

The Curatorial Conundrum

What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?

Paperback ISBN: 9780262529105 | 352 pp. | April 2016 | (MIT Press)

Collectivity, Conflict, Imagination, Transformation

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The title of this essay, “Collectivity, Conflict, Imagination, Transformation,” is composed of the four building blocks that guided the curatorial team¹ in the development of the concept for the 31st Bienal de São Paulo—four notions, which, when brought together, have the potential to change reality.² Charles Esche, Nuria Enguita Mayo, Pablo Lafuente, Oren Sagiv, and myself arrived in São Paulo after a stormy winter in Brazil, during which hundreds of thousands of citizens in major cities went out into the streets to protest against the rising costs of public transportation. The protests led to other struggles by various organizations and unions that fought for better wages, education, and health care, among other public services. While the Bienal is an established institution that has a place of honor in the pantheon of exhibition histories, it is also a temporary and contemporary art event. It therefore seemed important to us that it should take account of what was going on in Brazil at that moment. One of the key questions that accompanied the curatorial team when we embarked on this enterprise was how to give a voice to the social processes being experienced in the country: how to *present* reality, without trying to *represent* it.

To gain a deeper understanding of Brazilian society and to engage with local artistic perspectives, interests, concerns, and urgencies we enacted two initial measures to ensure this; first, the non-Brazilian members of the curatorial team relocated to São Paulo during the research and exhibition period. Secondly, research was convened through a series of Open Meetings, which took place in different cities in Brazil (such as Porto Alegre in the South, Fortaleza, Recife, and Salvador

in the North East, Belo Horizonte, and São Paulo in the South East, and Belém in the North), and Latin American capitals and a few cities outside Latin America. The meetings did not have a structure or an imposed subject; the idea, on the contrary, was to put forward an exploratory format, which participants could use in the way they thought best. During these gatherings the curator's role was that of moderator, and was rooted in an attitude of active listening. The meetings allowed us to set up a situation of exchange in which we could touch on issues of art and its relationship to life in the cities. In this schema we were able to explore the educational and cultural infrastructure, local social dynamics, and current political struggles, among many other issues. All this information has been fundamental to how the curatorial concept developed.

Traveling through Brazil and other parts of Latin America, the movement of people, their displacement, and resettlement became a major concern—from the right to free, or even affordable, public transport, to the experience of migration, and the social invisibility of nomadic groups, as well as attempts to establish interlocution with indigenous people. Each meeting was observed and reported on by an independent critic and later shared online on the Bienal blog.³

A residency period was offered to artists and artists' collectives from Brazil and other geographies to support the development of new work. We encouraged collaborations between individuals and groups in the development of projects, as this seemed to respond to our current time. Through their work we examined conflicts underlain by unresolved relationships between groups, between different historical narratives, and between ideas incongruent with official perceptions of the Brazilian establishment. At the same time we tried to contemplate these conflicts collectively, in the belief that such a process is more enriching and effective than individual thought processes and work. We identified imagination and transformation as tools that help one advance beyond and change one's current position. Art at its best has revolutionary power. It can make that which was

forbidden yesterday acceptable today, enabling us to observe reality differently. This transformation is also the result of processes that we experience, and can be comprehended via acts of translation, transgression, transgenderism, and other measures that conceal a turn and reject the notion of one absolute truth.

The idea of a turn is often attributed to religious conversion, to a change of political system, or the attempt to define a moment in which social and institutional conventions change, giving way to a different set of common values. Such a turn may only occur without exact mechanisms of control and command. At present, the intensification of national movements, ascents, and collapses in the markets of the global economy, and increased inequality in the distribution of resources all indicate a paradigmatic change. When the status quo is enforced concurrent to that change, the non-existent is rendered tangible abruptly. The turn discernible to us on the horizon seeks a way to rid itself of predetermined parameters. It does not shy away from conflict and confrontation as vehicles of change.

