THE NEW BOYCOTT CRISIS

The impact of cultural boycotts on artists, venues and promoters in the arts 2026
By Denise Fahmy, Rosie Kay and Prof Jo Phoenix © 2026

"The real loss is the work that was never made and never seen"

Respondent December 2025

Contents

With thanks to Prof Jo Phoenix,
Mark Parsons and Lee Curtis

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01.
Executive Summary

Something has gone wrong in the arts. Not at the margins, not in isolated incidents, but structurally - in the way decisions are made about who gets to create, perform, exhibit, publish and be heard. An ecology that was once built on talent, artistic judgement, meritocracy and creative risk has been gradually displaced by a different dynamic: fear, informal or direct sanctions, quiet cancellations, the normalisation of silence, the avoidance or subversion of due process and formal procedures, a heightened sense of anxiety about reputational risk, safeguarding and safety.

The determining question is no longer: Is this good work[1]? It has been replaced by what will happen if we programme this content or this artist? The New Boycott Crisis documents the devastating role cultural boycotts are playing in shaping the arts ecology today.

01. Executive Summary

This report, produced by Freedom in the Arts, builds on the findings of Afraid To Speak Freely (May 2025)[2]. Drawing on surveys and in-depth interviews with artists, venue leaders, agents, managers and promoters, it documents what we call the new boycott crisis: an interconnected web of coercive practices - cancellation, deplatforming, institutional exclusion, professional ostracism, workplace bullying, funding compromises, compelled political declarations, harassment and reputational destruction - that collectively polices the boundaries of acceptable thought, association, expression and programming within the arts. Although this crisis predates the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, it has escalated sharply since, with sporadic pressure morphing into a systemic force that is threatening careers and the very business models sustaining the sector.

Impact on Artists

The damage of the boycott crisis falls heavily on individual artists, who are overwhelmingly the people with the least institutional power to resist it. Most are freelancers, financially precarious and dependent on networks of reputation and goodwill. The report documents a pattern of silent boycotts: opportunities drying up, invitations ceasing, communications going unanswered, and projects stalling indefinitely - all without formal explanation or documentation. However, since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza, Jewish artists are experiencing a wave of boycotts. Exclusion may be triggered not by anything they have said or done but by their identity itself. Artists report severe psychological harm, self-censorship, cultural erasure, loss of income and, in several cases, symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress. Gender-critical artists experience parallel mechanisms of exclusion on the grounds that their belief in the immutability of sex has been perceived as being ipso facto transphobic.

Impact on Venues and Institutions

Venues - festivals, theatres, comedy clubs, literary organisations - are where programming decisions are made or, more precisely, where they fail to be made. With the new boycott crisis, the defining pattern is not venues facing protests and capitulating but anticipatory compliance: pre-emptive cancellation driven by fear of what might happen rather than response to what has happened. Critically, the pressure overwhelmingly originates from inside organisations - staff complaints, staff networks, advisory bodies - rather than from audiences. "Safety" language is weaponised to reframe political objections as welfare concerns, triggering HR processes ill-equipped to distinguish between genuine safeguarding and ideological pressure. Venues may end up breaching contractual obligations, equality law and their own governance frameworks, often without recognising that they are doing so. The artistic mission is being subordinated to survival, with programming driven by what is "safe" rather than what is excellent.

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[1]The Guardian's five-star review of Róisín Murphy's Hit Parade explicitly weights a political position over artistic merit: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2023/sep/07/roisin-murphy-hit-parade-review

[2]Fahmy, D., Kay, R. and J. Phoenix (2025) Afraid to Speak Freely, Freedom in the Arts, doi: 10.48683/1926.00122571

The Cascade Effect: Agents, Managers and the Ecosystem

Agents, managers and promoters are the connective tissue of the arts and have become the sector's primary shock absorbers. This report reveals that boycott pressure cascades laterally through the ecosystem, with each capitulation making the next target more vulnerable. The 2024 Barclays sponsorship crisis and the parallel Baillie Gifford campaign against literary festivals powerfully illustrate this cascade dynamic, with multiple festivals losing major sponsors in rapid succession. Intermediaries are increasingly forced to mediate antisemitism and belief-based discrimination on behalf of institutions, advising Jewish and gender-critical artists to conceal their identities, avoid certain venues and remain silent - turning self-censorship into a professional service delivered under duress.

