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You Are Invited Not to Attend:

Answering the Call for a Cultural Boycott of the  
Shiraz Festival of the Arts

Freedom of thought! Freedom of thought! Democracy! Democracy?  
What do these words means? I don't want any part of them.  
—Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Last, (quoted in Abrahamian 2008, 150)

The giants aren't coming this year!  
—*Kahyan*, 1976 (quoted in Azimi 2011, n.p.)

In the decade leading up to the Revolution of 1979, Iran hosted an annual gathering of the world's leading figures in the fields of dance, music, and theatre. Conceived by Empress Farah Pahlavi as a way to “nurture the arts, pay tribute to the nation's traditional arts and raise cultural standards in Iran,” the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts served as a sort of yearly “pilgrimage” for artists and spectators from Iran and beyond (Afshar 2015, 4). For a week each fall, international audiences attended performances that ranged from traditional Persian, East Asian, Southeast Asian, African, and Middle Eastern dance and music, to contemporary Iranian theatre and film, to site-specific commissioned works by American and European directors and composers such as Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, and Iannis Xenakis. Owing to the incredible variety of works not only showcased but also commissioned by the festival's organisers (for example, Robert Wilson's *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: a story about a family and some people changing*) the festival is still today, notes Vali Mahlouji, “recognized as one of the most uniquely transformative inter-cultural experiences, perhaps the most radical multi-disciplinary crucible of any commissioning festival in history” (Mahlouji 2015, 87).

During the same period, however, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime was facing increased international scrutiny, as reports circulated of the extensive use by SAVAK, Iran's secret police, of imprisonment and torture against political dissidents. As oil revenues and government spending exacerbated the gap between the rich and the poor, and as the Shah placed more overt limitations on democracy—in 1975, for example, he formed the National Resurgence Party and simultaneously declared all other political parties illegal—

protests and crackdowns grew in size, intensity, and frequency. In this light, and taking into consideration other events staged by the Pahlavi regime in the years prior to the Revolution (in particular the almost comically lavish celebration marking the 2,500th anniversary of Persian civilisation), the Festival of Arts functioned not only as a critical instance of cultural and artistic exchange and innovation but equally as a deliberate effort on the part of a repressive government to deflect accusations of human rights abuses while fostering a national image of prestige and sophistication, particularly in the eyes of American and European elites.

A growing awareness of this situation led, finally, to a widespread boycott of the 1976 festival, most notably by a number of prominent American and European artists and scholars who had presented in previous years.<sup>1</sup> Not everyone agreed with the boycott—including choreographer Merce Cunningham, who would, nevertheless, ultimately abide by it—and the debates that played out in journals and newspapers over the relative value of participating or not participating in this particular event reveal a deep ambivalence towards the ways that larger structuring forces can undermine or even nullify the political potential and aesthetic dimensions of an embodied encounter with an audience. A close reading of the documents that stage this debate, alongside an examination of how some of the artists involved understood the relationship between their performances (whether dance or theatre), the spectator and the public sphere, presents an opportunity to consider the place of aesthetics in conceptualising the cultural boycott as a political tactic.

That such a project remains relevant is made clear by the current controversy surrounding the call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel (including recent attempts to pass legislation in the U.S. criminalising expressions of support for BDS).<sup>2</sup> More particularly, its relevance is apparent in the persistence and persuasiveness of very specific arguments against a cultural boycott that circulate even among those committed to the BDS movement more broadly. That is, while for many artists and scholars the economic boycott—not purchasing goods made in the Occupied Territories, for example, or asking retirement funds to divest from companies that sell weapons to the Israeli military—is understood as a non-violent tactic in line with core liberal values, the cultural boycott—which asks artists and scholars not to accept funds from or participate in events financed by the Israeli government—seems incompatible with the project of progressive social change insofar as such change is understood as being dependent upon precisely the sort of exchange and dialogue that festivals, performances, conferences, and other kinds of collaboration are meant to facilitate. Similar arguments played out in response to the tactic of the cultural boycott as it was applied to South Africa during apartheid, most notably with the Sun City campaign in 1985. The same concerns have also been raised in response to calls by artists involved in the Gulf Labor Coalition to boycott institutions it has accused of benefiting from exploitative labour conditions and tolerating the suppression of free speech in Abu Dhabi (among them New York University and the Guggenheim Museum). Recognising the complexity and power of the arguments against the cultural boycott, a recently published collection of essays takes up the issue directly via what the editors call “a critical detour from the pro/con axis” that typically organises the discussion. The title, *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency, and Cultural Production*, signals this shift, even as

it also makes clear that the editors (and most of the contributors) are generally supportive of the cultural component of BDS. At the same time, the work contains expressions of ambivalence towards the tactic and admissions of confusion about when and where it ought to be applied. Perhaps most critically, for my purposes, they acknowledge that the work of cultural practitioners “is affected by [cultural boycotts] whether or not [they] endorse a particular campaign” (15).

