2014 alone: the 19th Sydney Biennale, because of its financial ties to notorious migrant detention centers off the coast of Australia; the 10th Gwangju Biennale, after an exhibiting artist’s painting was pulled from the show due to political pressure; the 31st São Paulo Biennial, which received funding from the Israeli Consulate in violation of an ongoing cultural boycott of the state; and Manifesta 10, hosted at a Russian state institution in St. Petersburg shortly after Vladimir Putin’s anti-LGBTQ laws and aggression against Ukraine made global headlines.⁴ But the trend has not been limited to one-off global events. In 2011 the Gulf Labor Coalition—a group of artists that had been privately negotiating with the Guggenheim Museum to improve labor conditions for the workers that would build its new branch in Abu Dhabi—went public with a list of demands and announced a boycott, collectively refusing to have their artworks collected for the Emirati institution until such conditions were met. That same year, which saw uprisings spread from Tunisia and Egypt to Spain, the United States, and many other countries, also witnessed the emergence of Occupy Wall Street-affiliated collectives (such as Occupy Museums and Arts & Labor) that advocated

Assuming Boycott

on behalf of unpaid interns in the arts and exerted pressure on Sotheby's and the Frieze Art Fair for their use of non-unionized labor.⁵

In my view there are at least three reasons for the uptick in acts of protest, refusal, withdrawal, and boycott among artists. First, as suggested above, artists have been inspired by the revolutions and occupations of 2011, as well as the many social movements presently responding to enduring conditions of injustice and inequality, from #BlackLivesMatter to #NoDAPL.⁶ Second, as arts institutions have increasingly embraced politically engaged art, the conflict between artists' social commitments and the often troubling financial ties and complicities of the institutions supporting them has at times become untenable. Fairly or not, an artist who makes video installations about climate change will face more public pressure than an abstract painter to ensure the museum exhibiting her work does not have climate-deniers like the Koch Brothers on its board, or rely on donations from BP or Exxon-Mobil. Third, the internet and particularly social media not only facilitate and publicize such pressure, but also connect distant localities imbricated in the same global networks of art and politics, making visible the commonality of struggles "here and elsewhere" and giving artists tools to raise awareness and organize campaigns transnationally.

These recent catalysts notwithstanding, it is important to note certain precedents for today's boycotts. The 1968 Venice Biennale, for example, was overwhelmed by anti-capitalist protests that forced its sales office to close.⁷ In 1969 the São Paulo Biennial faced a boycott campaign that left the exhibition with substantially less art on display, and affected numerous São Paulo biennials to come, as artists around the world protested the relentless persecution of Brazilian artists under a U.S.-backed military dictatorship.⁸ In the 1970s, as the Iranian Shah's repression of dissidents became more widely known, artists including

Introduction: Boycotts as Openings

John Cage and Merce Cunningham boycotted the royal family's annual Shiraz Festival of the Arts.⁹

The most famous example of a cultural boycott undoubtedly remains the campaign waged against apartheid South Africa that acquired international prominence in the 1980s (though it was initiated decades prior). *Assuming Boycott* thus begins with a section on the legacy of this boycott movement, reassessing its aims, tactics, and implications for cultural production. It is essential to understand the history of the South African boycott for many reasons, but particularly, in our context, because of its direct relation to a present campaign: the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, which takes the anti-apartheid movement as its model and, like it, includes a cultural and academic boycott.¹⁰

Initiated in 2005, BDS and in particular the cultural boycott of Israel—the subject of this volume's second section—represents the most sustained ongoing campaign examined here. The movement, which targets institutions that invest in or are supported by the State of Israel, and not Israeli individuals, calls for an end to the military occupation of Arab lands, full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.¹¹ Because its demands entail not only an end to the fifty-year-old occupation, but a thoroughgoing transformation of Israel's demographic makeup and status as a "Jewish state," BDS has proved controversial not only among Israel's hardline supporters but also for some liberals critical of the occupation.¹² It has nonetheless become prominent in the cultural sphere through the support of scores of public intellectuals, including Judith Butler, Naomi Klein, Gayatri Spivak, and the late John Berger, as well as the votes of organizations such as the American Studies Association to boycott Israeli academic institutions.¹³ And it has been hotly debated in the realm of the visual arts, where the idea that culture represents an

Assuming Boycott

ideal space for dialogue beyond the dividing lines of politics is especially strong.¹⁴

Assuming Boycott takes a critical detour from the pro/con axis of debates surrounding cultural boycotts. The title of this anthology signals a new starting point; we begin with the assumption that art does not transcend the political conditions under which it is exhibited, and that artists are increasingly assuming the agency to demand that their art be shown and circulated in accordance with their ethics and solidarities. We recognize that boycotts are a condition of our time and that our work as cultural practitioners is affected by them regardless of whether or not we endorse a particular campaign. In this context, we wish to suggest that acts of boycott are often beginnings and not ends, that they frequently generate challenging and productive discussions rather than shutting down dialogue.