Key Findings

The New Boycott Crisis identifies several critical dynamics. First, appeasement does not work: institutions that capitulate do not purchase peace but permanent vulnerability, with each concession inviting further demands. Second, resistance can succeed: in some documented cases where venues held their ground, predicted protests did not materialise, audiences attended, and the controversy evaporated. Third, a small number of internal actors hold disproportionate power: staff complaints, not audience boycotts, trigger most capitulations. Fourth, EDI and values frameworks have been weaponised, with political demands reframed as diversity issues to access institutional complaint machinery. Fifth, antisemitism is the dominant form of identity-based exclusion documented across the data, operating at every level from overt to institutional, frequently unrecognised by the very frameworks designed to prevent discrimination.

Recommendations

The report calls for systemic change across four areas. Governance reform: boards need training for crises, with legal and communications expertise, and should be required to adopt explicit statements of artistic purpose and a commitment to protect freedom of expression. Legal clarity: the sector urgently needs accessible guidance on equality law, contractual obligations and the legal thresholds for exclusion and cancellation, available at the point of crisis rather than after the damage is done. Sector coordination: cross-sectoral networks of organisations committed to resisting boycott logic and sharing resources are essential to transform the incentive structure from compliance to resistance. Collective action: the boycott crisis is at its core a crisis of collective action failure - the silent majority must be given mechanisms for collective expression and protection for individual expression. Without intervention, the self-reinforcing dynamics documented in this report will intensify, and the arts sector's claim to value diversity will be exposed as hollow: diversity of identity without diversity of thought.

2. Note on Research Methodology

The data collected for this report comes from several sources. These discussions enabled us to construct a survey for three groups of respondents:

1. Artists
2. Venues
3. Agents, promoters and managers

Between 23 October and 19 December 2025, Freedom in the Arts conducted three confidential sector-specific surveys examining experiences of boycott pressure, cancellation and related decision-making across the arts.

The **Artists Survey** comprised 26 semi-open questions and received 158 responses across 29 art forms. The majority of respondents worked in theatre, music and literature (68%). Eighty per cent identified as freelance practitioners, 70% reported more than 16 years of professional experience, and 77% stated that they had either directly experienced or witnessed boycott-related activity.

The **Venues Survey** consisted of 27 questions and received 15 responses from organisations spanning 12 sectors of the arts and entertainment industry. Reported venue capacities ranged from 30 to 160,000, with an average capacity of approximately 2,000. Fifty per cent of responding venues were publicly subsidised and fifty per cent operated without subsidy.

The **Agents, Managers and Promoters Survey** included 25 questions and received 21 responses from professionals working across eight sectors, predominantly theatre, music and literature. Respondents ranged from sole operators to organisations with up to 500 employees or associates.

In total, the research received 194 survey responses. Survey participants were invited to indicate whether they would be willing to take part in follow-up interviews. This resulted in 45 in-depth, one-to-one interviews conducted by Rosie Kay across artists, venues, intermediaries, publishing professionals, legal experts and governance figures.

One case study referenced in this report draws on direct observation by co-author Denise Fahmy, who attended the "Meeting the Moment" conference hosted by Watershed in November 2025.

In addition, Freedom in the Arts convened a confidential roundtable discussion with approximately 30 senior arts leaders, including artistic directors, executives, trustees and sector intermediaries from across publishing, theatre, music, festivals and visual arts. The roundtable was conducted under strict non-attribution to enable candid discussion of governance dilemmas, internal organisational pressures and reputational risk. Six of the roundtable participants were subsequently interviewed individually. The roundtable served both to test emerging themes from the survey data and to explore cross-sector similarities in how boycott pressure is experienced and managed. Contributions from this discussion are incorporated thematically throughout the report rather than attributed to named individuals.