I read this framing of boycotts as intersecting productively (even symbiotically) with our inclination in the field of theatre and performance studies continually to re-evaluate the relationship between theatre, performance, and the public sphere. On the one hand, our literature on performance and politics or theatre and social change rarely if ever references the tactic of the boycott; we focus, understandably, on those performances that *did* happen, and also occasionally on those that didn’t due to censorship or repression. I would argue, however, that the relationship between theatre and politics necessarily covers also the possibility of choosing not to make theatre under a given set of circumstances. *Assuming Boycott* draws our attention to this possibility. At the same time, however, *Assuming Boycott* is largely absent an attention to the medium-specificity of performance, to how the content and form of a work that will not be made, or remade, in a particular place or time matters to the function or effect of the boycott. The book’s emphasis on the relevance of context notwithstanding, it neglects the conditions of artistic production as such and so neglects what might be called the aesthetic dimension of the cultural boycott. In reading across these two tendencies—privileging what happened over what did not, on the one hand, and on the other, flattening the specificity of what might have happened into a general category of things that did not—I am drawing on the proposal Christopher Balme makes in *The Theatrical Public Sphere* to investigate what happens when libidinal and affective responses—or “intensities,” as he calls them—“spill out of the auditorium and intervene in and engage with sensitive social discourses. This ‘spillage’ can manifest itself in the form of protests and scandals, which engender in turn focal points with which to study the interaction between the theatrical and the wider public sphere” (Balme 2014, 15). Balme’s work follows on what he identifies as a “revival of interest in the public sphere” as against an exclusive focus on “the closed circuit of performative aesthetic experience” (12). Largely leaving aside work that falls neatly into the category of “political theatre,” Balme proposes other ways and places we might look for theatre’s resonance within the wider public sphere. Neither, he argues, can we look only at what happens inside “the black box” nor can we ignore the aesthetic dimensions of performance if we wish to understand the way in which a theatrical public sphere is constructed or contested and its significance in constructing or contesting other publics and counter-publics.

What follows, then, is not an exhaustive accounting of the Shiraz-Persepolis Arts Festival, nor is it an argument for or against cultural boycotts in general or even under the specific circumstances of Iran in the 1970s. Certainly, the remarkable imprint the festivals left on those who attended and participated, and, by extension, upon future generations of artists, particularly within Iran, should not be underestimated as the easily-dispensed-with collateral of a cultural boycott. At the same time, forgetting the boycott—remembering “what happened” to the exclusion of what did not—not only avoids the political questions

raised by making and presenting works of performance in the specific context of the Shiraz Festival in 1970s Iran, but also obscures the ways in which these political concerns were reflected and refracted in and by the formal concerns underpinning some of the works themselves.

Contemporaneous accounts of the Shiraz Festival boycott exhibit a marked circularity that indexes the uneasy desire to claim two seemingly contradictory positions simultaneously: on the one hand, theatre should not have to concern itself with politics; on the other, theatre holds out the possibility that it might work on its audience in some politically progressive way. As Chelsea Haines puts it in her contribution to *Assuming Boycott*, this view privileges “the cultivation of an individual subjectivity that, in an indirect way, produces informed, socially responsible citizens capable of critical judgement and collective social action” (Haines 2017, 190). In “An Editorial: The Shiraz Festival: Politics and Theatre,” published in the December 1976 issue of *TDR*, Michael Kirby begins by stating that he does not agree with the boycott because he does “not believe in mixing theatre (or sports) and politics”; then notes the fear he sensed among Iranians during his visit and that “nobody will discuss politics”; and then spends the remainder of his essay considering whether or not Shuji Terayama’s *Ship of Fools* contained or communicated any “political content” (Kirby 1976, 3–5). These positions are not, in fact, contradictory, but reflect the problem of navigating what we might call a transnational public sphere via the presentation of performances that largely task the spectator with the production of meaning. Although the concept of a “transnational public sphere” really only gains traction in the early 21st century, as Balme notes, the questions he suggests it raises are easily applied to the debate over the Shiraz Festival boycott:

Since theatre artists cannot realistically be expected to chain themselves to Japanese whaling ships, at least not in their capacities as actors, and most theatre is highly local in concrete spatial terms, must we leave these issues and spheres of activity to political activists? (Balme 2014, 176)

Balme proposes a way out of this “impasse” through a “notion of distributed aesthetics,” which, quoting Anna Munster and Geert Lovink, “must deal simultaneously with the distributed and the situated” (177). Though Balme (and Munster and Lovink) are focused here on conceptualising information exchange as it happens on and off the web, the description nevertheless helps to articulate a way of thinking about the “provisional community” constituted by the cultural boycott:

media provide the distribution links, the points of articulation, between the spectators/users/public, whatever we want to call them. In such configurations, the traditional “place of performance” is a hub around which a public sphere of interaction can emerge, but such a hub—conceived as a concrete place—is not essential for distributed theatrical aesthetics to function. (177)

My point in quoting Balme at such length is to propose that thinking the cultural boycott of the festival as dependent upon or perhaps constructive of something akin to Munster and Lovink's "distributed aesthetics" goes some distance towards foregrounding the relationship between the activity of making a performance and the activity of *not* making a performance. This allows for a much more complex and productive reading of, for example, Merce Cunningham's participation in the boycott. Far from an individual political act, the narrative of Cunningham's absence consists of multiple exchanges that played out over a series of weeks in a range of forums. These exchanges and the ways in which they reference (however indirectly) performances already made, as well as those that might or might not be made in the future, index the contradictions that adhere in attempts to delegitimise the cultural boycott by advancing a conception of politics that ignores the possibility (and indeed the inevitability) of participating in constructing or dismantling, rather than simply entering or occupying or absenting oneself from, the public sphere.

