

to boycott or who to boycott: from the guggenheim abu dhabi, sydney and istanbul biennials, to boots and brecht

GUY MANNES-ABBOTT

I'm talking with a migrant construction worker of some rank about the conditions that he and those under him live and work with on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi. He speaks calmly and authoritatively in Urdu and English in response to questions and prompts from others, adding queries of his own as we proceed. This conversation, in the narrow confines of a labour camp on the outskirts of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) capital city, details the crude exploitation of south Asian men entrapped here by debt, low pay and no rights as such.

What is being described are the "conditions of forced labour"¹ that NGOs identify and which I have witnessed myself. These are the conditions in which Rafael Vinoly's New York University campus is being completed, under which thousands of men are building Jean Nouvel's Louvre Abu Dhabi and which trapped those that lay massive foundations for Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum and will build it out unless there is urgent change. None of these men can express grievances without going to significant lengths and do so only if visas are expiring and they want to leave, or they're completely desperate.

If they try to organise a collective response, they are summarily deported. If I disclose more detail about anyone, they would face the same outcome.

A fiery sun descends through the men while we talk. I point a camera at 'nothing' so that it will record their voices at least. When I watch later, 'nothing' has been transformed into the booted feet of men just returned from the day shift. I'm transfixed by the dust on the tips of their boots, beneath the measured detailing of systemic abuse. A dust rendered invisible in this place: obsessively swept out of sight like the men themselves but which, once located, speaks with resonant affect.

This year I'm in the Gulf largely to research labour camps in and around Abu Dhabi, along with others from the GulfLabor coalition of artists and writers.² We were invited by TDIC (Tourism Development and Investment Company, government-owned "master developers")³ to meet and engage with them on steps to address the conditions on Saadiyat Island, particularly the recruitment fee debts which imprison so many. This is the fourth year that some of us have come together in



The Gulf from many shifting locations in the world, and the second time some of us have attempted a direct, rather than 'deniable' dialogue since the boycott campaign was launched in March 2011.⁴ We met here originally as artists and writers in the *Sharjah Biennial* and Art Dubai's related programs and embraced responsibilities that come with those gratifying privileges. As GulfLabor the former extend to challenging Abu Dhabi's government and global brands like the Guggenheim to treat the construction workers who make it all possible with proper respect. To match Emirati ambitions for a post-oil economy – in this case the \$27 billion development of Saadiyat driven by highly-engineered architectural spectacles – with investment in the lives and dignity of those building and servicing it all. Many of the artists whose work the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi needs for its museum to gain credibility are committed to GulfLabor's boycott until these issues have been addressed.⁵

The museums will form Saadiyat's Cultural District and offer the usual package of curation, exhibitions, conservation, and education, to draw in tourists primarily, but also a nascent Emirati audience. A Norman Foster-designed National Museum will narrate the UAE's identity with the help of the British Museum, who were keen to finance an extension in London.⁶ There will be a 'universal' museum in the form of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, based on the model of a 'public art museum' that was borne of Republican revolution in 1793. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will cover modern and contemporary art with a focus on the MENASA region, and be the biggest Guggenheim in the world. In time, Zaha Hadid will provide another "cherry" for this somewhat decadent cake⁷ with a planned performing arts centre.

Saadiyat represents a deadeningly familiar production of economic globalisation, in which art has become the most liquid asset of our time. For art globalisation to maintain growth it needs new audiences in rapidly developing countries with their matching airports, cultural institutions, universities, museums, and extended art infrastructure. Along with these apparently credible elements, Saadiyat will host a vast range of five-star hotels and golf courses, an enormous connective retail arcade for elite brands, plus masses of restaurants, cafes and coffee bars to keep foreign currency churning.

Meanwhile, I'm listening to men who build all these possibilities, including their own labour camps. Men who have been here for months through years, beyond the first two spent paying off recruitment fees⁸ and into decades. They've come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal in a tradition that stretches back decades, even centuries, in time and trade. Indeed, the UAE contains archaeological evidence of 7000 years of links with the Indus Valley Civilisation. Individually, I speak to Nepalis who have been in Dubai for thirteen years, Pakistanis who have been in Sharjah for fifteen, others in Abu Dhabi who have worked globalisation's circuits throughout the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore for longer still. None, of course, can ever gain residence here.

I hear men describing jobs in general construction on wages that start at 572Dh with food allowances of 210Dh –\$AUD166 and \$AUD60 a month—and commutes of up to three hours, six days a week, to sites on Saadiyat Island. Details. In the dust there are details, real human experiences being relayed by the people they shape and define. Details which TDIC ignore



and which are unsought by 'starchitects' who free themselves of any responsibility for the builders of their 'palaces'.⁹ Details which massed PRs or PR-driven directors of Western museums breezily reject while trying to belittle or swat us away too; us and our well-researched concerns, alongside the hopes, dreams and concrete lives as well as deaths of the migrant workers they exploit.