The Bienal opened in light of a conflict that confronted us with the very notions, actions, and concepts that had inspired us throughout the work process. It opened on September 7, a few days after a ceasefire was secured between Hamas in Gaza and the Israeli government. Due to the proximity between that military attack and the Bienal opening, the majority of the participating artists demanded that the Bienal Foundation boycott Israeli state funding in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

An Introduction to Boycott

An organized Palestinian call for a boycott on Israel was made by PACBI (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel) in 2004.⁴ The boycott movement called upon the

international community to show solidarity with the Palestinian struggle; to avoid collaboration with state-funded Israeli academic, cultural, and other institutions and organizations, as well as participation in events organized or sponsored by official Israeli organizations or ones with economic partnerships in the occupied territories. This boycott is to be applied until Israel complies with international law, ends the occupation and the discrimination and oppression suffered by the Palestinians within the Green Line, and acknowledges the right of return of the Palestinian refugees to the territories of historic Palestine. The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) Movement, which is better known today, was established in 2005; in addition to its call for an economic boycott, its goals were identical to those of PACBI.⁵

The rise in international support of a boycott of Israeli institutions and products was triggered by the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2008-2009, during which more than 1,000 Palestinians were killed, and the takeover of the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara in 2010, which had left Turkey to break Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip, alert international public opinion to the situation of Gaza residents, and transfer humanitarian aid. The ship was boarded by an elite unit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) before reaching the Gaza shores. During this takeover, nine international activists were killed, and approximately twenty more were injured.

Israel's response to the rising support for a boycott was the introduction of a new law, the Boycott Law (Law of Prevention of Damage to the State of Israel through Boycott, 2011), which applies to citizens of Israel and states that any public call for a cultural, academic, or economic boycott of any person or party solely on the grounds of affiliation with the State of Israel, one of its institutions, or a territory under its control (a clause which was added to the law to cover the prevalent call for boycott of products from the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories), will be considered a civil injustice, and hence sufficient cause to establish a punitive damage claim. The

phrase “boycott of the State of Israel” in the law covers many forms of conduct whose connection to the literal meaning of the word ‘boycott’ is far from clear. The law may apply to intentional avoidance of buying products made in a factory in Judea and Samaria, or voluntary abstention from cultural contact, such as deciding not to perform in an Israeli theater or exhibit in an Israeli museum in Judea and Samaria, refusing to study in Ariel University in the West Bank, or to visit the Jewish settlements beyond the Green Line. Through this law, the State of Israel denies the elementary civil right of organization intended to encourage citizens to avoid partaking in what others perceive as wrong or sinful by abstaining from economic ties or visits to certain territories.

Israeli propaganda tends to define any struggle against government policy as a type of terror: diplomatic terror, economic terror, cyber-terror, legal terror, and anti-Semitic terror, the latter being the most effective internationally. In doing so, it deems any form of struggle against the occupation as violent and illegitimate. The Palestinian choice of a strategy of boycott and diplomatic-economic sanctions, however, is based on tactics of nonviolent struggle considered legitimate and effective around the world. *Vis-à-vis* the mighty propaganda machine implemented by Israel, the Palestinians have opted for a tool intended to expose the international community to their plight, and enable anyone, anywhere in the world, to express active support for their cause.

One should note that the Israeli propaganda efforts are underpinned by a double standard regarding the Palestinian boycott of Israel. Israel itself advocates a boycott against Hamas in Gaza, against the regime in Iran, and—recently—against the boycott supporters themselves. For Israelis living in Israel it would be hard to call for a boycott when they themselves cannot boycott the products made in their country or the university in which they study/teach, and continue to pay taxes to the Israeli state. Nevertheless, it is their civil right (although not according to Israeli law) to support the international BDS calls against Israel or any other nonviolent measure that may make

their country end its occupation, considering that until Israelis feel international pressure and threat on their economy and culture, there will be no change.⁶ This is as equally legitimate and moral a stand as the position maintaining that a boycott is immoral and ineffective.