In the same vein, the notion of distributed aesthetics offers a way of conceptualising the relationship between invocations of the private and public, particularly as these govern who may do what where. The performances at the Shiraz Arts Festival were technically open to the public and much was made (both at home and abroad) of the access granted to students via reduced-price tickets. According to a description of the Festival published by The Asia Society, the events were intended "to bring down the wall between the culturally privileged and underprivileged [within Iran], and to celebrate and share humanity's artistic wealth as widely as possible for the benefit of larger publics across the country, especially the younger generation" (Afshar 2015, 3). Yet the audience was always heavily (and in some years, primarily) international, suggesting that the stated "public" character of the festival may have been as much about constructing an image of the Iranian public and its relationship to its government for foreign audiences as it was about attracting local spectators. At the same time, the festival championed the idea of a private and individual right to artistic expression, attracting participants with the promise of total freedom and control regardless of the wishes or interests of the broader Iranian public (indeed, regardless of whether or not this right was extended, during the festival or at any other time, to any member of the Iranian public). In fact, because of the controversial content and experimentalism of some of the contributions—nudity, the use of sacred spaces, the presentation of "traditional" Persian forms banned in the rest of the country—in combination with the religious conservatism of segments of the country's population, and growing popular indignation over the economic policies of the government (including expenditure on the Festival itself), the performances and also the performers received police protection.<sup>3</sup> Security concerns initially threatened to prevent Robert Wilson's company from performing the epic, seven-day long *KA MOUNTAIN* on the mountain Haft Tan (the site Wilson had chosen) because it could not be secured sufficiently to allow Empress Farah Pahlavi to attend. According to composer Gordon Mumma, participants were each "given a 'guide' (read 'guard') dressed in a Western suit with a tie and jacket. The primary jacket function was to conceal their weapons. Others recalled that the performance sites were "absolutely filled with soldiers with rifles...you looked at something extraordinary, old and beautiful, and you would see soldiers" (Gluck 22). In some cases, military and police

involvement went beyond protection to include participation. In the “special thanks” section of KA MOUNTAIN’s program notes, Wilson includes the Iranian Imperial Army.

The tension between the vacillating public and private faces of the festival came to a head in 1976 when an article in *The Village Voice* featured Iranian poet Reza Baraheni—who had himself been imprisoned and tortured by the Shah’s government—expressing his hope that not only businesses and tourists but also artists would boycott the regime. He expressed “dismay” that Peter Brook, the Open Theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, and Bread & Puppet Theatre had all participated in past festivals, implying that they should have recognised that their involvement would help give cultural cover to ongoing political repression (Hentoff 1976, 15). As Baraheni and others, prominent among them theatre critic Eric Bentley, persisted in calling for a boycott, potential festival participants were confronted with the question of whether or not it was morally or politically acceptable to attend the upcoming 10th annual festival. Arguments on behalf of continued participation fell roughly into two categories, though both of these were usually in play simultaneously. The first category identified artistic practice as privy to a private/cultural sphere exempt from public/political consideration and influence. This position was articulated explicitly by Merce Cunningham, who explained, “My work is not concerned with politics and I have always felt it should be free to be shown in any place that is made open to it, whether that is a gym in a Detroit high school or an open-air theater in Shiraz” (Cunningham 1976, n.p.). One of his company members, Martha Lohmeyer, argued along similar lines that “the first purpose is that the dances be seen” (Coe 1976, 10). The use of passive voice in both quotes is significant in that it detaches the performance from the performer. It is as if the dance could be shown or seen without necessitating the willing appearance and presence of a dancer. But it is in the necessity of presence and of a work’s co-temporal production that the stakes of the boycott, when applied to performance practice, lie. What would it mean to say instead, “I believe I should be free to show my work in any place made open to me”? Putting it in this way would make clear, of course, that Cunningham was free to show his work anywhere he liked. Cunningham’s language, his use of the word “free,” invokes the spectre of censorship where it does not, strictly speaking, exist. What exists instead is the problem of presence as a prerequisite for presenting one’s work within a given space and time. What Cunningham is free to do, thanks to the festival’s frame, is enjoy the status of the outsider, who, paradoxically, operates within the very space outside of which he claims to be situated. By claiming presence and absence simultaneously, layering “not here” onto “here,” private onto public, the outsider effects the erasure of context. It is the disavowal of this context, when confronted with its return in the form of the call for a boycott, that produces Cunningham’s awkward phrasing above.

The suspension of context was not only a means of justifying participation, it was also precisely the appeal for many participants. This is emphasised in Mahlouji’s article, when he notes that “Many, such as [composer Karlheinz] Stockhausen, found the Iranian sphere without cultural baggage and therefore a facilitating and mediating encounter in contrast to the uneasy dialogues with their home audiences” (Mahlouji 2013, 91). In finding the Iranian sphere “without cultural baggage,” the artists engage in a classic form of orientalism—treating a context with which they are unfamiliar as devoid of content. In the

case of Stockhausen, “uneasy dialogues” likely refers, first and foremost, to the fact that the Festival’s audience was composed primarily of those, on the one hand, predisposed towards experimental work, or, on the other, sufficiently unfamiliar with (and so without a strong commitment to) either the classical or avant-garde traditions from which Stockhausen departed. At the same time, it seems plausible that in 1972, during a period that saw artists and students debating the political value or function of art in Germany (as elsewhere), “baggage” refers equally to questions of political commitment and responsibility.