We do not claim that these findings are statistically representative of the entire arts and cultural sector. Rather, the combination of structured survey data, extended qualitative interviews and cross-sector roundtable discussion provides a detailed, multi-layered investigation into how boycott pressures are operating across different parts of the sector.

What most surprised the research team was not the existence of boycotts themselves, but the breadth of their secondary effects: on governance structures, commissioning decisions, risk assessment processes, professional behaviour and creative ambition.

Confidentiality was central to the research design at every stage. Many participants expressed concern that public identification could result in professional retaliation, reputational harm or further exclusion. For that reason, quotations are anonymised, identifying details have been removed or generalised where necessary, and case studies are presented in a way that protects individuals and organisations while preserving the integrity of the evidence.

This report documents a marked increase in antisemitism experienced within the UK arts sector. Although the research did not set out to focus exclusively on antisemitism, a significant proportion of respondents were Jewish artists or reported experiences of Israel-related scrutiny. Antisemitic tropes and assumptions were described in multiple cases. These findings are therefore addressed explicitly where they arise, alongside other documented forms of identity and belief-based exclusion.

The evidence collected suggests that antisemitism within the arts sector is, in part, being exacerbated by the growing prevalence of cultural boycott campaigns relating to Israel, including those associated with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), and Artists for Palestine UK. This report does not take a position on the Israel–Gaza conflict itself. It is clearly a tragedy for both communities. Rather, it documents the experiences reported to us by artists, venue leaders and intermediaries, who consistently described Jewish and Israeli artists, programmes and subject matter as being disproportionately affected by organised pressure, in ways that frequently crossed into antisemitic tropes or assumptions.

Freedom in the Arts recognises the right of artists and individuals to protest, to withdraw their work and to express political views. We also recognise that many artists who support the Palestinian cause hold their views sincerely and vigorously. While this research did not receive submissions from artists reporting cancellation or exclusion on the basis of pro-Palestinian views, we acknowledge that such cases have been publicly documented in the UK and internationally, and have led to initiatives by Brian Eno, Massive Attack and others to support artists in that position.

We believe, based on the evidence gathered, that cultural boycotts within the arts sector tend to foster division, undermine artistic evaluation on its own terms and have limited impact on achieving meaningful political change. This report is concerned not with adjudicating geopolitical disputes, but with documenting how boycott logic operates within cultural institutions, and the consequences this has for artists, organisations and audiences.

3. What is the New Boycott Crisis?

In our previous report - **Afraid To Speak Freely (May 2025)** - we detailed how freedom of expression is under attack in the arts and cultural sector. This report builds on this work but asks: what now drives decision making in the cultural sector and to what effect? What we found was a sector gripped by what we are calling 'the new boycott crisis'. We draw evidence from surveys and in-depth interviews with artists, venues, managers and agents. The overall finding is that the logic and practice of boycotts has fundamentally reshaped the art and cultural sector. This needs careful explanation because the new boycott crisis does not follow a traditional pattern. It is something different. It is a crisis because it is expanding in scale, pace and effect. Although it started well before the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza, it is an escalating crisis in which sporadic pressure has morphed into a systemic force, often antisemitic, affecting everything from sponsorship to programming, in every field from publishing to festivals. It is threatening careers and the very business models that sustain the sector.

We call this a boycott crisis not because every act of exclusion, quiet cancellation, or bullying, harassment or discrimination is formally a "boycott," but because "the boycott" is the organising principle around which a much larger ecosystem of coercive practices has formed. Traditional boycotts are familiar and broadly understood. They have a defined target, a stated demand and a clear mechanism: the withdrawal of economic participation until the demand is met. What we are dealing with now is something that has evolved far beyond that model.

