

# Are Boycotts the New “Collective Curating?”

## by Sergio Edelsztein

Much has been said and written about the increasing internationalization of the art world. This text will focus on one specific manifestation of such internationalization: boycotts, whose effects are felt in the local sphere as well.

The cost of curating and producing institutional exhibitions and programs is rising dramatically, fostered by the rising cost of art itself (in many ways related to the trend in creating site-specific projects). Simultaneously, state funding is being cut dramatically, so the need for private and corporate sponsors is steadily increasing. “Luckily,” corporations and wealthy individuals who sponsor artistic production and presentation are, in spite of the financial crisis—or possibly because of it—wealthier than ever. (For example, during the 2008 recession the art market not only continued to surge, but in fact grew dramatically.) This internationality is fuelled by the increased participation of emerging economies such as those in the Persian Gulf, Latin America, India, and China that offer an alternative to West European and North American hegemony within the art market. In such places, small groups of economically powerful individuals build museums and initiate international art shows and fairs. These are often devoid of roots in the local culture and tradition, and disregard the basic human condition of the inhabitants of these places, which are often run by mildly dictatorial regimes or, at least, governments with poor human rights records. Thanks to the Internet and global television networks, people have a relatively clear picture of the internal politics, institutional mechanisms, and sponsors’ human rights records from anywhere in the world.

The increasing number of calls for boycotts in the art world stem from this reality, where we all feel at home anywhere in the world, and feel comfortable expressing ethical approval or reprobation about any issue. Dave Beech writes in “To Boycott or not to Boycott” (*Art Monthly*, Oct. 2014, page 380) that, “Artists who boycott large survey exhibitions represent the first serious challenge to the rise of the curator and the corporate sponsor that have shaped the neoliberal art institution. Putting aside the content of each boycott, therefore, we can say that the art boycott generally is a method for renegotiating the balance of power within art.” Boycotts epitomize the neoliberal art institutions, and while they effectively renegotiate the position of the curator, their effects in the long run are pernicious to art institutions at large.

Boycotts organized by artists typically oppose two entities: sponsors, characterized by what we might call “dirty money,” and institutions, as a protest against various curatorial and management decisions. I am currently working with an institution in Poland being boycotted by local artists who disapprove of the municipality’s handing it over to a private company to run. A museum in Israel is being boycotted in protest of the way the curator was fired. Most of these boycotts have a specific purpose: to remove an official or sponsor, or to protest bad management. In this text, I take the examples of more high-profile events that have rocked the

art world in the last couple of years, though naturally, motives, strategies, and results might also be interpolated into smaller, local events.

The issues surrounding boycotts in the art world are complex, raising questions that are entire worlds unto themselves. There's the "why" (is the issue burning enough?), the "whom" (in the case of local or international artists boycotting a local or international event), the timeline of "when," and of course "how." Though motivated by diverse reasons, the boycott process is relatively uniform: a petition is circulated and once there are enough signatories, if the demands have not been met, the boycott is called.

A boycott is nothing more than a withdrawal and is decidedly *not* a form of activism. The demands of a boycott are always both too specific, and not specific enough, depending on the scope of the reading. Questions such as "Whom are you punishing?" and "What price are you prepared to pay?" are seldom raised. Imposing one's moral judgment onto others and asking them to act upon it is a slippery slope that can easily, if not inevitably, lead to hypocrisy and double standards.

Last summer British critic JJ Charlesworth wrote:

*It's hard to decide what is worst about the idea of a cultural boycott [...] Is it that there's something inherently repugnant about artists and intellectuals – a demographic you might think was more committed than most to openness, freedom of expression and internationalism – trying to close down the artistic freedom of their peers, in order to make a political gesture of disapproval [...] Or is it that in campaigning for what is essentially a form of censorship, those calls for a cultural boycott contribute, unwittingly, to the now-familiar process of demonization of those states that we 'over here' disapprove of? Is it that in their obsessive focus on a particular country and its actions, campaigners for boycotts effectively reinforce the sense of moral superiority that always seems to attach to 'us' [...] over 'them'.*