Composer Iannis Xenakis, who, Mahlouji notes, “had fled the Greek junta,” differently neutralises the problem of context in an open letter to *Le Monde* published in December of 1971. In an argument frequently echoed by opponents of the cultural boycott he insists not only upon “freedom of speech” but contends that it is “impossible to name one single country that is truly free and without multifaceted compromises, without any surrender of principles.” The various atrocities committed by various states are all “interchangeable cancers” (Xenakis 2008, 223). The reference to “interchangeability” avoids the question of the significance of working with or for any regime in particular, while acknowledging the existence of a context from which one can be excused. At the end of his letter, Xenakis states that “the most shameful injustice is the torture and execution ... of men and women,” continuing, “This is why I have always been involved ... in protests and actions against dynasties and tyrants” (224). What this closing assertion clarifies is that his argument in favour of participation in the Festival misunderstands the cultural boycott as an individual expression that stands in for and prohibits an exchange with an audience. Concerns that one is “singling out” a state or institution fail to take into account the boycott as, precisely, a *tactic*, but instead imagines (and misunderstands) it as primarily an unsolicited, individual expression of moral objection, directed only at the offending party. Because one could make unsolicited, individual expressions of moral objection about numerous regimes, likely with little impact, it indeed appears to be an entirely arbitrary and perhaps colonialist or racist enterprise to single out any one country or government for such treatment. In contrast, however, the cultural boycott explicitly solicits participation in a collective expression of moral objection, and comes as a call (or as an echo of the call) from those living under the conditions the boycott seeks to transform. Put another way, the tactic of the cultural boycott is to ask artists to “speak” in terms that the state or body it seeks to address has marked as unintelligible, and thereby to perform a refusal of the terms of intelligibility. In his contribution to *Assuming Boycott*, which focuses on the work of the Gulf Labor Coalition (formed to protest labour conditions for workers building the Guggenheim Museum on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi), artist Naeem Mohaiemen describes this dynamic, noting that “tangible demands are dismissed as posturing, while metaphoric confrontations are celebrated”:

Drill a crater in the floor, flood a gallery, smash an object, stage a pitiful death—critics hail these gestures as having the power to “shape worlds.” But when artists ... read from a list of demands for labor rights, this work—involving conversation, negotiation, research, protest—suddenly becomes illegible to the same museum. (Mohaiemen 2017, 154–55)

Because this illegibility is in practice all but inevitable, it must be understood not as the failure of the call for a boycott but rather as its central purpose: the accusation of illegibility, coming as a response to explicit demands and calls to boycott, mirrors the illegibility against which the cultural boycott protests and so proposes to speak to and construct an audience that might override the existing terms governing legibility.

For Cunningham, Xenakis and Stockhausen, the freedom of the private/cultural sphere is invoked as a sufficient justification for participation—and yet reference to this sphere is nevertheless filtered through a conception of exchange that depends upon a public and even upon a politicised conception of a/the public. In the case of Cunningham's argument, the passive voice downplays but inevitably evokes the spectator whose presumed universality, her membership in an every-public that could be anywhere, produces the work's non-political political character. Mahlouji's reference to Stockhausen, and the opportunity the festival presented to dispense with his "baggage" at home, similarly acknowledges that while not devoid of political context such events may appear so to a foreign visitor who is not automatically beholden to it. It also becomes clear in Mahlouji's description of the festival that "experimental" or "avant-garde" might actually be synonymous with "private" which is to say, the "not public." Referring to the commissioned collaborative piece *Orgahst*, created in 1971 by Iranians Arby Ovanessian and Mahin Tajadod, directors Peter Brook, Andrei Serban and Geoffrey Reeves, poet Ted Hughes and performed by actors from eight countries, Mahlouji contends, quoting Erika Fischer-Lichte, that the creators intended that the piece's "[a]ttainment of meaning would transcend the need for rational discourse and bring the audience to alternate modes of consciousness forming a new community 'beyond any fixed, stable identity'" (89). In this case, the outsider provides an aesthetically authorised opportunity to dispense with context altogether in the name of a politics that "transcends" politics. In the brief text he prepared for inclusion in the catalogue for "Iran Modern," Robert Wilson addresses "politics" by another name, as he seems to understand censorship as any form of constraint, however logistical, that might be dictated by context:

There was no censorship, no one telling me I could not do what we did. I worked closely with Reza Ghotbi [one of the Festival's organisers] who engineered everything brilliantly. After my second visit we had an eight-hour meeting in Paris [...] I said I wanted to have 1,000 cowboys and 1,000 Indians, and 2,000 people to stage the Trojan War. (Wilson 2013, 95)

The scale of Wilson's project ultimately conscripted not only a massive number of locals and international guests, but military helicopters and personnel. The private here encounters the public, but does so directly and visibly through the fixtures of state power.

Reconciling the confrontation between a private non-political space (that is nevertheless located within a deeply political/politicised context) and a latently political public depends upon figuring the foreign artist as an outsider, one who can for that very reason be granted a kind of "pass." The pass permits the holder either to avoid the question of politics



altogether, or to approach the question of politics at an angle not available to those tethered by context (this is perhaps the best way to understand the strangeness of Wilson's reference to censorship). Put another way, those against the boycott held that the visiting artist is not obligated or entitled to intervene in the political, and so, owing precisely to his de facto exclusion, he can usefully participate in the more "neutral" space of the cultural, with, perhaps, the possibility of *indirectly* affecting the political. This was ultimately Cunningham's position, which slipped into the second category of response referenced above, as, following his company's vote (which he abided by) not to attend, he continued to feel that engagement was preferable, and that, as Carolyn Brown put it, "the work itself might change people's minds, that is, to open them" (Gluck 2007, 26). Historian Robert Gluck notes that Gordon Mumma, another of the company's members, "held that the [Merce Cunningham Dance Company]'s work modeled values important to convey to the Iranian people, including creative, free action and a non-linear, non-hierarchical way of thinking and acting" (Gluck 2006, 220). The vagueness of these hypothetical political interventions, in combination with their implicit uni-directionality and their presumption that such values are not precisely those motivating the call for a boycott, reinforces the visiting status of the artists in question.