All of these are things that brought us here in the first place and bring us back now, in complex matrices of desire, dreams, demands, needs, and meetings only possible here in the Gulf, one of the global cusps of still-negotiable futures. Everything is in play in urgent as well as dynamic, expansive and threatening ways. We find ourselves doing academic research, social work, political activism, camera and sound operators, and utilising languages we were born into or, in my case, learnt in the adivasi or tribal regions of India, where Naxalites find sanctuary today. Some of this will become our work as such, understood as the once-liberating, increasingly banal breadth of visual production now. Indeed, we've had invitations and meetings here about collectively participating in art's grandest 'spectaculas'.

We came to listen to the dust that speaks to us because we are able or perhaps merely willing to listen. How do we gauge effect? NGOs point to our relative freedom of movement, ability to generate publicity and function with unbiddable independence. Certainly any attempts to stop or silence international artists or writers while investing in a global art hub would be recklessly stupid of authorities in Abu Dhabi. At the same time, we're calmly aware of being flotsam in these oceans of oil money and sovereign wealth funds.

I arrived in The Gulf from Australia where I'd been performing my book, *In Ramallah, Running* in art contexts in Adelaide and Sydney, facilitated by the CACSA in Adelaide.¹⁰ I also presented a talk on GulfLabor's activity at Artspace¹¹ as

a tangential response to the boycott by *Biennial of Sydney* artists objecting to the founding sponsor and ongoing Chair's links with offshore detention centres. Within hours of that talk, unrelated to my words or presence, the Board Chair Luca Belgiorno-Nettis had resigned from the *Biennial*, although he remains a Director of the founding sponsor, Transfield Holdings. The policy of the government and Transfield's lucrative role in it also remains unchanged.

One of the boycotting artists came to my talk on GulfLabor's boycott of the Guggenheim during which I drew a couple of lessons from that campaign. I emphasised the need to be well researched and then precise in criticising the UAE or Guggenheim on its treatment of migrants, in a context of crudely prejudiced and ignorant attacks. A boycott also needs to have a clear idea of strategic effect, to hit or trigger levers of actual change. Finally, success is likely to involve compromisingly small reforms, and yet correcting injustices, or forcing change upon national governments or global corporations is also always big. It requires us to do many things publicly, privately, more or less constantly, and not go away. As I write, TDIC have responded dismissively to GulfLabor's report containing our research and recommendations, despite our sincerity in engaging them and the ease with which they could adopt our recommendations if they recognised the urgent reality and dreadful legacy that "conditions of forced labour" are building on Saadiyat. Apparently not. I will refrain from listing all the other alliances, international bodies and ongoing campaigning strategies, some of which are slow, or invoke established juridical mechanisms. They may come too late or all together with overwhelming momentum to force change. Let's see.

Meanwhile, globalisation envelopes these specificities and precise contexts. We are a long way from socialising and politicising spaces of economic globalisation that formed at the end of the last century. We are also far from articulating any form of political subjectivity at a global level. From recognising ourselves in the twenty-first century migrant condition and articulating a new political subject: a global citizen, let's say. Far from, yet close to. Majority populations of migrant workers are likely to become global citizens in this formal way at least as soon as Emiratis or the peoples of neighbouring Gulf countries become citizens of formally constituted democracies. As such the former is a more radical as well as more realistic outcome to work for.

I'd like to refer to Hito Steyerl's recent work to address two last points. If we accept, as she so eloquently puts it, that ours is an "age of mass art production"¹² then what is an artist-actant to do? If we also accept that the money that oils art globalisation, from sponsors of biennials that soften-up a territory's image, and open new territories to trade and tourism, to arms funding and 'regeneration' with architects, global corporations, curators and armies folding-in on each other, then again, what are artists, writers, thinkers, rebels or coming global citizens to do? How do we assemble alliances to act globally and develop ways to institutionalise an inventive radicalism?

To boycott or who to boycott is not a very interesting question, actually. Of course there are extreme circumstances which require categorical responses—South African apartheid, Israeli occupation, Saadiyat's feudalism, etc. But, generally it's more productive, radical and unsettling to be constantly at this work, strategically aligned, lean of body and well-researched mind (with aleatory habits) than to look for things to boycott. Boycotting can merely confirm the totalising effects of globalisation, when what is required is the imagining or conceptualising of a certain exteriority to it, or the embodying of antagonistic thresholds.

I did not have to decide on my involvement in the *Biennial of Sydney*. If forcing the break with one sponsor was in some sense a success, what next? Transfield are old hands at supplying large-scale frigates to the Navy, which uses them to patrol and detain asylum seekers at sea. The contract to take over the detention centres was worth \$AUD1.2 billion and on its announcement, Transfield's share 'value' rose by over \$100 million in one day. Artists ought to ask whether they benefit from such a vile business, but the attendant complexities highlight an abyssal circuitry at work. If sufficient artists had earlier planned a boycott of the *Biennial* in toto unless Transfield withdrew bidding for the contract or the government changed policy, what then?