This quote was taken from a response to the calls for boycotting Israel according to the BDS movement in general and the Cultural and Academic Boycott in particular. However, these remarks address relevant questions common to all boycotts. I should, however, note that I am the director of an art institution in Israel, and both as a member of this institution, and as a cultural practitioner, I am increasingly experiencing the effects of the BDS movement. I will not elaborate on this specific boycott nor on any of the events related to it—like the Mattress Factory case, the Creative Time one, or the São Paulo Biennial. I am not evading this issue because it's close and involves me, but rather because I think it is a unique case that does not belong in the same basket as the other boycotts.<sup>1</sup> Still, as the oldest and longest "boycott" movement, it has to be mentioned here as an inspiration for action and involvement, showing the way to other movements like a beam of light.

Below are summaries of a few relevant boycotts that highlight some developmental points relevant to understanding covert potentials and dangers. These descriptions are informed by the study Chen Tamir published in March on the website Hyperallergic called "A Report on the Cultural Boycott of Israel." (Tamir is a curator working with me at the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv and has been researching the progress of the BDS and other movements for some time.)

#### Case I: The 2014 Sydney Biennial

Before the opening of this event, a boycott was called targeting the Biennial's major sponsor, Transfield, a multinational corporation that, among other services like waste management and public transport, is involved in building and managing

Australia's offshore detention centres for asylum seekers. Illegal immigration from around the Pacific is one of Australia's major controversies. The boycott began with a statement signed by ninety-two artists, followed by much public debate. It spread to boycotting Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art because of its ties to Transfield and the Biennial. Eventually, the Sydney Biennial's Chairman of the Board, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, who also was the CEO of Transfield, stepped down. Funding from Transfield will be discontinued after the next Biennial, which had initially been founded by the Transfield founder and former CEO, Belgiorno-Nettis' father.

What is interesting about this boycott is not only its high international profile, but the question of what made this year's Biennial, after over forty years of Transfield sponsorship, the one to be boycotted? Why now? Perhaps it's the result of a "snowball" effect spurred on by other international boycotts over the past two years.

#### Case II: Manifesta X, The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, 2014

A few months before Manifesta's opening in June 2014, the Russian government passed anti-gay legislation that grants them the power to arrest suspected gay people, including tourists and foreigners, as well as the forbidding of gay "propaganda" and the adoption of Russian children by foreign gay couples. A petition was circulated, lobbying Manifesta to relocate. Around this time, Russian forces occupied the Crimean peninsula and essentially initiated the takeover of Ukraine. A second petition was circulated with the same goal of relocating Manifesta in protest of Russian aggression there. Manifesta responded with a statement that it would continue as planned with the belief that "the Biennial acts as a catalyst for local and international artistic life. [...] We believe cancelling the project plays directly into the current escalation of the 'cold war' rhetoric and fails to acknowledge the complexity of these geo-politics." A few artists withdrew, but the vast majority remained. The curators maintained that the show is "political in a larger context" and that displaying contemporary art in Russia is itself a strong statement for pluralism.

Artists withdrawing from Manifesta explained their decision in different ways. Nikita Kadan, for instance, withdrew because he felt Manifesta was a "project contributing to the ideological facade of Putinist Russia and its normalization on the international scene." The collective Chto Delat? decided to withdraw after a statement by chief curator Kaspar König denigrated any attempt to address the present situation in Russia by artistic means, demoting such to "self-righteous representation" and "cheap provocation" and thus effectively pre-emptively censoring them.

It is even possible, that in view of the changing political situation, the organizers may have felt some degree of relief that more politically engaged artists were leaving the show's checklist, for fear of state and police intervention and public reprobation. This raises some questions for the future: will artistic or organizational decisions be influenced by fear of artistic activism? Is Manifesta's decision to hold the next edition in Zurich—the capital of wealth and probably the last place in Europe where you can expect political turmoil to erupt in the next year and a half—a consequence of the St. Petersburg conflict?

