Arguments de Culturescapes contre le boycott

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Categories: Boycott culturel

Voici les arguments (en anglais) que le directeur de Culturescapes, Jurriaan Cooiman, à envoyé aux organisateurs et partnenaires du festival, en reponse à la lettre ouverte de BDS Suisse et nos reponses:

1. Boycott is the wrong signal, especially when cultural workers are affected, regardlessof where they come from! Wherever they cannot be heard there will be less awareness of their situation, thus prejudices will grow and fronts harden.

We do not call for the boycott of artists. You are welcome to feature Israeli artists in your artistic program, when you invite them based on your independent appreciation of their merit. We ask to you refrain from giving your support to events and institutions that use art to whitewash apartheid.

Artists are capable of being independent, of standing for justice and liberty, of capturing in their work, what is human, universal, absolute, in every situation. But artists are also capable of betrayal, of working in the service of states, even the worst of states, and artists are capable of lending their voice to racism and hatred. Artists are even capable of doing both at once. We know that from history. There hasn't been an ideology so vile that no artist agreed to promote. Artists are human beings; they live in their times and often share the times' vice and blindness.

There is an apartheid political system in Israel, based on continuing ethnic cleansing, racism, and military occupation. Some Israeli artists use their voice in the defense of justice. Others willingly promote apartheid. Some use a superficially "critical" voice to legitimize apartheid by helping the state appear "enlightened". It isn't easy being an artist in such a compromised political situation, but that difficulty should not be an excuse. When the government of Israel explicitly tells us that they are using art to help sell apartheid, it is the moral duty of every artist to refuse to join that enterprise. When Palestinian artists who are the victims of apartheid invite Israelis to join them in a non-violent strategy of boycott, it is the moral duty of Israeli artists, who benefit from apartheid, to join (and quite a few did). Yet many Israeli artists willingly participate in this organized state propaganda effort. The question we want to ask is therefore:

In the face of this collaboration, what is your moral obligation, towards your fellow citizens, towards your fellow human beings in Palestine, who pay the price of that collaboration in every moment of their life, towards those Israeli artists who have lost sight of their own duty, and towards art itself?

We think your obligation is to refuse to take part in this propaganda effort.

The message that we ask you to send is that you will not collaborate with apartheid, and that you expect your fellow artists in Israel to stand up for what is right, even at the cost of losing access and prestige, and that when they do that, you will support and defend them in any way you can. This is the right message that all cultural workers should send to one another, a message of friendship based on helping each other do the right thing.

2. It's true that funds from both the Israeli and the Swiss government are involved. On both sides these are the contributions of tax payers – be they consumers of culture or cultural workers, be they on the left or the right politically and so on – as in all countries.

How art is funded is always a fundamental question, moral, political and artistic. Funding is never truly without strings attached, and never truly without consequences. However, the universality of the problem of funding art cannot be used to legitimize the loss of all boundaries and standards. Will you accept sponsorship from the association of slave traders in the Sudan? There is a huge difference between your institution taking Swiss taxpayer money and taking the money of a government based on apartheid. We ask you to draw a line. Switzerland is a democracy. Israel is an apartheid system, based on the systematic oppression, ethnic cleansing, discrimination and occupation of millions of people on the basis of their religion/ethnicity for three generations. The monies in this case is the wealth extracted through that system of abuse, disbursed by the people in charge of that abuse, given to artists according to the same racist standards that govern the general politics of the state, and those monies are disbursed for the express purpose of facilitating the continuation of this abusive political system. By accepting this money, you accept to be paid to facilitate the continuation of that abuse.

Furthermore, the level of oppression in Israel would never have been possible without European complicity. One of the reasons Palestinians have chosen the non-violent method of the boycott is the strategic understanding of the importance of European cultural support for Israel. By rejecting this collaboration you will have a significant impact, far out of proportions to the economics involved, on Israeli public opinion and politics. That power carries responsibility.

3. We want to provide opportunities for artists to show their work – and through the chosen event, to give voice to its entire context. It is important, however, to view these two endeavors separately in order to focus on the work of the artist regardless of his or her place of origin.

You cannot seriously “focus on the work of the artist regardless of his or her place of origin” when you organize an event based on belonging to (one sector only of) that place of origin. You cannot “give voice” to the entire context when your access to the artistic world you want to showcase is organized along sectarian race/ethnicity/religion lines, when your local informants are all embedded in a milieu defined by race/ethnicity/religion, and when you systematically pretend that that issue of sectarian race/ethnicity/religion doesn’t matter to what you do.

You are providing an opportunity for Israeli artists who are willing to collaborate with apartheid to showcase their art, and the only context you are giving voice to is the particular perspective of those artists.

4. We aim for dialogue: to bring Swiss citizens, women and men, into direct contact with Israeli artists, giving them the opportunity to form their own opinions.

“Dialogue” has become one of those vacuous words that have replaced patriotism as an excuse for anything and everything. What isn’t dialogue? The conversation between Nixon and Kissinger deciding to bomb Laos in secret was a dialogue. The master asking the slave to serve tea and the slave saying “yes, master” is a dialogue. A conversation of men about why women want to be raped is dialogue. The interrogations at Abu-Ghraib were dialogues. But, Naomi Klein and Judith Butler explaining to Israelis why they boycott Israel was also dialogue.

We want dialogue. Dialogue in which who is speaking and who is silenced, who is speaking on behalf of whom and who is left speechless, who is speaking in defense of what, who has power and resources and who is denied them, are made explicit and are openly discussed in the dialogue. This is democratic, liberated and liberating dialogue. This is what the cultural boycott stands for. Equality.

The use of art as propaganda, the manipulation of public perceptions through the selective showcasing of art, based on racist institutions, willingness to collaborate, and access organized through sectarianism, is also “dialogue.” That kind of dialogue doesn’t give people “an opportunity to form their own opinions.” It shapes their opinion manipulatively but withholding information about the reality behind what they are experiencing. This is why the government of Israel is so eager to fund this kind of “dialogue.” And that is why you should refuse to participate.

5. Our programming is independent.

Of course it is. So what? Doesn't that make it worse?

6. We try to see art and artistic forms of expression in the context of the social, historical and political fields of tensions and energies in which the art and artistic work of the given country develop.

The director of Culturescapes has no expertise from which to draw in order to “see art and artistic forms of expression in the context of the social, historical and political fields of tensions and energies in which the art and artistic work of the given country develop.” He is being informed about Israeli culture and art by the inner circle of (Jewish) Israeli artists who manage this kind of cultural propaganda, establishment figures within the racist (based on European Jews) establishment of Israeli culture. His definition of Israeli culture is theirs. Whatever he represents as contextual and historical analysis is theirs. The fundamental context of Israeli art is that it exists and is created under conditions of apartheid. Of course, that doesn’t make it worthless. Great art can be produced within an apartheid system. But you cannot inform people about the contextual history of art under apartheid when you ignore the fact that it is art under apartheid.