Even when a participant might insist upon a more direct attempt at political address, the outsider is still, and perhaps especially, imagined as a figure endowed with special abilities to intervene. For Brook, this consisted of his personal access to Empress Farah Pahlavi as a result of his attendance. He describes how, during his visit in 1971, he

seized the opportunity to say what had to be said on every level of Persian life, starting with the censorship, without frills, without beating about the bush, directly to a person who, within a restricted field of movement, has got more influence than anyone in the country. And to me the possibility of confrontation with the powers that be, and in particular the Queen, completely balances the account. (quoted in Navasky 1976, 169)

By invoking the foreign artist as, on the one hand, entitled to freedom from political considerations, and, on the other, uniquely positioned to facilitate a politicised mode of cultural exchange and dialogue, such responses draw our attention to the figure of the outsider as both constitutive and destructive of a/the public sphere. The outsider operates within a presumed public sphere on the basis of a "pass" that grants him rights (to speech and expression), even as these are withheld from those who, at least in theory, *constitute* the public sphere—in this case, the vast majority of Iranian citizens, including many of its most avant-garde artists. The presence of the outsider and his access to these rights is the basis upon which the existence of a public sphere is made to appear precisely where one may not usually, or in practice, be permitted to exist.

Perhaps the most striking example of this dynamic comes in the request Brook apparently made to the Empress, in 1970, that the festival include a staging of the Shi'ite mourning ritual known as *ta'ziyeh*. The ritual involves reenacting, according to very specific formal constraints, the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein, which marks the decisive moment in the

split between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims. Because of the ritual's religious character and, more importantly, its history of use in the context of political protest, the practice of ta'ziyeh had been outlawed by the Pahlavi regime since the 1930s. The effect of this was to chase ta'ziyeh performances out of the cities and into more rural communities where those charged with enforcing the ban were likely to turn a blind eye. In granting a dispensation for the performance of ta'ziyeh within the frame of the festival, the ritual was detached from its religious and political character and endowed instead with significance as a "traditional Persian" performance form (Malekpour 2004, 157–58). That this was not an entirely successful or permanent rewriting became clear, as ta'ziyeh and other manifestations of what anthropologist Michael Fischer in *From Religious Dispute to Revolution* calls the "Karbala paradigm" played key roles in providing the form and content of the revolutionary movement that would oust the Shah in 1979 (Fischer 2003).

The call for a boycott, then, seeks to negate or invert the outsider position, rejecting the claim that the outsider's capacity to facilitate dialogue or exchange through the physical co-presence involved in performance can instantiate a more robust public sphere in which the public might also engage. The boycott proposes instead that under certain circumstances theatre's potential political character lies primarily or even exclusively in the fact (or act) of its production rather than in the specificity or content (which might also, of course, be the form) of what is produced. This is what an appeal to the artist's autonomy, such as the one Brook makes here, fails to account for:

In the arts, the relationship with money rests entirely on what one controls: that is, whether, having received facilities, one uses them honestly to further whatever purposes one has set oneself, or whether one accepts to distort one's aims to suit the purposes of the people who have given the money or to please the box office. (Navasky 1976, 10)

Brook locates the "purposes of the people who have given the money" on the level of the content of an artistic work, which in turn makes it possible to conceive of ignoring or even actively working against those purposes while accepting financial support. The problem with this logic is that it ignores the possibility that the "purposes of the people with the money" might adhere not to any specific work produced, but to the *act* of producing work. That is, if the value of an artist's participation lies in the fact of participation, we find that a repressive regime can allow for even overt criticism of its policies and activities, so long as that criticism falls within the frame it has established for its foreign visitors.

In response, the cultural boycott proposes that we recognise theatre as something that is first and foremost "produced" in the sense that it is made to appear, and that, in certain cases, this production comprises its political form and content over and above any more specific accounting of what happens on stage. This production—which occurs even before any performance actually takes place in the form of publicity—resists subsequent attempts to challenge its political meaning, for example by explicitly or implicitly critiquing the sponsoring body. The example of the Bread & Puppet Theatre is instructive in this regard. In *The Village Voice* article cited above, Baraheni notes that, to the company's credit,

“when they came and discovered what was going on, [they] held a demonstration protesting the Shah’s repression” (Hentoff). Although Baraheni misdates the participation of Bread & Puppet (it was 1970, not 1974), his reference to their protest is confirmed (sort of) in an article by Mahasti Afshar. What, according to Baraheni, was an explicit protest against the Shah, becomes in the article an entirely ambiguous moment of experimental theatre:

In 1970, Peter Schumann, founder and director of Bread & Puppet Theatre, was the first to introduce festival audiences to experimental American theatre with *Fire* and *King’s Story*. Before each performance an actor read a statement of protest against political oppression then another actor distributed freshly baked bread among the audience, which fit well with “theatre and ritual,” the main theme of the 4th festival, and the play was performed with the company’s trademark giant puppets. Schumann also decided to perform in a park and outside a prison, free of charge. (Afshar 2015, 34)

Even though the passage indicates that the statement of protest against political oppression came before the performance, meaning it was situated, provocatively, outside the theatrical frame, no connection is made in the article to what Baraheni suggests was the specific target; linked with the distribution of bread, the “protest” is, it seems, precisely part of what made the performance “fit well” with the theme of that year’s festival.