#### Case III: The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

In 2011, over one hundred and thirty artists signed a statement boycotting both the Louvre and Guggenheim museums over concerns regarding the abuse and exploitation of workers employed in the construction of these museums' franchises

on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. The boycott expressed that they would refuse to cooperate with the museums until they guaranteed the workers fair conditions, including hiring an independent monitor whose findings of the working conditions would be published. The artists formed a group called Gulf Labor, which has continued its work since. To date, little has changed on the ground, save for a slight improvement in working conditions that has impacted only those working on these specific construction projects.

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There is something in the term “boycott” that does not reflect the unique anatomy of the “cultural” boycott. The artists boycotting the Sydney Biennial had agreed to participate in the event knowing very well that Transfield was its main sponsor (and had been since 1973). They must have known of the corporation’s commercial activities. Only towards the opening, after rallying support for their cause, did they take advantage of the PR build-up and announce their demand that the Biennial give up Transfield funds, or else they would withdraw. It is important to understand that the aim of these movements is not withdrawal *per se*, but the raising of social issues in an urgent, imminent situation. If artists refuse to engage right from the start—as would be the case in a consumer boycott, or in a worker strike—there would be no resonance whatsoever in their position. In this case, artists literally “used” the Biennial as a platform to raise the issues of immigration and the franchising of detention into private hands.

One thing is certain about the high-profile boycotts mentioned above: they succeeded in raising consciousness about important policy problems—and that is an achievement. But besides this, how can we weigh the consequences, successes, and downfalls of these boycotts? In the case of Manifesta, the political situation evolved while the show was still being organized, and artists had to react according to those developments. In terms of results, President Vladimir Putin couldn’t care less if some artists withdrew from Manifesta, and he probably would not have even noticed if Manifesta relocated or was cancelled in protest. Therefore, there was no possibility of negotiating the terms of participation. Artists withdrew from what they believed was a high-end showcase of a political regime that was quickly fading back into darker times.

The foreign workers in the Emirates are still working under slavery conditions, and the detention facility in Papua New Guinea is still in operation. Australian policy on asylum seekers has not changed at all. As an example of a “successful” boycott, then, whose aims were achieved? The Sydney Biennial boycott had no effect on government policy though it did jeopardize the future of the Biennial. The question remains of which corporations or individuals will support art events without the fear of being scrutinized and criticized for the ways in which they amassed their wealth? This issue will be crucial for the next Sydney Biennial.

When the Sydney Biennial controversy erupted, George Brandis, Australian Minister for the Arts, responded by directing the Australia Council to deny future funding to any exhibition or performance that “unreasonably” refuses corporate sponsorship. These are questions that every institution and exhibition might face as boycotting becomes more popular and institutions might need to reconsider their funding. Individuals and corporations that sponsor art events do this for the sake of public relations, but some also do it out of a genuine interest in and love for art (probably spurred by their chairpersons and important shareholders)—out of a real sense of responsibility to raise the cultural life of their country. If this is met by criticism, rather than a positive response, they will probably stop.

This discussion should be framed within a larger one about the characteristics of art funding and sponsorship. Philip Hammerton, an obscure English landscape painter from the late nineteenth century wrote: "The simple truth is that capital is the nurse and governess of the arts, not always a very wise and judicious nurse, but an exceedingly powerful one [...] For Capital to support fine arts it must be abundant – there must be *superfluity*." One need not be a Marxist scholar to know that no one made *superfluous wealth* by working with his or her own hands. The making of such fortunes necessarily involves exploitation and questionable practices.

