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When Artists Boycott

by Kareem Estefan

A TENUOUS CEASE-FIRE in the Gaza Strip had been holding for only two days when the 31st São Paulo Biennial was roiled by a public letter demanding the retraction of the event's Israeli sponsorship. Issued a week before the prominent international exhibition's Sept. 6 opening and endorsed by 55 of the 68 participating artists and collectives, the letter charged that the signatories' work had been "undermined and implicitly used for whitewashing Israel's ongoing aggressions and violation of international law and human rights."¹

The near-total support for the letter by artists in the biennial—six more signed by the Sept. 1 press preview—was remarkable in its own right. But still more striking was the institutional response: a collective statement of support from the biennial's five curators—two of whom are Israeli.² This move was followed by the withdrawal of Israeli government funds from the general sponsorship of the event. As a practical matter, the funds, which constituted less than half a percent of the biennial's \$10.5 million budget, were simply applied more narrowly to fund the work of three Israeli artists included in the show (a fourth, Yael Bartana, had signed the letter of protest). Still, this outcome demonstrated how support for a boycott of Israel has been growing within the contemporary art world.

In recent years, artist-led protests have targeted numerous sources of cultural funding deemed unethical; Israel has hardly

been singled out in this regard. Artists have boycotted cultural institutions including the Guggenheim Museum (due to fears that the workers slated to build its Abu Dhabi branch will be subject to the exploitative labor practices common in the United Arab Emirates) and the Sydney Biennial (for its ties to a company profiting from Australia's draconian immigrant detention policies). The action in São Paulo was spurred on by what the participating artists viewed as the disproportionate use of force by Israel's military in the offensive it called "Operation Protective Edge." In the weeks leading up to the biennial, Israeli forces killed thousands of Palestinians, including hundreds of children.

Though intensified by an immediate crisis, the protest in Brazil was also part of the sustained Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel. Modeled on the international movement to end apartheid in South Africa, BDS was launched in 2005. It arose partly in response to the evident failure of the Oslo Accords to secure Palestinian independence or to halt the illegal construction of Israeli settlements. But BDS also emerged out of the failure of the Second Intifada—a violent Palestinian uprising met with increased repression—to achieve the same aims. The boycott movement, founded on principles of nonviolent resistance and direct action, is supported by more than 170 Palestinian trade unions, youth centers, arts organizations,

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The cultural boycott of Israel asserts that Israeli institutions cannot be separated from state policies fostering ethnic exclusion.

charities and other civil society groups.³ BDS activists call for an end to the occupation and expropriation of Palestinian land, full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.

Nearly a decade old, BDS has won the endorsements of myriad cultural figures, from authors like Judith Butler, John Berger, Junot Díaz and Arundhati Roy to musicians including Brian Eno, Pink Floyd's Roger Waters and Public Enemy's Chuck D. More recently, BDS has secured mainstream media attention in the wake of such events as the American Studies Association's academic boycott of Israel and the decision of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. to divest from multinational companies whose businesses support the Israeli occupation.

But the movement has only lately staked out a presence in the art world. This may be due to the previous focus of BDS activists on garnering endorsements from musicians, actors and other higher-profile cultural figures. On a deeper level, however, the art world may have lagged behind their pop-culture counterparts because of a persistent attitude among visual artists that their work is edifying, progressive and autonomous—that the symbolic politics of art trumps the political implications of how it is funded and circulated.

TODAY THAT BELIEF in contemporary art's inherently subversive power appears to be eroding, as cultural producers grapple with the geopolitical and corporate mechanisms governing global art events, whether in Australia, Russia, South Korea, the UAE or the U.S. Significantly, this wave of struggle is a reaction not just to flagrant instances of censorship, like those witnessed at this year's Gwangju Biennale or the 2011 Sharjah Biennial, but also to perceptions that corporations (like BP, a major sponsor of London's Tate museum) and governments (like the monarchies of the UAE which uphold the indentured servitude of a migrant workforce) are attempting to put a cultured gloss over their unscrupulous practices.

