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Editorial

e-flux journal #62 — february 2015 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle
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Increasingly it seems like no large exhibition opens without an artist boycott. And the reasons to withdraw are legitimate – a gulf museum employs migrant labor under terms approaching slavery, a biennial sponsor corporation operates an offshore detention center, works are censored for petty moral reasons, a municipality passes a homophobic law, or funding is traced to an occupying state with a staggering record of ongoing human rights abuses.

Of course, these petitions can start to come off as a nuisance to those who believe that a healthy cultural industrial complex thrives on its distance from power and politics, as if some kind of contemplative distancing that makes art possible in the first place must also be too elegant to deal with the mundane financing or bloodstained politics of its hosts. But now there are so many petitions, so many threats to withdraw, that it becomes clear that the conditions for producing and exhibiting art have become ethically unbearable for too many artists – and this comes at the same time that the economic and political utility of contemporary art is becoming clear to global players discovering how supporting vanguard cultural production can humanize their own image. Where industrialists before put their surplus into culture – often to curry favor with the municipality – now municipalities, industrialists, and feudal lords alike use culture as advertising. And the staggering number of boycotts can be understood as the artistic response to these particular advances in the industrialization of the art world, and of art.

An important part of this shift is a change in the status of cultural production in general. Basically, art can no longer be taken to be an automatically good thing. If artworks have for over a century pointed to transformations in political or social consciousness, many artists are now coming to terms with the degree to which artworks are already functionalized as instruments of blunt social and political realities. While these realities might be depressing to idealistic types, or confusing to connoisseurial contemplative types, it would be a shame to miss what a profound reformatting of time we are currently experiencing when the engine of historical progress that defined the modern tradition slows down and bifurcates into the endless mirroring and redistribution of the present time. Technology turns naturalistic and advanced materialist accounts read global swarms of waste products for legible signs, for points where planetary-scale desires start to look structural or infrastructure-ish. The real discovery in all this may in fact be in a slow and relentless unraveling of what a sham the modern tradition may have been the whole time as an era

profoundly overstuffed with heroic promises layered over a sewer of neglect, of all the contradictions that modernity necessarily had to suppress in order to sustain its wildly progressive claims. And the *Charlie Hebdo* killings in Paris this past month could be seen as a testament to this.

While many find it difficult under these circumstances to identify the clearly marked political horizons of the past, we can also see artists taking these large-scale structural shifts into account to build an awareness of the strength of their own blind complicity, of their proximity to power, or of their coordinated opposition, as producers or nonproducers within the cultural industrial complex. And when it comes to the boycotts, the very interesting thing to notice is something that comes beneath the layer of moral indignation that any boycott petition has to use, because many of the artists involved in organizing or joining these boycotts are, in their work, already dealing with what is being boycotted. In many cases the same artists withdrawing their participation are actually extremely interested in the bloodstained funder, the weapons manufacturer, the moral police, or the draconian state policies they stand together with other artists to oppose.

Of course this is by no means a contradiction. Rather, it suggests that we may be witnessing a very sophisticated war of position that is renegotiating the way artists seek to simultaneously instrumentalize and be instrumentalized by hegemonic forces that far surpass them in scale. It is to say: a dictator is funding the exhibition, and I will not participate in the exhibition with my work on this dictator – he belongs to me, and within my work, and I do not belong to him. In terms of military strategy, it can be taken as a flanking or pincer maneuver to surround and contain the thing that might otherwise surround and contain you.

The artist Ahmet Ögüt, who has found himself participating in a number of recent boycott actions, has described how he began questioning the effectiveness of boycotts that only rely on a refusal or withdrawal of labor. Maybe the boycott attracts too much righteous indignation or self-interest. Maybe it's not sufficiently encompassing in scale to modify the terms of the agreement. Funders are by definition rich, and almost never interested in art. They can just as easily find another artist who will accept the terms. Furthermore, artists are often invited to participate in exhibitions not by funders, but by curators and institutions who respect their work. Why reject that dialogue outright? With this in mind, Ögüt began thinking of what Gayatri Spivak has called affirmative sabotage – saying yes, entering into the

agreement, but with a caveat: the artist participates on the condition that she or he has license to intervene in all operational aspects of the event, potentially causing significant problems for funders. Potentially turning a biennial into an exposé on the transgressions of its funders. Potentially scaring those funders away for good when they realize they are in over their heads.

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