Let us briefly consider the history of artistic patronage, leaving church and the monarchy aside to focus on private entrepreneurs. We can begin with Enrico Scrovegni from the fourteenth century, "heir to one of the greatest private fortunes ever put together in the West, whose commissioning of Giotto's masterpiece, the Arena Chapel frescoes, was an act of expiation for the notorious usury of the super-rich Reginald, Enrico's father," (Colin Platt *Marks of Opulence*, pg. 38) and fast-forward to the late nineteenth century American philanthropists Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, Andrew Mellon, John D. Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt. The benefactors of the most prized American museums donated both money and their collections of art to public institutions. They and many more were colloquially called the "Robber Barons," a term coined by Mark Twain, denoting businessmen who "used exploitative practices to amass their wealth. These practices included exerting control over national resources, accruing high levels of government influence, paying extremely low wages, squashing competition by acquiring competitors in order to create monopolies and eventually raise prices." (Charles Dole) Joseph H. Hirshhorn, for whom the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. is named, made his fortune mining the uranium that fuelled the United States' atomic arsenal during the Cold War. In the time Hirshhorn mined for uranium, from the early 1950s to 1960s, the U.S. arsenal grew from about 250 atomic bombs to 18,000 nuclear weapons. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no artist has ever boycotted the Hirshhorn.

Hirshhorn and his like were all also important art collectors. Many sponsoring corporations are headed by collectors, and almost all sponsoring individuals collect art. Yet, very few collectors are boycotted by artists in the context of sales, which of course, are a private interaction. In any case, the point is that looking for uncompromised private or corporate sponsorship is nearly impossible.

State funding allocated to art and culture in every kind of government, including those with a record of human rights abuses, exploitative colonialism, and even genocide, is earned through the taxes paid by the public (and also corporations) and therefore considered "cleaner" than private donations. Taking state funds for art is like drinking water from the tap, sending children to public school, or receiving social security or health services: a right of every citizen, and in any case, inevitable. However, it is imperative to understand the inherent connection between public and private spheres. Private funding comes in where public funding falls short. Furthermore, corporations, both historical and contemporary, made and make their wealth—whether exploiting the earth's resources, the working class, or the stock exchange—with the agreement and support of the government, and the regulators who turn a blind eye to their exploitative practices. Whatever these

individuals or corporations do, it is still the hegemonic power of the state that is responsible. They share a common and furiously defended interest.

The problem is that boycotts target the effects of hegemonic policies, but not its causes. This might be presented as a practical choice aimed at possible and immediate success, but in Giorgio Agamben's view this is emblematic of modernity and liberalization: "Causes demand to be known while effects can only be checked and controlled," he wrote. By the same token, boycotts target institutions and sponsors for their excesses, but almost never criticize the power that permits such excesses. Gulf Labor critiques labour conditions as they are dictated, not by the Guggenheim Corporation, but by the Tourist Development and Investment Company, a government branch responsible for building the infamous cultural complex of the Saadiyat Island by the contract and conditions imposed by the Abu Dhabi government. But the labour conditions on this "Island of Happiness" are by no means unique in the Gulf. Rather, they reflect the policy that built the Emirates from the start.

Returning to the topic of sales exemptions, no call was made to boycott the UAE as a country, especially not the Abu Dhabi Art Fair. We can only imagine the effect of the 2000 artists that have now signed the boycott refusing their work be shown and traded in this fair. *That* would surely have an impact.

The symbiosis of public and private funding is nowhere more evident than in the case of the Guggenheim boycott, a perfect mix of all possible worlds: institution and state, economics and politics, and private and governmental funding. It involves boycott, but also activism and unlike the other examples, it has developed and adapted its tactics. In *Manifesta Journal* No. 18 there are a number of articles on the issues of the Sydney and Guggenheim boycotts. Mariam Ghani, a member of the Gulf Labor Working Group offers some interesting insights:

Like most long-term boycotts the Gulf Labor campaign has undergone a number of shifts and has deployed a range of different tactics over the years following its public launch. Gulf Labor's most visible tactical shift came in fall of 2013, when we launched the *52 Weeks* campaign. Every week for a year, we are releasing one or more artist's projects. These projects call attention to some aspect of the conditions of workers on Saadiyat Island, the political context that enables their situation, and the problematic compact between the western institutions building on Saadiyat and their partners in Abu Dhabi; or they make links between the situation of the workers on Saadiyat and similar struggles by other migrants and workers in other places and times. *52 Weeks* represents a move from the strategic use of artworks (withholding them, or imposing conditions on their sale, production and exhibition) as an activist tactic, to an attempt to apply the same kind of pressure through the production and distribution of artworks that directly address or enact that activism.