The new boycott crisis is not a single formal campaign, although this is one aspect. Instead, it is an interconnected web of coercive practices - cancellation, silencing, exclusion, professional isolation, bullying, funding pressure, forced political statements, harassment and reputational harm. Collectively the boycott crisis functions to police the boundaries of acceptable thought, association, expression and programming within the arts. These practices may be orchestrated by formal campaign organisations, driven by institutional actors who have adopted their logic, or emerge through informal but patterned social pressure.

For this report, we define the boycott crisis as follows:

The organised or emergent imposition - and the anticipatory self-imposition - of professional, reputational, financial or social costs on artists, cultural workers or institutions on the basis of their perceived political associations, beliefs, identities, national origin or failure to conform to one side of contested political positions. Such practices include, but are not limited to, formal boycott campaigns, cancellation, deplatforming, discriminatory programming decisions, funding conditionality, compelled political declarations, professional ostracism, workplace bullying, harassment and the use of informal, undocumented pressure that operates below the threshold of legal accountability. These practices may be centrally directed or spontaneous, domestic or international and they operate individually, cumulatively and across the ecosystem of artists, intermediaries and institutions - such that pressure applied at any one point cascades through the network of relationships on which cultural life depends. The boycott crisis is sustained not only by direct coercion but by the normalisation of silence and avoidance, and by the internalisation of fear, whereby individuals and organisations pre-emptively comply with political demands that have not yet been made, on the basis of consequences they have not yet experienced but have learned to anticipate.

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[3] See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crgg13nn0kgo

This definition is deliberately broad, because the crisis is broad and expanding. In the face of the boycott crisis, individual and institutional 'impartiality' or 'neutrality' is no longer tolerated. Institutions and individuals are being forced to choose between capitulation to the boycotting logic on the one hand or collapse on the other. This is not about woke versus anti-woke, left versus right. It is about what is deemed acceptable and what is deemed taboo.

Before moving on, it is important to note that regardless of the political issues at play, organised and orchestrated boycotts do have a devastating impact on the art and cultural sector as the following case study demonstrates.

The Impact of an Orchestrated Boycott: The Barclays Boycott

The Barclays sponsorship crisis in 2024 illustrates how boycott pressures compound. Following 7 October 2023, over 1,200 musicians signed open letters demanding festivals drop Barclays sponsorship due to the bank's investments in defence companies that supply Israel. Bands Boycott Barclays, amongst other organisations, led campaigns targeting music festivals sponsored by Barclays, including The Great Escape, TRNSMT, Latitude and Download.

For festival organisers, the calculation was brutal: proceed with Barclays and lose headlining acts plus face artist boycotts that would make future programming impossible, or drop Barclays and lose 20-30% of operational revenue in a climate in which replacement sponsors are difficult to find, given activist campaigns demonstrate willingness to target any corporate entity.

Internally, festival staff unified in solidarity with performer demands to drop Barclays. Management faced not just external pressure but internal revolt. Legal advice confirmed that terminating sponsor contracts without cause would create liability. Yet proceeding would trigger mass artist withdrawal. The funder (Arts Council England in some cases,

private investors in others) provided no clear guidance. Professional bodies offered no protection. Media coverage amplified the conflict. Staying silent was characterised as complicity.

The result: multiple festivals ended their relationships with Barclays not necessarily because leadership agreed with the boycott argument, but because the alternative was organisational collapse[3]. Simultaneously, the precedent then applied to Baillie Gifford sponsored book festivals across the UK, creating a cascade where each capitulation made the next target more vulnerable. In the end, it is unclear that the political objective of the orchestrated boycott was achieved (Barclays still invests in defence companies supplying Israel) with perhaps the only real outcome being the risks to sustainability of the business model.

The Asymmetry of The New Boycott Crisis: Glastonbury 2025

The Barclays case illustrates how boycott pressure operates through economic leverage. But the new boycott crisis also operates through a less visible mechanism: a systematic disparity in who is granted access to cultural platforms and who is quietly denied it. The events at the Glastonbury Festival in June 2025 brought this disparity into sharp public focus.

