Editorial

The show "Stolen Arab Art" that recently opened in Tel Aviv is tainted by exploitation, ignorance, incoherence, and impersonation. The organizers blatantly disregard the will of the chosen artists not to show their work in Israel. The members of Tohu's editorial board object to the patronizing act perpetrated under the guise of enlightenment and dialogue.

Essay [1] / Tohu Editorial Board [2] July 14, 2018

In recent years we have witnessed a phenomenon: **people operating within the art world with blatant disregard for the rights of artists and citizens, under the guise of enlightenment and dialogue. We call upon members of the art community in Israel to refrain from cooperation with such actions.**

We must address this issue again, in light of the show "Stolen Arab Art" that has recently opened at the Center for Art and Politics 1:1, a space under the artistic direction of Omer Krieger. To quote the organizers of the show, which is on view in a new art space run by Adi Engelmann and Marcel Art Projects: "The exhibition presents before the Israeli public a selection of video works by artists from the Arab world... without the artists' knowledge or consent, acutely aware of this act of expropriation ...through this exhibition, we wish to promote a shared reality marked by open dialogue and exchange throughout the Middle East, without wars, occupation, or any borders."

Only about a year ago, the “Third Mediterranean Biennale,” curated by Belu Simion Fainaru and Avital Bar-Shay, opened in Sakhnin. There, too, the curators had wanted to show works by artists from the Arab world without their knowledge or consent, knowing that such a show would not be an option for many artists, due to either their local political situation, the oppressive occupation by the Israeli regime, or the values of the communities to which they belong. There, too, the organizers have tried to cynically utilize BDS (the economic, academic and cultural boycott against Israel) to create publicity for the show, presented themselves as victims of an arbitrary situation over which they had no control, and justified their actions with honorable intentions. That show has already raised a public outcry and much anger over the despicable act.

However, in that case, the organizers did not try to present their theft as a subversive act and their disregard of the artists wishes as stemming from a "wish to promote a shared reality marked by open dialogue and exchange throughout the Middle East, without wars, occupation, or any borders," as the organizers of the current show claim. In the case of the Sakhnin exhibition, the works were immediately taken down, at the request of the FRAC collection which had loaned them, following the demand of the artists to cancel the loan as soon as they have heard that their works were being shown in Israel without their knowledge or consent. One of the artists took a step further and gave an interview to a local newspaper, in which he described the potential harm to artists as a result of this ruse. We wrote at the time, as many others have, about the possible damage such a move might cause the artists as well as other initiatives of resistance, conversation, cooperation, and essential solidarity that develop at various levels of public life, and about the duty of the cultural community to distance itself from this drastic action and denounce it publicly.

It seems the organizers of the show in Tel Aviv have learned nothing. They act as if just acknowledging the issue (i.e. having fliers containing copyright law excerpts and public domain bibliography in the show) and announcing it not only relieves them of responsibility but adds an ostensible radical flavor to their offensive act of deception. Rather than remove the works, they cling to the legal argument that "We chose not to publish the artists’ names, on the assumption that they would not want for their work to be shown in Israel, as part of the Arab and International Cultural Boycott of Israel, and with the aim of not foisting an undesired cooperation upon them, so as to shield them from criticism and accusations of treason in their countries of origin." **Indeed, art can create and promote discourse, but not as an act of coercion**, even when it is accompanied by Anarchist arguments from the 1840s and by invitations to an "open discussion" (where the organizers determine the terms). The occupier robs and then orders the occupied to participate in a

discussion. The fact is that discussions of the kind the show aims at occur all the time without coercion, cheating, or overheated self-serving publicity.

Organizers of shows such as the Sakhnin Biennale and the current one at the new space in Tel Aviv blatantly disregard the wishes of the artists not to show their work in Israel, taking a position that demands ending the Israeli occupation and objects to a normalization that treats both sides as equal and the occupation as a "conflict." This move is not only aggressive and exploitative, it also encompasses ignorance, incoherence, and impersonation. More than anything, it seems to feed on the current political mood in Israel, and it cannot be detached from the violent, racist, exploitative, and oppressive Israeli policy, whose marks are evident almost throughout the political spectrum and at any point in the public sphere. The organizer's surprising, if not shameful, self-presentation as victims of a situation they cannot control as they steal and trample from a position of power and superiority, regardless of how many times they twist it around and whether the show is in Sakhnin or in Tel Aviv, stems from that same way of thinking. So does the attempt to appropriate any response to the event (including this one, surely) as a positive effect of the event itself, something that could not have happened without it. The patronizing, dismissive, silencing response to the words of the artist and actress Raida Adon during the opening of the show has been a clear demonstration of what stands behind the organizers' declared "good intentions."

And to stress even further: **it is not enough to declare yourself an artist or a curator. You must be accepted as one. And we refuse to do that. We see you as you are: ersatz philosophers, pseudo-theoreticians, media and publicity people lacking a moral backbone. What remains of "Art and Politics" if the result is a cynical instrumentalization of art? How is the organizers' position, which purports to be a new Left, different from that of Israel's right-wing government?**

members of Tohu's editorial board

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