Assessing the campaign from the two-thirds mark, it seems to me that *52 Weeks* and its many brilliant contributors have begun to re-imagine what a group like Gulf Labor can be and do—how an activist project based in a boycott might serve beyond that boycott, without abandoning it. *52 Weeks* is a reminder that a boycott can and should be the beginning of a larger conversation, rather than a means to shut down all dialogue around an issue.

What is interesting in Ghani's praise for the *52 Weeks* project is that it brings us back to the typical field in which artists have been addressing these issues in an active, practical, and constructive way. Since the 1960s, artists identified the

connections between art, institutions, politics, and capital as intrinsic to all artistic creation, turning it into the main subject matter of their works. Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, Andrea Fraser, Daniel Buren, and Michael Asher, to name just a few, have worked towards a mode of art described as "Institutional Critique." Thirty years later, Fraser herself re-checks "the historic and present-day efficacy of Institutional Critique" and she finds a nostalgia for it as a now-anachronistic artefact of an era before the corporate "megamuseum" and the 24/7 global art market, when artists could still conceivably take up a critical position against or outside the institution:

Today there no longer is an outside. How, then, can we imagine, much less accomplish, a critique of art institutions when museum and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification? Now, when we need it most, institutional critique is dead, a victim of its success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against.

From this point of view, it is plausible that by boycotting, artists are making an effort to withdraw from the art world, or at least from portions of it that they identify as offensive, criticizing it "from the outside." But, Fraser goes on to close this possibility too:

Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us...it is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves. (Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, 9/2005)

Hans Haacke wrote in 1974, "Artists, as much as their supporters and their enemies, no matter of what ideological coloration, are unwitting partners [...]. They participate jointly in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of their society. They work within that frame, set the frame and are being framed." But boycotting artists do not always seek to make a difference in the art world, but outside it, using the art world as a springboard for this goal. At other times, as demonstrated by Ghani, the struggle starts from the art world but develops beyond it.

True activist art that addresses institutions and their sponsors is found today as well. Liberate Tate, a collective that aims at discontinuing BP's sponsorship of the Tate, has performed a number of interventions to heighten the pressure on museum officials. They belong to a large coalition of groups that target oil company sponsorship of cultural events in the UK, including Platform, Reclaim Shakespeare Company, Rising Tide, Shell Out Sounds, and others. Liberate Tate and similar groups such as Occupy Museums reclaim Institutional Critique's affirmative action, as do several other organizations, mostly to disrupt the swift, codified, and ritualized conduct of art institutions and their public, by engaging rather than withdrawing. Beech writes: "Institutional critique reverses the ethical charge of the boycott, using it as a rationale for participation rather than withdrawal."

Another contemporary instance that exemplifies how far art and its institutions have strayed from Institutional Critique since the 1970s involves the 2015 Venice Biennale. In his online statement, curator Okwui Enwezor explains the rationale for recreating a framework of events that took place during the 1974 Biennale that "was dedicated to Chile, as a gesture of solidarity toward that country in the aftermath of the violent coup d'état, in which General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the government of Salvador Allende a year before." Were the bloody

*coup d'état* in Chile to take place today, only calls for boycott—not solidarity, activism, or demonstrations—would be heard today, at the Biennale, and everywhere else. Just boycott.

Interestingly, perhaps even contradicting what was previously said, Ghani arrives at the same "activistic" position, and in her report draws a limit on withdrawal: "Ultimately, a boycott should be a tactic of last, not first, resort." She goes on, prescribing a three-part protocol:

- 1 - Public boycotts should be called only when private negotiation proves either impossible or fruitless.
- 2 - A boycott should be applied only when a boycott is likely to produce results. That is to say, a cultural boycott will work only if the creative work being withheld has significant and immediate value to the institution or government being boycotted. If that government or institution does not in fact need cultural products for a specific purpose in this specific moment, cultural workers have no leverage with that government or institution, and a boycott will not work.