On 28 June 2025, rap-punk duo Bob Vylan took to the West Holts Stage at Glastonbury Music Festival - one of the UK's largest summer music festivals - and led an audience of approximately 30,000 in chanting "Death, death to the IDF". The performance, which also featured chants of "from the river to the sea" and a backdrop message accusing the BBC of downplaying genocide, was broadcast live on BBC iPlayer to a national audience. The BBC had internally flagged Bob Vylan as one of the seven "high risk" acts ahead of the festival, but cleared them for live streaming with what the corporation later described as "appropriate mitigations". Hours later, on the same stage, Irish language rap trio Kneecap - one of whose members was on unconditional bail for a terrorism charge relating to the alleged display of a

Hezbollah flag at a London concert[4] - performed to one of the weekend's largest crowds. Despite Prime Minister Keir Starmer publicly stating it was not appropriate for Kneecap to play, despite a private letter signed by thirty industry professionals urging the festival to consider the likely ramifications of Kneecap playing, and despite the BBC's decision not to livestream the set, the performance went ahead. The BBC subsequently uploaded an edited version to iPlayer.

The political fallout was significant. Prime Minister Keir Starmer condemned Bob Vylan's chants as "appalling hate speech." Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy raised the matter in Parliament and demanded answers from the BBC about its failure to pull the livestream. BBC Chairman Samir Shah issued a public apology, specifically to the Jewish community. The BBC's Director of Music, Lorna Clarke, stepped back from her duties pending an internal investigation. Bob Vylan were dropped by their agency, UTA, had their US visas revoked by the State Department, and were removed from festivals in the UK, France and Germany. Avon and Somerset Police opened a criminal investigation into both acts. Glastonbury's organisers declared themselves "appalled," stating there was "no place at Glastonbury for antisemitism, hate speech, or incitement to violence." In a later podcast interview, Bob Vylan's frontman stated he had no regrets and would do it again, and claimed BBC staff had congratulated him backstage.

Certainly, the condemnation was swift, and some of the consequences for the artists involved were real. But the critical point for this report is what the episode reveals about the architecture of access and exclusion in the arts sector and the nature of the boycott crisis.

Bob Vylan were given the stage. They were given the live broadcast. They performed in front of tens of thousands and were streamed, potentially, to millions. The consequences came afterwards. Kneecap were given the stage despite a member facing terrorism charges, despite direct intervention by the Prime Minister and despite organised

industry opposition highlighting the antisemitism. Even the music festival's founder, Michael Eavis, responded to criticism by suggesting that people who did not agree could go to other festivals. At the risk of repetition: the institutional apparatus of one of the UK's largest summer festivals and the BBC could not, or would not, prevent performers with documented records of incitement from accessing one of the country's largest cultural platforms.

The experiences documented in this report tell a story that is the mirror image of what happened at Glastonbury. We talk about Jewish and gender-critical artists quietly removed from line-ups, uninvited from collaborations or passed over for commissions - not because of anything they have done or said on stage but because of who they are, where they come from or what they believe. No Prime Minister condemns these actions in Parliament in real time. No BBC executives step down. No police investigation is open. No agency drops anyone.

The asymmetry is structural, not incidental. Glastonbury 2025 did not create the asymmetry. It made it highly visible in a way that is difficult to ignore, and this asymmetry - between what is loudly permitted and what is quietly or silently prohibited - forms the backbone of this report.

The next sections describe the new boycott crisis through the eyes of our respondents.

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[4] See https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/18/kneecap-rapper-charged-with-terror-offence-released-on-unconditional-bail-liam-og-o-hannaidh. The charges were later dropped. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce846r2drg8o

04. Artists

The individual impact of the boycott crisis lands most heavily on artists. They are the individuals whose work is pulled, whose careers are threatened if not devastated, whose identities and political allegiances are scrutinised not just now but at any point in their history, and whose silence, in the face of the coercive practices, is enforced. They are also, overwhelmingly, the people with the least institutional power to resist the force of the crisis. Freelance artists, often financially precarious, are dependent on regional, national and often international networks of reputation and goodwill.