My point here is not that Afshar’s narration of the incident is deliberately downplaying the protest of Bread & Puppet against the regime (though I will return to the historiographical problem of the Festival), but rather that in the context of the state-sponsored Festival, protest as a specific kind of exchange becomes impossible. Overt criticism of the Iranian government is, in effect, censored, not by being prohibited but by being granted the “right” of expression, so long as that right is extended only to those holding the outsider’s pass. While, as I will discuss, the Festival may have facilitated the presentation of work by Iranian playwrights that carried implicit critiques of the Pahlavi regime, nothing so overt as Bread & Puppet’s protest would have been tolerated. The production of the political had already happened, insofar as it consisted of the acceptance of an invitation by a theatre company to come and do exactly what it does, even if that should involve explicitly protesting the very political repression in which the host country is engaged.

The most compelling argument against a cultural boycott centres not on the content of any specific work, but rather on the apparent ability for performance to produce or construct a space within and yet exempt from the conditions governing everyday life in the place where it is presented. In her contribution to *Assuming Boycott*, “The Shifting Grounds of Censorship and Freedom of Expression,” Cuban artist Tania Bruguera describes her uneasiness about cultural boycotts on precisely these grounds, as she discusses her performance of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* at the 2009 Havana Biennial. The Biennial, she explains, is used by the Cuban government “to position Cuba within an international art community, tempering its stricter forms of censorship to project an image of openness to

the world” (Bruguera 2017, 142). While Bruguera’s own work is overtly political in its form and content, what I wish to emphasise is the way in which she recognises the Havana Biennial not as an opportunity for Cubans to learn from or engage in cultural exchange with visiting artists and their work, nor even primarily to circulate their own work abroad, but to use the fact of the Festival, and the kind of “public” sphere it offers its guests, as an opportunity for the Cuban participants to “experience freedom,” which might be another way of saying that, for a moment, the fiction of the public sphere becomes a reality. This, she continues, might lead them to “seek [freedom] in spaces where their rights have been denied.”

“Freedom” is a decidedly vague term, though perhaps less so when speaking of overtly repressive regimes. The problem of examining to what extent artists in Iran during the 1960s and 70s were “free” to make whatever kind of work they wished, and to what extent foreign presence provided an opportunity to say what otherwise could not be said, is considerable, and treating the question comprehensively or definitively is outside the scope of the present study. I should note that in the scholarly writings about the Festival that I have seen (as opposed to some of the journalistic accounts), there is no discussion of whether or not Iranian works were censored. Generally, writers acknowledge elements of the political context (and in some cases make passing reference to the boycott), but without discussing what this might have meant for the work presented. At any rate, it is clear that festival participants at the time were aware of police and military presence, as referenced above, and that some of the works by Iranian theatre makers carried discernibly political themes, if not “statements of protest.” To take one example, the program from the 1972 festival includes a description of a play written by Abbas Naalbandian and directed by Arby Ovanessian. The plot of *All at Once* revolves around a young schoolmaster, who lives in a poor neighbourhood in Tehran in an overcrowded house. He keeps a “mysterious large box” in his room, and his neighbours speculate about what might be inside. When Ashura arrives, the tenth and most important day of the month of Muharram, during which Shi’ites commemorate the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein, the schoolmaster somehow becomes associated with Hussein during a performance of ta’ziyeh. The “ignorant masses” murder him, after which “they break into his room to discover that his coveted box contains only books.” Silence follows, and then the sound of “six well-spaced steady beats of the chains used by worshippers” in a mourning procession. The lighting becomes brighter, and the schoolmaster “calmly comes into the garden—naked; his body is red from blood.” The others also enter and silently dig up tiles and some soil, making a shallow grave. They move away from the hole and the schoolmaster lies down in it. The stage directions read, “Quiet. They separate. Quiet.” The lighting becomes so bright that it “hurts the eyes,” and the people on stage, moving in silence, flee. They slip as they “try to escape from a large invisible being which threateningly attacks them. They want to penetrate the walls and become lost” (Official Festival program 1972, n.p.).

The program note offers no further information or suggestions at interpretation; anyway, these seem unnecessary or inevitably reductive. Numerous readings propose themselves, any of which might appear threatening to a regime that, by 1976 would have somewhere between 25,000 and 100,000 political prisoners. Around the same time, Amnesty

International published a report listing the forms of torture common in the Shah's prisons, noting that such prisoners included "theologians, writers, theater directors, and university teachers" (Amnesty International 1976, 10). It is perhaps not entirely a coincidence, then, that *All at Once*, as a play, enlists or invokes each of these figures even in the brief space of its synopsis. In an article for the *Village Voice*, Nat Hentoff gives examples of the kinds of "crimes" that might lead to torture and imprisonment: "One man was found with a book the Shah's regime had suppressed" (Hentoff 1976, 13). Whether or not the treatment of the schoolmaster is meant to be read as a literal or direct reference to torture under the Shah, it seems entirely in keeping with the logic of censorial regimes that it would *appear* to the censors to be such a reference. A report on the seventh Shiraz Festival published in *TDR* included a description of *Killing Friday*, an Iranian play presented in a teahouse, and noted that one Iranian critic "had high praise for the play and commented in the press that the work 'might deal a deadly blow to the meekness in Iranian theater and to the many forms of control, including auto-censorship, that have for years forced Persian drama into seedy symbolism and allegorism of the too-clever-by-half species'" (Khaznadar and Deak 1973, 43).