This is true for boycotts aimed at government policy in general, as in the case with Manifesta, and is especially true of Israel. It is also true for institutions so far as they are not engaged in the imminent opening of a major project like, for instance, the Guggenheim. Ghani continues:

- 3 - If the boycott does not include a significant portion of the most visible cultural workers necessary to the immediate purpose or project of the government or institution, the boycott will not work. A public boycott should not be called until enough organization has been done to ensure a minimum of consensus around the goal and necessity of the boycott in the community most important to its success. If the demand behind a boycott is vague or diffuse, the boycott will not work.

This last point is of utmost importance, for this is where massive pressure, especially through social media and threats, becomes ugly. It is a slippery slope from there to censorship. To boycott is to withdraw, but to pressure fellow practitioners to join a boycott is censorship.

In an article published in *The New Republic*, titled "Are we Entering a New Age of Artistic Censorship in Europe?," Tiffany Jenkins brings a number of examples of recent boycotts and petitions that ultimately led to the removal of artworks and the decommissioning of theatre plays. A work by the Chapman brothers was taken down by the MAXXI Museum in Rome last summer, deemed paedo-pornographic by a children's rights group. Similarly, when the protests against a play titled *Exhibit B* grew fierce, the Barbican in London caved quickly, citing safety concerns. At the beginning of November last year, organizers of the *Le Mois de la Photo* exhibition in Paris gave in to a few letters of complaint, removing photographs by Diane Ducret of the artist cuddling and kissing her daughter. And in Germany earlier that year, the Museum Folkwang in Essen pre-emptively cancelled a planned exhibition of Polaroids by the French-Polish artist Balthus featuring a model called Anna who posed for him from the age of 8 to 16. Jenkins concludes:

There are important differences between the demands for censorship of the past and those of the present. Historically, those calling for censorship were often concerned that an artwork—perhaps of a sexual nature—would have a coarsening effect and a negative moral impact. Today's activists have a dif-

ferent rationale. They argue that they are the only ones who have the right to speak [...] Why have these recent demands to censor been so successful? It's worth reflecting on who is protesting, because this is also different from the earlier, top-down attempts to censor. [...] Many contemporary campaigners calling for boycotts are from the so-called liberal left who, it would seem, want art to show a world they wished existed, having given up on trying to change it.

Boycotts, and particularly their ability to censor, threaten to unleash a disdain and antagonism that is intrinsic—but repressed—within large sections of our communities, and above all, within the ruling classes and politicians. It is not a coincidence that the polemics surrounding the Sydney Biennial were followed by a substantial cut in the Arts Council budget. In our neoliberal capitalist system, the institutional art world (unlike the art market) could easily be viewed as a burden on society, a sector that can't justify its existence economically. Intrinsic but loud polemics like these are detached from the institutions and artworks taking over newspaper headlines and TV slots and inspiring the involvement of bureaucrats and politicians, especially if those polemics attack them directly as in the cases discussed here. Calls for censorship coming from prominent and respected members of the artistic community cue further attacks on the art world's legitimacy, responded to first and foremost with budget cuts.

However sympathetic we are towards the causes boycotts target, as they increase in number and visibility, regardless of their immediate success or failure, they will have a devastating effect on the legitimacy of the institutional art world. Smaller, "parochial" boycotts like those discussed above may cause the same effects in the local sphere.

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It is important to also address how boycotts and censorship have been shaped by contemporary social behaviour and social media. Facebook easily creates an illusion of collectivity and simplifies our ability to share our opinions and rally for support, and many websites easily disseminate petitions or calls for action. But beyond these, when analyzing the roots of the numerous boycotts, one must consider the culture of "rating" that informs our over-opinionated positions on just about everything. Through the use of websites such as Uber, Airbnb, and Hotels.com, humans are constantly asked to review their experiences. Airlines, restaurants, banks, and virtually every service asks us for our opinions. And we are also constantly being rated as users and as publics. For example, the Uber app asks consumers to rate their taxi drivers, but also asks drivers to rate their passengers. The goal is to eliminate unfitting drivers, but if one day you can't get a car to pick you up, just think what you may have done or said in a taxi yesterday. We are constantly pushed by the technological liberal complex to be opinionated even about things we don't care about, and to act upon those opinions in a way that can effectively alter other people's lives, without giving it much thought. Responsibility and accountability can so easily be sacrificed for compatibility.

