

**Kareem Estefan, Carin Kuoni, Laura Raicovich, eds..** *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency, and Cultural Production*. New York: OR Books, 2017. 273 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-944869-43-4.

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With calls for boycotts coming from all sides of the political spectrum, the publication of *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency, and Cultural Production* is a particularly timely publication. Given the late capitalist state of the global economy, many individuals feel as if boycotting is the most effective way to assert political power. Indeed, as editors Carin Kuoni and Laura Raicovich herald in the opening line of their introduction, “Boycott is a tool of our time, a political and cultural strategy that has rarely been more prominent than now” (p. 7). In the art world, cultural boycotts in particular have surged within the past few years to draw attention to exhibitions’ and institutions’ ties to oppressive governments, labor practices, and corporations. The contributors to *Assuming Boycott* turn a critical eye on this phenomenon, exploring the reasons behind cultural boycotts, their implementation, and their possible ramifications.

The genesis of the publication was a series of seminars hosted by The New School’s Vera List Center for Art and Politics in 2014 and 2015. Many have been adapted to appear in *Assuming Boycott*, buttressed by the inclusion of previously published key texts. The book’s numerous contributors come from a variety of disciplines, and include artists, lawyers, anthropologists, architects, art historians, and activists. Despite this scholastic

breadth, the book is surprisingly narrow in its geographical focus. The first two sections, “The Cultural Boycott of Apartheid South Africa” and “BDS and the Cultural Boycott of Israel,” offer clusters of essays that center on two specific examples of cultural boycotts. The following sections, “Who Speaks? Who Is Silenced?” and “Dis/engagement from Afar,” are part of the editors’ stated aim to take “a critical detour from the pro/con axis of debates surrounding cultural boycotts” (p. 15). These two sections certainly expand the discussion to other regions and concerns beyond the two case studies, including Gulf Labor Coalition (which protests against the labor practices of the Guggenheim’s expansion to Abu Dhabi) and a participating artists’ boycott of the 19th Biennale of Sydney in 2014. But the actors in these boycotts are primarily based in the United States, and many of them inevitably end up circling back to BDS (the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement that targets the Israeli state), in part because of the activities and interests of the contributors and in part because of BDS’s status as an ongoing and highly visible boycott. For the most part, the authors write in explicit support of enacting cultural boycotts, and many write from their participatory experiences within them. However, they do not shy away from the complexities, difficulties, and paradoxes that often arise

from cultural boycotts, such as the ethics of disengagement versus engagement and the challenges of maintaining political focus while allowing for flexibility during a long-term campaign. Moreover, the essays are at their best when they position boycotts not only as acts of disengagement but also as means through which to foster new cultural or creative spaces outside the power structures of global capital or of oppressive state regimes.

A close examination of the cultural boycott protesting apartheid South Africa in the first section provides historical context for the influx of cultural boycotts that has occurred over the last decade. The editors also implicitly argue for a reconsideration of the perceived “success” of the South African boycott, which this section’s contributors are quick to question. The opening overview of the boycott by Sean Jacobs, the founder of the blog *Africa Is a Country*, highlights a further underlying reason for its inclusion, one that connects it to the book’s subsequent sections: it has been used as a model for BDS. In the following essay, art historian John Peffer analyzes the emergence of two artist groups in the 1980s: the Medu Art Ensemble and Thupelo art workshops. Since Thupelo revolved around artists from the Western Hemisphere coming to South Africa to work with predominantly black artists, it broke with the ideals of the boycott. It was, however, supported by the African National Congress and, Peffer argues, envisioned a non-racialized and international community in which South African artists could be a part. Anthropologist Hlonipha Mokoena’s essay examines the relationship between the cultural boycott and South African music. She argues that the implementation of the boycott was far from systematic, since international musicians often defied the boycott and consumption could not be fully policed within the country, and that it isolated black South African musicians by prohibiting their performances outside of the country. However, she concludes, this isolation fostered a vibrant local music industry that has had

lasting effects in post-apartheid music. In a fascinating excerpt from his memoir about his time in 1980s South Africa, writer, filmmaker, and critic Frank B. Wilderson III observes the sexism that existed in the South African anti-apartheid struggle, and presents a critique of Nelson Mandela’s tolerance of liberal capitalism, which he claimed would usher in multinational corporations after apartheid and reconnect white South Africans to “global Whiteness” once the boycott ended (p. 71).

As alluded to previously, the second section on BDS functions as the book’s core, providing a fulcrum around which many of the previous and following essays hinge. The authors explicitly position themselves as BDS supporters and generally start with the viewpoint that BDS is an imperative. From there, they explore the sociopolitical changes that it can generate. Theorist, filmmaker, and scholar Ariella Azoulay opens with a key theoretical text about how the Israeli state turns its citizens into “citizen-perpetrators,” and how BDS can lead to the realization of Jewish Israelis’ “right not to be perpetrators” (p. 85). She argues that Israeli citizens must reclaim this unalienable right in order to aid the BDS movement, dismantle what she calls the “regime-made disaster,” and forge a new civil contract. Legal scholar and activist Noura Erakat views BDS as vital in the civic and cultural realm since Palestinians have been crippled politically. And because the constant calls for dialogue ultimately reinforce the status quo, she argues, the boycott is needed to disrupt the regime and foster collaborative resistance. In a compelling conversation between architectural theorist Eyal Weizman and one of the book’s editors, Kareem Estefan, Weizman emphasizes, “Wherever BDS cuts off or impedes a relation with a state institution, the movement should find—perhaps even create—new forums for solidarity and cultural production” (p. 102). He also finds that engagement, as opposed to the withdrawal advocated by BDS, is at times necessary, referencing his own work with the research agency Forensic Architecture in Israeli courts and the Joint List