Even among those who support a boycott of Israeli products and institutions in principle, many object to an academic and cultural boycott. This objection relies, *inter alia*, on the argument that a cultural boycott without an economic one is ineffective. Another argument often voiced by the artistic community, not only in Israel, is that art is apolitical and should strive to create a dialogue between cultures, hence it must not be boycotted. Adherents to this claim usually regard art as autonomous, and will fight to preserve it as such. The idea that art is autonomous implies its lack of any form of utility (other than economic, perhaps), eliminating any possibility for action, or a political/social call by art, thereby negating the argument that art can form a bridge between cultures and create dialogue.

A Guide for the Perplexed

In the following paragraphs I will try to explain the logic behind the cultural and academic boycott, and the conditions for its effectiveness. Such a boycott differs from the economic or consumer boycott, because it works simultaneously on symbolic, representative, and informative levels, and should take place in the public sphere. Therefore, discussion of the boycott, and the lively debate accompanying it, furnishes countless opportunities to present the reasons that led to it—the wrongs inflicted by the Israeli regime—and deny its legitimacy, thereby undermining the democratic image that the State of Israel tries to sustain. This may subsequently thwart economic collaborations, or investment in Israeli companies, an act that may turn into economic sanctions and lead to the end of the Occupation. In contrast, thus far the consumer boycott has been performed by individuals,

without media reverberations. Only boycotts by corporations or large companies attract publicity, generating a media buzz that exceeds the isolated boycotting act, but these instances are relatively rare.

Many Israeli artists, curators, and cultural activists who support the Palestinian struggle maintain that a cultural and academic boycott leads to silencing, and does not distinguish between supporters and objectors of the occupation. In order to reply to this argument one must distinguish between different forms of boycott. PACBI's call for boycott demands a refusal to work with government institutions, or ones sponsored by the State of Israel, while rejecting the boycotting of individuals. The issue remains unresolved when individuals employed by public and government institutions are concerned. This dilemma arises mainly with regard to the boycotting of academic scholars who lecture in public universities (as the majority of universities in Israel are public and subsidized by the state). It also applies to Israeli artists who have been granted government support, and even Palestinian artists, citizens of Israel, who were given such grants. The strict objectors ban any connection with the State of Israel, thereby preventing discussion of the boycott and eliminating the potential for public debate regarding the essence of the boycott, its justification, and modus operandi—concerns that are vital to the success of the boycotting act.

In making this argument about the need for public boycott, I draw on two sources: one originates in Jewish tradition, the other in my own professional experience.

The Hebrew word for boycott is *herem* (חרם), which goes back to biblical times. It first appeared in Leviticus. The word *herem* is sometimes associated with the Holy of Holies (the Sanctuary) (Leviticus 27:28),⁷ and at other times, with abomination and profanity, hence, what is boycotted is abhorred and cursed (placed under *herem*) (Deuteronomy 7: 26).⁸ The Hebrew root *H-R-M* has two major denotations. One refers to something that is forbidden to touch, while the other

is something sacred. These gave rise to a third denotation: *herem* is one of the ways to dedicate human beings and property to God or His representatives. Deriving pleasure from that which was placed under *herem* is prohibited. He who enjoys it is called an embezzler, and is placed under *herem* himself. The word *herem* has been given numerous interpretations by various commentators in different eras. All of them, however, refer to the principle that it is forbidden to touch the object placed under *herem* or that the object is consecrated (namely, it becomes the property of God, hence untouchable). Most of the biblical contexts for *herem* are war-related. Only later did the term come to designate the exclusion of a person from the community, of excommunication. The distinction between *niddui* (ban, ostracism) and *herem* originated in the Babylonian Talmud (third to fifth centuries CE). According to that distinction, a *herem* was applied after 60 days of *niddui*, during which the ostracized person had a chance to mend their ways. After that period, *Herem* designated the disgrace of ostracizing, and the person placed under *herem* could neither study the Torah nor work.⁹ Following the Geonic period (eleventh century CE), *niddui* and *herem* were used to reinforce public regulations within the Jewish community. One of the best-known cases of *herem* was the one initiated in 1656 CE by the Rabbis of Amsterdam against Baruch Spinoza and Uriel da Costa, claiming that their teachings were heresy. Slightly later, boycotts were decreed against Sabbatai Zevi's adherents, against Hassidim, against Jacob Frank and his followers, and against Enlightenment and Reform Jews.¹⁰