The capacity of arts boycotts to yield further and richer debate has been recognized, at times, even by those working for targeted institutions. Curator Joanna Warsza, who organized the public program for Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg, personally supported a strategy of challenging Russian state policies as well as the biennial's host institution from within, but also defended the boycott, arguing, "Boycotts make institutions more sensitive, more vulnerable and more apt to change. And institutions should not suppress them but consider the claims. So I would consider the boycotts as a form of mobilization, not a form of quitting."¹⁵ Likewise, the curatorial team for the 31st São Paulo Biennial, regardless of their individual positions on BDS, supported the exhibiting artists' right to demand that the biennial reject Israeli funds, writing in a collective statement that the boycott should serve as "a trigger to think about the funding sources of major cultural events."¹⁶ While similar respect is typically granted to artists' freedom of speech by most curators and arts institutions targeted by boycott, the above two responses are uncommonly supportive of the premise that cultural boycotts give rise to important

Introduction: Boycotts as Openings

debates. More often than not, cultural institutions—from global mega-museums like the Guggenheim to advocacy organizations such as the National Coalition Against Censorship to socially engaged arts nonprofits like Creative Time—stand against cultural boycotts as limitations on expression—forms of censorship, even.¹⁷

The third section of *Assuming Boycott* therefore takes up questions of freedom of speech and (self-)censorship as they relate to cultural production and boycott. Do boycotts inhibit free expression and dialogue, or do they instead shift the terms of debate, setting new conditions for the relations among artists, institutions, and the publics impacted by their cultural production? When are boycotts techniques of censorship, and when are they essential tools for those who have not been politically or materially empowered to speak? Is it sufficient, or responsible, to defend the value of free speech, without critiquing various forms of social inequality that bestow prominent platforms for political expression upon some while systematically marginalizing others? Such questions spill into this volume's fourth and final section, which examines the dynamics of political (dis)engagement as it unfolds at a distance. As much as campaigns that see citizens of the United States and Europe advocating for the rights of imprisoned asylum seekers or exploited construction workers across the world are celebrated as evidence of transnational solidarity, participating activists face charges that they should stay out of complex local situations they don't understand, refrain from enforcing their values on different cultures, and attend to political problems in their own countries. Here, the question—at a global scale—remains, who speaks (for whom)? And who is silenced?

The contributors to this anthology do not find consensus regarding the value of (dis)engagement from afar, or the ways in which boycotts may curtail, foster, or redirect expression. Several of them have been directly involved in organizing withdrawals from biennials or other

Assuming Boycott

cultural events (locally or at a distance), but many have also applied political pressure by other means, rejecting the tactic of boycott. Some dispute the notion that a boycott represents total disengagement, pointing to the proliferation of high-stakes conversations engendered by a threat of (publicized) withdrawal from a prominent event. Others argue, however, that boycotts foreclose more nuanced conversations and relinquish the mediating role of art as a bridge, sacrificing the possibility of critically intervening in situations of injustice with the aim of changing minds.

Cultural boycotts remain unpalatable in part because art is seen as intrinsically aligned with liberal tenets including freedom of expression, cross-cultural dialogue, and social uplift through education.¹⁸ Artists who undertake boycotts can harness this assumption by revealing the gap between the politics of their own work and the politics of its exhibition and circulation, thereby using the progressive rhetoric of art institutions as leverage to enact political change. But they may also wish to bypass such institutions entirely, as the artist Ahmet Ögüt suggests by asking, “Are biennials still pedagogic sites with transformative aims that can have a lasting effect on civil society? Or are they part of the neoliberal capitalist idea of ‘festivalism,’ which is more concerned with scale, budget, number of visitors, and branding?”¹⁹ If artists increasingly decide to forgo global biennials, they may consider boycotts a starting point for cultivating more ethical institutions. As Eyal Weizman suggests in this volume, referring to BDS, boycotts can be “part of a wider spectrum of political actions that *block* non-democratic and unequal platforms and *open* democratic platforms for co-resistance.” This hopeful proposition captures the spirit of the diverse contributions to *Assuming Boycott*, a series of critical inquiries that consider the ways cultural boycotts move beyond disengagement or withdrawal to posit imaginative forms of engagement and solidarity, and open new avenues for effecting change at the evolving conjuncture of art and politics.