as examples. Nasser Abourahme, political theory and urban studies scholar, takes on critics of BDS's most controversial goal in his essay—the right of Palestinian refugees' return to their homeland—and points out that the Israeli colonization of Palestine, far from being located in the past as a form of nation building, is currently underway as a “present continuous” (p. 121). Curator Joshua Simon posits that although BDS is normally positioned as promoting disengagement, it in fact directly engages with the bondholders and lenders that hold real political power within the logic of late capitalism. But paradoxically, he simultaneously argues that since the neoliberal state depends on occupation, BDS must work to create agency outside of consumption. Artist and curator Yazan Khalili calls for BDS to incorporate an ethical demand: the removal of the “oppressive apparatus” of the Zionist state (p. 133). For Khalili, the Zionist state victimizes not only Palestinians but its Jewish subjects as well, continuing their Euro-Christian oppression through the conflation of religious and political identities. This point is an important one to make, since this same slippage sometimes occurs in the essays here. This section thus ends with a push for BDS to expand its aims and, in dialogue with Azoulay's opening text, to fight “on behalf of all the victims of the Zionist state” (p. 135).

The third section is meant to shed light on both artistic responsibility and possible censorship related to calls for boycott. Artist Tania Bruguera provides a welcome Latin American voice, detailing her own encounters with Cuban censorship in her fight for socially responsible freedom of expression. She conveys a healthy dose of skepticism toward the efficacy of cultural boycotts, preferring artists to practice direct engagement by visiting the people with whom they wish to act in solidarity. Naeem Mohaiemen, an artist who has been involved with Gulf Labor Coalition since the group's inception, explains how a shift in artists' metaphoric confrontation through artwork to direct political engagement

can be potentially transformative, but also how it can lead to real emotional and professional quandaries. In her essay, Svetlana Mintcheva, the director of programs at the National Coalition Against Censorship, critiques the calls for the removal of offensive or appropriative art objects or conference participants, likening these demands to acts of censorship and suppression. Although she does not fully consider the very real reasons behind why groups might protest or attempt to remove culturally appropriated or racist artworks, Mintcheva does offer a timely voice of caution by warning that simply pressuring institutions to exclude a certain participant or to remove a certain artwork leads only to silence and self-censorship, limiting the call for social justice to the symbolic without addressing the structures that underline institutional inequalities. Ending this section, anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler's essay asks why critical anthropologists do not bring the analytical tools they have honed through their discipline to a discussion of Israel-Palestine, and argues that censorship and self-censorship surrounding the issue persists in academia. Taken together, these essays tackle how freedom of expression intersects with multiple sites of knowledge production primarily in the United States.

The fourth and final section uses the idea of distance to ask if, as the editors write, “our engagement with disengagement, especially as it transcends the local and covers distances, is not only a response to global capitalism but also a reflection of newly emerging artistic practices” (p. 183). Curator Chelsea Haines's insightful essay examines the responses of museums and biennials when they are the targets of boycotts to analyze how an understanding of art's ontology—as transcendent of the context in which it is shown but also able to exert political influence—is used as an argument against cultural boycotts. Artists and Gulf Labor Coalition members Mariam Ghani and Haig Aivazian describe how Gulf Labor Coalition's 52 Weeks campaign created an alternative form of engagement within the context of a boycott. In-

terestingly, Ghani and Aivazian remain positive about the role of museums, and do not question the expansion of the Guggenheim to Abu Dhabi; the focus is on the labor used to build it, rather than the project in and of itself. To my mind, however, it is difficult to separate the neoliberal expansionism of cultural institutions from the use of exploitative labor. A consideration of these mechanisms would have been productive in relation to 52 Weeks since the platform not only claims to bring issues of late capitalist labor to the forefront of artistic practice but also seems to have generated a space through which ideas can circulate outside of the museum. Artists Nathan Gray and Ahmet Ögüt discuss their participation in what they call their “conditional withdrawal” from the 2014 Sydney Biennale to protest the biennial founder’s business ties to offshore detention facilities of asylum seekers. Gray details the complex relationships between the Australian political, business, and art worlds; it was heartening to read how the Sydney Biennale protest catalyzed real change. To end the section, curator and writer Radhika Subramaniam offers thoughts on how technologies such as smartphones and social media foster a “sense of intimate distance,” and the means and awareness through which to engage across it (p. 226). As the closing essay of *Assuming Boycott*, Subramaniam’s text leaves the reader to think about her own interconnectivity and her engagement with others across distances.

The short length of each contribution at times leads to flat summaries, insufficient context, and disjointed essay structures, but it does allow for a breadth of contributions and viewpoints. This range is important, as calls for cultural boycotts continue across all aspects of the art world. *Assuming Boycott* can serve as a touchstone for the ethical, political, and cultural ramifications behind cultural boycotts and their possible outcomes. Certain essays or perhaps entire sections of this book can easily be incorporated into any undergraduate or graduate syllabus concerned with the intersection between art and politics. At

the same time, the book was constructed with a broad readership in mind: from artists concerned with political praxis, to people who want to learn more about BDS and/or cultural boycotts in general. In this current political climate, as an increasing number of artists, curators, scholars, critics, and museum administrators wade directly into the political arena—and often face backlash because of it—projects such as *Assuming Boycott* are greatly needed.

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