It is not possible to say with any certainty that either *Killing Friday* or *All at Once* are example of works that could be made or presented "publicly" only in the context of the Shiraz Festival. At the same time, evidence suggests that artists attending the festival prior to 1976 did perceive the kind of dynamic Bruguera describes. In an article for *The Soho Weekly News*, reporting on the potential boycott of the tenth annual Festival, Robert Coe provides an overview of conditions governing artistic production in Iran, noting that typically Iranian playwrights must submit their work to the Ministry of Arts and Culture for approval and "only at the Festival itself has the censorship been reduced so that Iranian theater groups may explore more freely—admittedly a major step." Theatre scholar Mel Gordon, he continues:

claims that the Shiraz Festival creates breaches of censorship that are possible only because of the presence of foreign journalists and artists who would bring home news of overt repression. "Western journalists do a lot of good," says Gordon, an ex-SDS member. "It's like an oasis for Iranians who are not free to discuss politics the rest of the year. We're like the Red Cross people going to Auschwitz." (Coe 1976, n.p.)

Gordon's assertion leads us neatly back to the limits of performance as productive of a space of possibility. Though it is only more recently that the Red Cross has acknowledged the discrepancy between what it saw and what it said it knew when it visited Nazi ghettos and concentration camps during the Holocaust, his claim positions the Festival's foreign participants as witnesses to a situation in which they cannot, really, intervene but to which they give some kind of humanitarian cover. While I believe that Gordon is speaking metaphorically—"Auschwitz" here seems to refer to an absence of free speech, rather than to the physical destruction of human life—he evokes a scene staged for outsiders who chose to see what they wish.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the extent to which the Festival may have actually facilitated breaches of censorship, it is useful to recognise that this sentiment is to be found not, primarily, in the actual arguments made by Cunningham or Cage or others in favor of participating in the 10th Shiraz Festival, but rather in descriptions of their work, its formal commitments and motivating impulses. For the 1972 festival, Cunningham had constructed two “Events,” one for the open air theatre at Shiraz, and the second at the ruins of Persepolis. A form he first used in Vienna in 1964, Events as conceived by Cunningham are composed of choreography taken from several different dances. The concept grew out of a need for flexibility when Cunningham’s company was confronted with “an unusual performing area.” While inspired by practical and logistical questions, the Events are also intended “to produce the possibility of several separate activities happening at the same time—to allow not so much an evening of dance as the experience of dance” (Cunningham 1976, n.p.). In *Don’t Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture*, Catherine Kodat reads the Event as proliferating the ways in which “a given dance phrase or gesture may signify”: Events “free dance phrases from their original contexts” and “make manifest hitherto unrecognized possibilities of action, recognizing the spectator’s understanding of what is before her, and prompting her to consider how the inconceivable might, in fact, be brought to life” (Kodat 2014, 107). It is perhaps unfair to make too much of the “unrecognized possibilities of action,” particularly given that these words are not Cunningham’s own. And yet in the statement he released about the Company’s decision not to attend the 1976 Festival he makes more or less the same claim—that his work might make such possibilities manifest, seemingly without recognising the call and response of the boycott as a way in which people might “speak to each other.” After stating at the outset that his “work is not concerned with politics,” he concludes with the following: “I think we live in a single-world now... in which people, if possible in spite of governments, can still speak to one another of such things as love, and nature, and life, and poetry” (Cunningham 1976, n.p.). It is perhaps no coincidence that Cunningham’s absence at the Festival was the product of a number of exchanges and encounters, which he narrates in his statement. It begins with Bentley’s public call to Cunningham and Robert Wilson; he then describes the group’s recent tour to Australia and Japan, and notes that in both places there were demonstrations against the government; he notes his own efforts to learn more about the situation in Iran; and finally he acknowledges the meeting at which his company made the decision not to attend. Cunningham’s statement supposes and also stages, even as it objects to the politicisation of artistic work or practice, a continuity between the space of the performance and what lies beyond or outside it, a continuity that need not be explicitly or even discernibly political.

The cultural boycott, far from cutting off the possibility of such a continuity, takes seriously the ways in which the theatrical event—the encounter between spectator and performance—can illustrate and contest existing distributions of power. This is so because, importantly, the cultural boycott does not demand, merely, that something not happen; rather it proposes that a not-happening *happen*. At its most basic, this takes the form of asking artists to refuse to participate publicly and to make clear their reasons for not attending, but it extends well beyond this, and in so doing depends upon the same “series of articulations” that Balme describes in *The Theatrical Public Sphere*: “the internal

(potential performances in the building) and the external (sphere of communication and exchange outside but focused on the particular institution) meet in reciprocal although sometimes conflictual relationships and cultural practices" (Balme 2014, 47). Balme's reference to "potential" performances reflects the contingency of the performance upon a range of other, related factors—in the case of the Shiraz Festival, these potential performances could only be realised so long as a separation between the external and the internal remained viable. I would argue that it is not so much that politics won the day in forcing the absence of artists like Cunningham, but that by 1976, the increasingly unavoidable clash between the external and the internal became incompatible with Cunningham's aesthetic goals. The possibility of imagining the production of a space for "speaking freely" seemed to be overtaken by evidence that any such "production" would be a well-disguised parody. Coe notes that the Iranian improvisational performance practice known as *ruhozi*, "long-suppressed," was only just allowed to "re-emerge" at Shiraz, "but, significantly, it was not improvised there" (Coe 1976, 10).