An act of *herem* within the Jewish community is performed in the presence of a *minyán*, a quorum: ten men who represent the public domain, as in a prayer quorum. *Herem* in the orthodox Jewish community is the most radical act implemented against an individual, cutting off and excluding them from the community. Understanding the etymology of the word and its biblical roots (the term was never secularized, nor acquired a civil synonym) may account for the alarm it elicits

in the Israeli public, and in the Jewish world at large, as well as the mass mobilization for the bitter fight against it.¹¹

While the Biblical view of boycott makes the public announcement of any boycott a defining aspect, there are also professional reasons why a boycott should be made public.

The following are two examples of boycott attempts or successful boycotts against Israeli representation in international art events that I personally experienced. In 2011 I co-curated the 52nd October Salon in Belgrade with Alenka Gregorič. The exhibition featured local and international artists, including Lebanese, Palestinians, and Israelis. During the preparations for the show (several months before the opening), the project organizers applied to the Israeli embassy in Belgrade, asking for support of the event, and received an affirmative response. When we learned of the Israeli support, we demanded that the Lebanese and Palestinian artists be advised thereof, and they announced unequivocally that they would not participate in the exhibition. The organizers decided not to risk the show and declined the Israeli offer. The boycott worked here, and the Israeli state was not represented in this cultural platform, despite the participation of Israeli artists. Similarly, the São Paulo Bienal featured local and international artists, including Lebanese, Palestinians, and Israelis. In this instance, too, the Biennial approached the Israeli embassy in Brazil for support of the project, which was also approved. The opening was scheduled for several days after the official ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. This attack on Gaza was the third and cruelest ever performed by Israel. It took the lives of more than 2,000 Palestinian civilians and combatants, with 72 dead on the Israeli side, 67 of them soldiers. To this day Gaza has not been rebuilt, and its citizens still live amid the debris. In this context, one must add that the Brazilian Ambassador to Tel Aviv was called back in protest during the Israeli attack on Gaza, concurrent with a harsh exchange between the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and Brasília, which was reported in the international press. Only after the

Israeli president apologized to the President of Brazil diplomatic relations were reinstated.

As in the case of the October Salon, this time, too, the artists were informed of the Israeli support. They were updated personally, as they were in São Paulo to develop their works. A meeting was held, with the participation of the Palestinian and Lebanese artists, two representatives from the curatorial team, and the Bienal Foundation President, in which the latter clarified that he had no intention of rejecting the Israeli support, and expressed his dismay that we were importing external problems that did not pertain to Brazil. His main argument was that the Bienal Foundation was not a political body, and that it would accept funds from any economic organization or country willing to support the event. Following the meeting and additional harsh exchanges, the artists wrote a petition demanding that the Bienal administration decline the Israeli support. In their letter they explained that:

At a time in which the people of Gaza return to the rubble of their homes, destroyed by the Israeli military, we do not feel it is acceptable to receive Israeli cultural sponsorship. In accepting this funding, our artistic work displayed in the exhibition is undermined and implicitly used for whitewashing Israel's ongoing aggressions, and violation of international law and human rights. We reject Israel's attempt to normalize itself within the context of a major international cultural event in Brazil.¹²

In their declaration the artists demanded that their work not be used to whitewash Israel's aggression in Gaza, namely not to enable the State of Israel to be represented in an international cultural event, and to benefit from the symbolic value of the artists' works. The artists considered that the presentation of their works under the emblem of the Israeli state clashed with and undermined the messages they wished to convey. Their argument pertains to many cases in which

artists are asked to represent various entities through their work, which is true of cultural events large and small, and museums that raise funds and offer the symbolic capital and contents brought by artists in exchange. Obviously, the problem does not lie in the fundraising itself, but in the degree of transparency, or lack thereof, in the artists' awareness of the support, and whether they agree to the transaction offering financial capital in exchange for symbolic capital.

