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Controversies News United Kingdom

Cultural boycott of Israel under fire

Jeremy Deller's name withdrawn from campaign backed by more than 1,000 cultural figures

By Anny Shaw. Web only
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Photo: © Jonny White

A cultural boycott of Israel launched in Britain earlier this month has attracted more than 1,000 prominent supporters—and growing criticism. Artists for Palestine UK published a letter in the *Guardian* newspaper on 13 February announcing the latest boycott. Signatories include Ed Atkins, Phyllida Barlow, Mona Hatoum, Bharti Kher, Kodwo Eshun and Bob and Roberta Smith, as well as architects, film directors, actors, musicians and writers. But the artist Jeremy Deller's name has been removed after it emerged he had not actually pledged his support.

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Deller, who represented Britain at the 2013 Venice Biennale, describes the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinian population as "a disaster for the world", but says: "I was not happy with the wording of the boycott," adding that he is "uneasy about blanket boycotts".

Supporters of the boycott refuse to take part in exhibitions, concerts, festivals and conferences in Israel unless they are organised by groups that support Palestinian rights. They also reject funding from institutions linked to the Israeli government.

One of the main criticisms of the boycott against Israel is that it shuts down cultural dialogue in the region. Yael Reinharz, the executive director of the New York non-profit organisation Artis, says the main effect of the boycott felt within Israel is a lack of exhibitions by Arab artists and curators from abroad. "Although unofficial initiatives do occur, Palestinian and Israeli organisations rarely collaborate, furthering the rift between the two societies," she says.

Robert Storr, the dean of the Yale School of Art, who has signed the anti-boycott initiative, Challenging Double Standards, which launched in December and has gathered more than 200 signatories, says culture may succeed where politics fails. "Despite the fact that I am profoundly dismayed by what has become of Israel under Netanyahu and the nationalist right [...] I believe that cultural exchange of every kind—uncensored on all sides—grows in importance in proportion to the failures of explicitly political dialogue," he says.

Comments

How misguided and self indulgent. Could I suggest that the artists, curators and academics who believe it's a noble thing to boycott their colleagues...

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Critics of the boycott also question its effectiveness and point to unintended consequences. "Of course, a boycott is a legitimate way of trying to put political pressure on Israel, [but] its effects on the policymakers is nil," says Sergio Edelsztejn, the director of the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv. "In fact, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel [the first cultural boycott launched in 2004] is the only movement that serves the demonisation of the other side, therefore benefiting Israel's right wing government as much as the Palestinian one," he says

Perhaps the gravest criticism that has been levied against the boycott of Israel is that it is anti-Semitic, a charge Artists for Palestine UK strongly rejects, saying: "We—Jews included—reject [the] pernicious conflation." Jack Persekian, the director of the Palestinian Museum, which is due to open in spring 2016, says "artists are boycotting Israel, not Judaism", adding that he hopes the boycott will put political pressure on Israel.

Supporters of a cultural boycott argue that it is necessary because the Israeli government controls cultural dialogue. "Israel wants the right to carry its cultural message around the world, [but] it denies any form of artistic expression to Palestinians," says Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, a founder of Artists for Palestine UK, who is one of dozens of Jewish artists and activists to support the boycott.

One British curator, who preferred to remain anonymous after having received "some bad responses" since the list was published, describes the idea of a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue as "false and ultimately one sided". A short book published by Artists for Palestine UK, which makes the case for the cultural boycott, includes accounts of a Gaza bookshop owner whose inventory supply has been cut off since 2007, how members of the Ramallah Orchestra were refused permits to enter East Jerusalem in 2012, and how in 2002 the Alrowwad theatre was vandalised by the Israeli army.

Meanwhile, Israeli artists who are critical of its government face increasing problems at home. "Artists supported by the government used to be invited to do exhibitions that were critical of the state's policies. It served the state because it proved that Israel is a democracy," says Eyal Danon, the director of the Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon. "Now there are more [artist] blacklists, the situation is getting worse."

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27 Feb 15 15:52 CET **STEVEN, GLASGOW**
What a silly headline. The campaign is "under fire" only if you consider a damp squib to be a raging furnace. I don't know if there are people expressing legitimate and thoughtful arguments against the boycott, but there are none being expressed in this article, which even descends into to playing the tired old and long discredited "anti-Semitic" card.

26 Feb 15 20:47 CET **ANNA WALDMANN, SYDNEY**
How misguided and self indulgent. Could I suggest that the artists, curators and academics who believe it's a noble thing to boycott their colleagues in Israel, have a hard look at what is happening to culture and art around the Middle East. I am sure all who joined the boycott feel better about themselves, but it's a meaningless gesture. It would be more useful if they spent time in a Middle East country and get a sense of real-life censorship, dictatorship and lack of freedom. That would deserve boycotting!

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