The growing influence of BDS in the art world can be considered part of this broader political awakening. But it also reflects factors unique to a situation in which the devastation of Palestinian homes and land has become a horrifying routine. The cultural boycott of Israel effectively asserts that Israel's arts institutions—unless their directors reject government funding and explicitly support the BDS movement's demands—cannot be separated from state policies that have contributed to an unsustainable condition in which ethnic exclusion is the norm.

It is perhaps ironic that one of the first major BDS actions in the art world focused on my employer, the nonprofit Creative Time, which is known for supporting socially engaged art. The organization's marquee exhibition "Living as Form" (2011) showcased work that blurred the lines between community activism, culture jamming, conceptualism and performance art. But the show, curated by Nato Thompson and first mounted at New York's Essex Market, became a high-profile target of the BDS movement when its "nomadic version" traveled this past May to a university

gallery at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology courtesy of Independent Curators International (ICI).

Located in Haifa, Technion is a major research and development center for the Israeli army and affiliated government contractors. That "Living as Form," an exhibition whose title announces an expanded framework for art based on the notion of "social engagement," should be exhibited in this militaristic context was deeply disturbing to many of the featured artists. A group calling itself the BDS Arts Coalition published a letter signed by over 100 artists and writers, including Lucy Lippard, Walid Raad and Martha Rosler, urging their colleagues to withdraw their work from the exhibition due to Technion's "central role in maintaining the unjust and illegal occupation of Palestine." Within the show's one-month run, 15 of 48 artists and collectives listed on ICI's "Living as Form (nomadic version)" Web page pulled their works out of the exhibition or signed the letter in support. In statements, Creative Time and ICI both underscored the importance of artists expressing their political views, and promised greater transparency and communication. Still, both institutions remained steadfast and the diminished show was presented at Technion. Creative Time began its statement by noting, "Free speech has been fundamental to our mission and hence we do not participate in cultural boycotts."⁴

Critics of BDS often charge that the movement stifles free speech and therefore hinders the cross-cultural dialogue that will be necessary to forge a lasting peace. To be clear, BDS activists advocate boycotts of Israeli institutions, not individuals. As was the case in São Paulo, Israeli artists have participated in BDS actions. At the same time, there are manifold constraints on free speech in Israel and the Palestinian territories, from Israeli laws that limit BDS advocacy and prohibit commemorating the *nakba*, to military and mob violence against peaceful protesters and bystanders (both Jewish and Palestinian), of the sort so visible this past summer. By redirecting culture away from venues supported by the Israeli state, BDS strives to halt an on-the-ground situation characterized by unequal access to political expression.

BDS presents a challenge: to find—to collectively create—a more robust space for freedom, outside or in the margins of a state that has been an occupying force for decades, and has simultaneously denied political rights to its roughly 1.7 million Palestinian citizens. It is a task for which artists are well suited. Workshops on BDS and its implications for cultural production have recently taken place at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics and the Asian-American Writers Workshop, both in New York. At these events, the participants proposed that artists will no longer be faced with the question of whether to boycott or not to boycott. Rather, to paraphrase Rosler, they will be charged with making art politically—in solidarity with existing social movements—instead of just making political art. ○

1. The full text of the letter was published Aug. 28, 2014, on the website Hyperallergic.com, along with reporting by Mostafa Heddaya, whose investigation of the biennial's finances is the basis of the figures cited here.

2. Oren Sagiv, one of the Israeli members of the curatorial team, led by Charles Esche, later clarified that he supported the artists' right to express their political opinions about the source of funding rather than the boycott itself.

3. Information about the makeup of the BDS movement and a full list of its demands is available at bdsmovement.net.

4. The full text of the protest letter and a list of its signatories is available at bdsartscoalition.org; Creative Time's response was issued June 13, 2014, on its website, creativetime.org.

Join the debate about artist-led boycotts by sending a letter to the editor at aiaditor@brantpub.com, or by commenting online at artinamericamagazine.com