In this spirit, the curators published a declaration supporting the artists, both those who decided to side with the Palestinian struggle, and those who chose not to.

We, the curators of the 31st Bienal de São Paulo, support the artists and understand their position. We believe that the statement and demand by the artists should also be a trigger to think about the funding sources of major cultural events. In the 31st Bienal, much of the work seeks to show that struggles for justice in Brazil, Latin America, and elsewhere in the world are connected. The idea of living in transformational times is fundamental to this Bienal, times when old patterns of behavior are exhausted and long-held beliefs are questioned. This transformation also affects the relationship between curators and organisers of major cultural events such as this Bienal. At the outset, we accepted the traditional agreement in which curators have artistic freedom and the Foundation has responsibility for the financial and administrative affairs. The Bienal de São Paulo Foundation has very correctly kept to this agreement throughout. In our turn, we assisted in international fundraising. However, as a consequence of this situation, alongside other incidents at similar events worldwide, it is clear that the sources of cultural funding have an increasingly dramatic impact on the supposedly 'independent' curatorial and artistic narrative of an event. The funding, whether state, corporate or private, fundamentally

*shapes the way the public receives the work of artists and curators.*¹³

Every evening at 7 pm during the week before the opening, a meeting initiated by the artists was held for updates and coordination. Many differences of opinion emerged during these conversations, some regarding the way in which they were to organize, act, and respond. Questions came up, such as whether the only problematic representation was the Israeli one, or whether there were other, similarly controversial countries or Brazilian organizations. Many questions were asked regarding the artists' commitment to the audience that had been anticipating the opening of the event for two years, and their commitment to the local producers with whom they had worked, etc. At the same time it was clear that all the artists wanted the Bienal to open as planned, and that as a group they did not want to let anyone leave, so that if the Bienal were to open, it would be with the participation of all the invited artists.

The Foundation's refusal to comply with the artists' demand or negotiate with them sparked a media reaction. More than 70 percent of the artists declared that they would not take part in the Bienal if the State of Israel were represented. The day before the opening an agreement was reached between the Foundation and the artists that Israel's sponsorship, and any other state support, would be restricted to their own nation's participating artists and not apply to the Bienal as a whole. While Israel was ultimately represented in the exhibition and there was no boycott, the struggle over the boycott demand yielded a message of solidarity and sharp denunciation of Israel's measures in the Gaza Strip in the Brazilian and international mass and social media.

The Silent Boycott

The events around the boycott in São Paulo proved that the *public* call for a boycott is as important

as the act of boycotting itself. This essay was written a year after the conclusion of the deadly attack on Gaza, and the cultural boycott in the Israeli art field is felt today more than ever, as museums, art centers, and galleries encounter an increasing number of artists who refuse to exhibit in Israel. Much of this, however, is done privately and discreetly (or, more accurately, by email). The boycott itself, its motivations and effect on the Israeli art world are not made widely known, and are not discussed in public—many of the invitations to exhibit in Israel by state-funded organizations or private non-funded entities are met with a negative response; sometimes the invitees simply omit to answer—hence the act of boycott does not fulfill its potential, and remains a mere refusal or disregard of the invitation.

The refusal to exhibit in an Israeli museum or gallery, to perform in Israel, or to participate in an event sponsored by the State of Israel is at the core of this boycott action, but without making it public knowledge or disseminating the reason for the refusal, the boycott remains between the inviting party and the refusing party, failing to make a public impact. A meaningful boycott must take place in the public sphere, or, more specifically—in the media/communication sphere. For instance, refusal to sell an artwork to an Israeli museum by an international artist who does not wish to be included in the collection for ideological reasons is not a boycott if the artist does not declare that he is boycotting the museum or its collection. Refusal to collaborate with Israeli art institutions or not inviting them to take part in international projects without public/media repercussions explaining why the invitation was withdrawn, or never considered to begin with, can be regarded as lack of time, indifference, or disregard. On the other hand, international events and organizers that fail to invite Israeli artists or cancel their participation in international events when they are neither supported by the State of Israel nor represent it, take an ineffective measure, which does not contribute to the boycott movement. A boycott is a civic action and does not occur behind the

scenes, between individuals, or in the private sphere. The boycott is not a goal in itself; it is an instrument to bring about change, and to put pressure on Israeli citizens and the state of Israel. Therefore boycott is unproductive if it is not announced publicly. If the Israeli public remains unaware of its existence and pressure is not put on the government from within, no change will take place, rendering the boycott pointless. The silently boycotting individuals or institutes may feel that they have made the right ethical decision for themselves, but they fail to contribute to the potential change aimed at by that boycott movement.