Their position in the sector means that they are highly vulnerable to the informal, undocumented pressure that the boycott crisis produces. The irony, of course, is that not all artists are equally vulnerable or equally impacted. Some, particularly established artists, such as Brian Eno and Massive Attack in the instance of the Barclays boycotts, do have the potential to wreck the sector and others still may well be the boycotters.

4. Artists

How it Happens

Silent Boycotts

At an individual level, the pressure of the boycott crisis is not always an overt or publicised formal cancellation. This is largely because the boycott crisis is not a reactive crisis. It is an anticipatory crisis that operates pre-emptively. What this means is that there is no single moment when an artist is told: you are being boycotted. Instead, survey respondents and interviewees described a pattern of quiet withdrawal. Opportunities dry up. Invitations stop coming. Communications go unanswered. Projects stall indefinitely.

"No one accused me of anything. They just stopped replying."

"It wasn't a cancellation letter. It was doors quietly closing."

The mechanism is the silent boycott. We call it silent because it leaves no legal footprint. It leaves nothing that can be challenged. If an artist receives a letter of termination, she or he can consult a lawyer. An artist who receives silence can challenge nothing and no one.

In several cases documented in the data we collected, artists were simply dropped by agents or collaborators who appeared to be very careful about what they committed in writing. For Jewish artists, quiet cancellation has a particular character. It is not triggered by anything the artist has said or done. Rather it is triggered by who the artist is. Jewish respondents describe opportunities disappearing after 7 October 2023 - not because they expressed any particular political views, but because their Jewish identity itself was treated as a political position. One respondent noted:

"I was dropped from a project without explanation. Friends told me it was because of the politics, not the work."

In another case, a filmmaker was told by their representative that they were "not the right creative fit anymore". Such language obscures. The filmmaker added:

"They were careful about what they put in writing, but privately there was no dispute."

For that filmmaker this also came at a time when they had argued with a friend about Israel at which point the friend "wheeled out every antisemitic trope". For this filmmaker the professional exclusion and personal antisemitism were experienced as part of the same boycotting climate.

Other artists describe a more lateral form of pressure coming not from institutions or gatekeepers but from within their own creative communities: peers, fellow band members, writing groups, within artistic networks. One Jewish musician described being expelled from her own band after refusing to participate in a politically charged event linked to the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign. The band had committed to the gig without consulting her and her participation was seen as a moral duty. Her dissent and refusal became evidence of the need to expel her. As she put it:

"This is not exactly a boycott, but I feel I have been boycotted within the band.... It became clear I had become the Zionist, the witch".

There are other triggers - such as gender-critical beliefs rather than Jewish identities - but the mechanism remains startlingly the same. Pressure escalating from within the community occasionally ending in a harassment campaign suffered by the individual in their daily life.

One gay arts practitioner described how publicly discussing his lived experience of sex and homosexuality, and engaging in online debate around gender-affirmative medicine for minors, affected his career. He believes his tweets were circulated in "secret groups". Shortly afterwards, while serving in a governance role at a national cultural institution that had issued a statement on online abuse and cancel culture, he became the target of public harassment. Those involved included cultural practitioners in full-time employment, among them a mental health practitioner with a Glasgow trust, an employee of the Scottish Parliament and freelance "book workers" aligned with Fossil Free Books. The backlash escalated into death threats, being followed to work and to the institution, and a male activist appearing outside his flat. He subsequently withdrew from public commentary and reported PTSD symptoms.

Separately, a publicly funded cross-cultural poetry project that he had designed, bringing together poets from marginalised language and identity communities, collapsed. Three participants, introduced by an external agency, began a campaign to have two others removed and ultimately caused the project to be abandoned. Workshops, commissions and events were not delivered as planned and were substantially reduced after concessions were refused. Public funds were lost. His professional opportunities in an already limited field were further narrowed.