The simple problem is that all money on this scale is sure to be tainted. Corporatised democracies that treat asylum seekers inhumanely, or which occupy Iraq with staggering death tolls, or autocrats that treat migrant workers like we all treat animals, are no better. I'd advocate Steyerl's response in her *Istanbul Biennial* commission: *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* "Rather than withdraw from such spaces because of their connections with military violence and gentrification, I would on the contrary try to show the video work in every single artspace connected with this battlefield."¹³ Her references are specific to the film's narrative loops but take in all that we recognise as globalisation today, symbolised by one of her targets: Koç Holdings. Koç have sponsored Istanbul's *Biennial* since 2006, while their corporate portfolio also includes Otokar's military hardware and, of course, major regeneration plans in the city.

Steyerl names other *Biennial* sponsors and details Siemens' willingness through its Nokia subsidiary to aide regimes in Bahrain and Syria and their role in her own career. The content of the work is well targeted and its trajectory takes in Gehry and Saadiyat too, but what is most significant is that she performed it in the enemy's arena. She used the resources to undermine them with resonant precision and the greatest degree of amplification. Rather than calibrating boycotts or withdrawals, the radical response to our situation is to perform this kind of Brechtian staging in the face of the beast, within its presently glittering 'palace'. Globalisation means that everywhere is linked to the battlefield Steyerl describes. As brilliant as her well-prepared performance in Istanbul was, to repeat it too easily or often would undermine its achievement and lose the crucial element of surprise! In fact, artists must not repeat or be predictable. Change requires greater rigour and agility and this underscores

what is so demanding for those committed to radicalising forms of making, thinking and freelance living. Boycott can be an answer but there are others. The overriding imperative is to engage battlefields, take the fight to them, assert presence where they are most comfortable and complacent, take up, activate, instrumentalise, occupy, radicalise, invert and reinvent these spaces of globalised capital and banalised culture until futures that we can barely dream of are actualised.

There is in this prescription a little bit of broken-down and composed¹⁴ or anyway stitched-together Utopianism I'm unafraid to say. It's essential in our ongoing battle not to cede the spaces of globalisation but precisely to take place within it, recompose its spatiality and establish grounds from which to fight, enjoy and invent. If, that is, we really do want to change things.

Notes

¹ "In light of the continued prevalence of workers reporting the payment of recruiting fees—the single greatest factor in creating conditions of forced labor—all parties must make a clear, unequivocal promise to ensure that workers are reimbursed any recruiting fees they are found to have paid to secure employment on the island." Human Rights Watch, 'The Island of Happiness Revisited', 2012 <http://www.hrw.org/node/105799/section/2>

² www.gulflabor.org

³ www.tdic.ae

⁴ Abu Dhabi Guggenheim Faces Protest By Nicolai Ouroussoff March 16 2011: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/arts/design/guggenheim-threatened-with-boycott-over-abu-dhabi-project.html?_r=1&

⁵ Signatures were gathered during 2010 and went public in 2011 here: <http://gulflabor.org/sign-thepetition/>

⁶ My British Museum FOI request in December 2013 yielded an admission that "Underwriting of £3m of this total cost from funds generated through the ZNM project has been agreed." The deal was linked with the extension when Abu Dhabi announced it in 2009 and finances 20 full-time members of staff in London to this day

⁷ Rem Koolhaas; "Neoliberalism has turned architecture into a "cherry on the cake" affair ... I'm not saying that neoliberalism has destroyed architecture. But it has assigned it a new role and limited its range." Interview with Star Architect Rem Koolhaas, *Der Spiegel* issue 50, December 2011

⁸ TDIC's EPP (<http://www.saadiyat.ae/en/about/about-tdic/worker-welfare/employmentpractices.html>) obliges contractors to reimburse all relocation and recruitment fees which are technically illegal in the UAE. The incidence of workers having incurred these debts has risen since monitoring began to 86% in 2013, cf PWC (http://www.tdic.ae/pdf/pwc's_tdic_epp_annual_report_2013.pdf) A TDIC official who wished to remain anonymous told GL in March 2014 that he did not believe anyone who said they had not had to pay these fees

⁹ 'Palaces for the People', *Al Manakh v1*, *Archis* vol 12, Amsterdam, 2007: 330

¹⁰ The author's visit to Australia was hosted by the Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide; with a presentation as part of the 2014 Adelaide Festival's *Artists' Week* program

¹¹ A film of which can be found here: http://artspace.org.au/public_upcoming.php?y=2014&i=85

¹² Hito Steyerl, *I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production*, Former West, House of World Cultures, Berlin, 18 March 2013

¹³ Hito Steyerl, *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (2013), 2013 *Istanbul Biennial*

¹⁴ Of course I am referring to Latour's construction but radicalising it. Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', *New Literary History*, 2010, 41: 475

Page 37:
Dust on boots, labour camp, Abu Dhabi, 2014

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Gorica labour camp, Jebel Ali, Dubai, 2014
Photos courtesy the author