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Boycotting the Global – 52 weeks of artist protest

This paper focuses on the New York based initiative “gulf-labor.org” as well as their exhibition project 52 weeks, which came to an end in October 2014. Gulf labor started as a dialogue with the Guggenheim foundation about how human rights violations in the building process of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi could be ameliorated. Goals were spelled out in conjunction with the Guggenheim Foundation and Human Rights Watch in 2011. A further petition addressed to the Guggenheim Foundation initiated a boycott of the collection, still in assembly, until the spelled out goals had been met.

Gulf-labor operates at an intersection of critical and engaged, social and political art practices. It uses diplomacy and activism, institutional critique, as well as different formats and media of exhibition in order to address a very specific situation and location. The analysis of gulf-labor’s development, its aims, means and actors serves to illustrate one of the major claims of this paper, namely: that within the rising number of internationally visible, contemporary artists stemming from Arab and Middle-Eastern countries, a movement can be observed which positively appropriates the “label” of Arab and Middle Eastern art.

Even though the collection being assembled for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is planned to focus on the representation of Arab and Middle-Eastern art, artists numerous other international artists are among the 135 artists who have signed the boycott. In 2013, after the demands had repeatedly not been met, gulf-labor decided to increase pressure by organizing an on- and offline exhibition, supported by artists and collectives who produced works specific to the context of gulf-labor’s goals.

In my paper I will focus on works by two artists: the New York based, Lebanese born, artist Walid Raad, one of the initiators of the initiative, who has been working on a project that cycles around “the history of art in the Arab world” as well as the signatory Oraib Toukan, a US born artist based in Jordan. Their practices not only address, but also reformulate hegemonic conceptions about themselves as “Arab” artists and about their art, filling such conceptions with new meaning while using the labels applied in order to change them. At the same time, they are addressing the new hegemonic forces that constitute themselves in the Arab Gulf countries. They are artists who analyze and resist both the Western hegemonic concept and the Gulf’s attempts to monopolize the definition of “Arabness”. Thus their work becomes a useful tool to add nuance to the discourse on “global” art practices in conjunction with “local” problems.

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Situating Global Art

on Ethnic Labeling in the art world looks at the emergence of a hegemonic concept of „Arab“ and „Middle Eastern“ art after 9/11, focusing on the way artists from Arab countries have been included in the dOCUMENTA as well as how „Arab artists“ actively appropriate this label.

Master of Arts: Religions and Art in the Cultures of Asia, Bonn University

Thesis: Case Study und Makrotheorie: Die Global Art Theorie am Fallbeispiel von Osama Dawod. (Bonner Islamwissenschaftliche Hefte, n. 9. Berlin, 2013)

Bachelor of Arts: Arabic Languages and Cultures / World Art Studies, Leiden University

Thesis: Discourses on ‚Metro‘ – Placing the Media’s Reception of the First Egyptian Graphic Novel in Context.