Can curators envision an app called "Rate Your Sponsor" where institutions, artists, and curators rate the application process, money flow, and report procedures of different sponsors? It could be an ideal open platform for activists to upload the results of their research on the sources of sponsors' wealth, and for curators to use in exhibition and event production to potentially shield themselves from boycott. But why not also create the "Rate Your Artist" app where curators could fill in information according to their experiences working with specific artists,

rating the quality of the workflow, the reasonable-ness of the artist's demands, etc. Does he or she fly only in business class? What is their position on artist fees? We could even be able to view a list of petitions and boycotts the artist has endorsed. That way, we could work with artists with no record of boycott, or with a conceptual flexibility that would assure their commitment to participation under virtually any political stress and without their looking into the details of sponsors' activities.

These two apps together might be the essential tools for curators in the decades to come, as exhibition costs rise, resources shrink, political instability spreads, and artists' political positions become unpredictable. Of course, I am being cynical: I would never support nor use such hideous tools. But these examples illuminate the issues we as curators will have to confront.

A separate "Orwellian" solution was contemplated by artist Ahmet Özü, who proposes incorporating into institutions what he calls an "Intervenor," which he describes in "CCC – Currency of Collective Consciousness," in *e-flux Journal* # 62, as:

Artists, art workers, cultural workers, or academics who aren't normally part of the institutional decision-making mechanism, and who are aware of the sensitivities of the local context. They would have an officially acknowledged agreement that protects their work from financial and political interference. They would also have a right to vet all forms of communication before they go public. This would include announcements, press conferences, events, and statements. Also, they would not act according to pre-programmed agendas, concepts, exhibition schedules, or locations. Intervenor could leave when it is no longer possible to challenge the limits of structural change. Intervenor would be the protagonists who go beyond symbolic and harmless institutionalized critical agency. They would intercede if the institution reacted in an authoritarian or judgmental way to any public concerns.

In other contexts, the person performing this role existed. They were called the "Kommissar." But, in many ways the "awareness of the sensitivities of the local context," i.e. the need to "protect the work from financial and political interference," is a relevant concern that curators will have to address in their practice.

Curators will have to conceptualize not only the subject matter of an exhibition, its relevance to the art world and broader public, as is done nowadays in catalogue texts, press releases, etc. Curators will have to invest much more thought and research into applications for funding and the interpretation of projects in the public sphere engaging with artists' oppositions, ideas, and political concerns to ensure burning issues can be addressed among them and the public. Curators will have to act as mediators between artists and institutions, defending decisions regarding such issues in the same way, outside of the mediation already performed in advocating for an a project's artistic relevance. Hopefully, disagreement and criticism might be reined back in to the principles of institutional critique, in which artists found a worthy site of expression rather than a tool to be abandoned.

These are challenging times for curators, who will have to directly address the political or economic issues like those mentioned above in a fresh, creative, and active way, creating platforms for engagement and not for withdrawal while dealing with the dangers of political correctness—perhaps one of the worst kinds of censorship—and fight proselytising, condescension, colonialism, and the ignorance and social pressure that often fuel boycotts.

\*with thanks to Talia Heiman and Chen Tamir.

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### Notes

1 There are many reasons for that, but basically, the PACBI (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott), as a branch of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) is not a "bottom-to-top" movement, but rather the opposite. Its guidelines closely follow the Pan-Arabic rhetoric of the last fifty years, placing it as a hegemonic position versus another. Without clear aims or terms of engagement, this movement should be seen as a punishment rather than a boycott with realistic aims.