The question provoked by the boycott is this: Is there a difference between refusal to exhibit somewhere since the budget is insufficient, or the museum is not important enough, or the project's underlying concept is not interesting enough, etc., and a refusal to exhibit for ideological reasons? Obviously, all reasons for refusal are legitimate, but this does not qualify them as a boycott. It is not a boycott if the refusal occurs outside the sphere of representation. Every refusal has an impact, but to try to change official Israeli policy toward the Palestinians living under occupation, it takes more than a refusal or silent solidarity. It takes a campaign to awaken public opinion for international solidarity with the Palestinian civil struggle.

- ¹ The 31st Sao Paulo biennial curatorial team consisted of Charles Esche, Galit Eilat, Nuria Enguita Mayo, Pablo Lafuente and Oren Sagiv. Associate curators were Benjamin Seroussi and Luiza Proença. See more about the curators at <http://www.31bienal.org.br/en/post/888> (accessed December 8, 2015)
- ² See for more details the Bienal website's information page at <http://www.31bienal.org.br/en/information/766> (accessed December 8, 2015).
- ³ To read the reports please see <http://www.31bienal.org.br/en/posts/860> (accessed December 8, 2015).
- ⁴ For more information on the campaign see <http://www.pacbi.org/>.
- ⁵ For more information on the BDS movement, see <http://www.bdsmovement.net/>.
- ⁶ Please see <http://boycottisrael.info/>.
- ⁷ “Notwithstanding no devoted thing (*herem*), that a man shall devote unto the LORD of all that he hath, both of man and beast, and of the field of his possession, shall be sold or redeemed: every devoted thing (*herem*) is most holy unto the LORD.” (Leviticus 27:28, King James Version of the Bible, 1604-1611).
- ⁸ “Neither shalt thou bring an abomination into thine house, lest thou be a cursed (*herem*) thing like it: but thou shalt utterly detest it, and thou shalt utterly abhor it; for it is a cursed thing (*herem*).” (Deuteronomy 7: 26; King James Version of the Bible).
- ⁹ See the website of the Shalom Hartman Institute (text in Hebrew), http://heb.hartman.org.il/Dvarim_Achadim_View.asp?Article_Id=41&Cat_Id=281&Cat_Type (accessed August 10, 2015).
- ¹⁰ See [https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%97%D7%A8%D7%9D_\(%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%94](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%97%D7%A8%D7%9D_(%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%94) [Hebrew] (accessed August 10, 2015); for English, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herem_\(censure\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herem_(censure)) (accessed August 10, 2015).
- ¹¹ The Arabic term for boycott is *haram*, denoting a prohibition, taboo, or alternatively, something sacred, dedicated to God, much like the Hebrew denotation of the term. In everyday language, however, the prevalent term for boycott is *mukataa* (المقاطعة), which derives from section or fragment, something that should be cut off.
- ¹² See Mostafa Heddaya, “São Paulo Biennial Participants Demand Organizers Return Israel Funding (Updated),” *Hyperallergic*, August 28, 2014, online at <http://hyperallergic.com/146032/sao-paulo-biennial-participants-demand-organizers-return-israel-funding/?wt=2> (accessed August 10, 2015).
- ¹³ See Mostafa Heddaya, “São Biennial Curators Join Artists in Repudiating Israeli Sponsorship,” *Hyperallergic*, August 29, 2014, online at <http://hyperallergic.com/146308/sao-paulo-biennial-curators-join-artists-in-repudiating-israeli-sponsorship> (accessed August 10, 2015).