The boycott proposes an alternative mode or avenue of exchange that depends upon revoking the "pass" offered to the outsider by the government or institution the boycott is meant to target. The concept of exchange is key here, because it focuses attention on the *call* to boycott, and signals the necessity of understanding the boycott as a response to a request for engagement rather than as an individual's act of self-exclusion. That is, the call for a boycott, which came, in the case of Shiraz, in the form of poet Reza Baraheni's general and individual request that artists refuse to participate (and the amplification of this request by Eric Bentley), is also an invitation, but one that asks its recipients to be elsewhere. What the boycott proposes, then, is the refusal of one kind of exchange—that which occurs between performers and audiences, but which happens on the terms and in the interests of the Pahlavi government—and its replacement with another: the expression of solidarity with Iranian dissidents, which requires the artistic act (because it must be enacted by artists in order to function as a boycott) of not making art. It proposes that, under existing conditions, there is no way to contribute one's artistic labour to the Festival—even if one attempts to "speak truth to power"—without simultaneously contributing to the Pahlavi regime's project of cultivating an international image that would appear to be at odds with, and so would obscure, its record of brutal political repression.

In the end, the "giants" did not come to Shiraz in 1976, as the *Kahyan*, an Iranian state newspaper, announced (Azimi 2011). Cage, Cunningham and Mumma, all of whom wished to attend, ultimately abided by the MCDC's decision not to. Composer Xenakis expressed his regrets to organiser Farrokh Ghaffary, explaining that in spite of his deep affection for Iran and his previously stated objections to a boycott, "faced with inhuman and unnecessary police repression that the Shah and his government are inflicting on Iran's youth, [he was] incapable of lending any moral guarantee, regardless of how fragile that may be, since it is a matter of artistic creation" (quoted in Gluck 2007, 26). Brook, quoted in an article in the *Village Voice*, had conceded that "this year might be a grand time to boycott Shiraz because when a lot of people come together around a single flag something can come of it. An anti-Fascist statement in a country like Iran rings out and reminds people that they haven't been abandoned" (Navasky 1976). Robert Wilson and his company also

stayed away, though in February the question had not yet been decided (Coe 1976). While by their own accounts, many of these artists felt that an opportunity was lost, it is perhaps equally possible to read their withdrawal, however reluctant, as a productive absence. They excused themselves as privileged outsiders, and also as spectators. In effect, they refused to sanction, with their own improvisational experiments, the un-improvised improvisation the Festival put on display.

Yet while ultimately successful to the extent that very few of those American and European avant-garde figures who had contemplated returning did so, the boycott features only minimally in subsequent accounts of the festival. Neither of the articles referenced above published by the Asia Society in conjunction with the Iran Modern exhibit include any mention of the boycott, though passing references to it do appear in other contributions to the catalogue; this minimal inclusion may be unsurprising in light of the fact that Farah Diba, the former Empress, gave a keynote address at the symposium. The effect of this elision is to flatten the history of the Iranian/Islamic revolution, indirectly locating the artistic production the festivals facilitated entirely on the side of the pre-revolutionary state. In fact, as the boycott suggests, and as was the case, the Iranian revolution developed out of a complex intersection of competing political ideologies, ranging from a conservative Islamism to a secular Marxism. Historiographically and dramaturgically, then, the cultural boycott disrupts and dislocates settled narratives, in the past and in the present, drawing our attention to what might have happened and didn't, and to what may happen still. The debates that play out—in person, in publications, between company members and collaborators—appear to produce the kinds of spaces that critics of the cultural boycott claim it forecloses. To say that a continuity exists between this space and the space of artistic production is not to claim that the former is a sufficient or desirable substitute for the latter, but simply to propose a recognition of the possibility that what we expect of one sphere might sometimes, and sometimes of necessity, be found in the other.

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## Notes

1. This was not the first instance of any individuals or groups refusing to attend; in 1971 the Performance Group had agreed to attend and then pulled out after learning more about the sponsoring body; S. K. Dunn, one of the performers in Wilson's *KA MOUNTAIN*, recalls that in Paris, while waiting to depart for Iran, she was confronted by one of Peter Brook's actors who implored her not to go (Dunn, n.d., n.p.).

2. On the legislation, see Greenwald and Grim, "U.S. Lawmakers seek to criminally outlaw support for boycott campaign against Israel" *The Intercept*, July 19, 2017. Taking up the debate over the BDS movement as a whole is beyond the scope of this essay, in part because the accusations against are so wide-ranging (from counter-productive to anti-Semitic). For an admittedly pro-BDS overview of what the movement is and isn't, see Omar Barghouti's *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions* (2011). The official call, issued in 2005 by "political parties, unions, associations, coalitions and organizations" representing "Palestinian refugees, Palestinians under occupation and Palestinian citizens of Israel," can be found at [www.bdsmovement.net](http://www.bdsmovement.net).

3. In some cases, this "protection" looked more like detention; in an interesting demonstration of the Festival's fixation on its star participants, S.K. Dunn recounts the not altogether friendly treatment



she and others in Wilson's troupe received from the Festival's organisers in the weeks prior to Wilson's release from prison on Crete. (Wilson had been arrested at the airport for possessing a small amount of hash and efforts were underway, but as yet unsuccessful, to have him released.) Attempts were made to prevent the actors from finding the mountain on which Wilson wanted them to perform, and they were initially housed in buildings with bars on the windows. Immediately before Wilson finally arrived in Iran the organisers had told the rest of the troupe that they had twenty-four hours to leave the country (Dunn n.d., n.p.).

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