What these cases demonstrate is that for the artists who are subject to boycotts, the pressure operates through a combination of institutional silence and community coercion. Institutions withdraw support without explaining why. Communities impose conformity through social punishment. Between the two, the artist is left isolated, without information, without recourse and without support. For Jewish artists, this isolation has a specific quality: it is isolation from a sector that continues to proclaim its commitment to anti-racism while practising, in some cases evidenced by, a form of racism against them.

Informal Blacklisting

Several artists describe what amounts to informal blacklisting: a pattern of exclusion that extends beyond a single institution or a single incident and that operates across the sector. They are not formally banned from anything. They simply find that their name has become, in the sector's unwritten calculus, a risk. Programmers avoid them. Commissioners pass. Festivals do not invite them. The exclusion is invisible to anyone who is not experiencing it, and it is almost impossible to evidence.

"I wasn't rejected. I just stopped existing."

For Jewish artists, the blacklisting has a particular mechanism. It operates not only through what the artist has said or done but through what they are assumed to believe by virtue of their identity. A Jewish artist is assumed to hold certain views about Israel. An Israeli artist is assumed to be complicit in the actions of their government. The assumption is the blacklist entry. No evidence of actual views is required, and no opportunity to contest the assumption is offered.

"I feel I am being judged for things I have never said or done."

Because the blacklisting is informal, it grows by association and by rumour. An artist who is seen as 'difficult' in one context becomes 'risky' in another. The risk assessment is never written down. It is simply understood. And because it is understood rather than documented, it cannot be challenged, reviewed or appealed.

Artists also describe being subjected to retrospective scrutiny: decades-old work trawled and reread through a contemporary political lens to construct accusations of racism, misogyny or transphobia. This creates permanent vulnerability for artists with long careers and a chilling effect for younger artists who learn from watching what happens to their seniors.

"They went back thirty years and read everything through today's lens."

When Artists Turn on Each Other

Artists themselves have used their public platforms to denounce peers. A focus on a peer's beliefs or position can lead to a threat of withdrawal - this is acceptable - and pressure on others to withdraw - this isn't. The result isn't accountability or discussion, it's coercion dressed up as ethics.

The collapse of the publicly funded Polari Prize in August 2025 illustrates how artists effectively destroyed their own community. Successful author John Boyne was longlisted but because he holds gender-critical views, authors and judges began withdrawing, protesting his inclusion. Within two weeks the organisers announced they would "pause" the prize for that year amid the backlash. No hidden needling was necessary. Artists enforced the line themselves. This public blacklisting requires no formal ban but is highly detrimental to long-standing and valuable institutions[5].

Artists displayed a similar mechanism during the Barclays boycotts of live music in 2024, revealing the power artists have. Performers threatened to withdraw and the industry ended ties with the bank. That power cuts both ways. If artists can pressure corporations, they can also drive other artists out of cultural life. Peer pressure, disguised as solidarity, is an increasingly open tool driving boycott behaviour.

Antisemitism

Antisemitism is as prominent as it is in this report for the simple reason that it was so present in the lives and stories of our respondents - across all the different data sources. For our respondents, antisemitism operates at every level: overt, covert, institutional and interpersonal. The evidence demands that it be described in full.

At its most overt, the antisemitism documented by us includes the circulation of antisemitic imagery within professional networks - the casual use of Holocaust comparisons and accusations of Nazism directed at Jewish artists purely based on their heritage. Several artists report a sharp escalation in explicit antisemitic content within their professional circles since October 2023.

"Colleagues liked a cartoon comparing Gaza to Auschwitz. These were people I trusted."

At its most covert, antisemitism operates through the same mechanisms of silent boycotts documented above. Jewish identity is treated as a reputational risk. Jewish themes in art are treated as inherently political and provocative, even when the work contains no reference to Israel or contemporary geopolitics. Jewish artists are advised by their own agents to remain invisible. The language in which it is conducted is designed to make it unchallengeable.

"My work is about Iraqi Jewish history. Israel is never mentioned. But Jewish equals political now."

"They said it was too sensitive right now. Not unsafe. Not illegal. Just too Jewish."

What makes this particularly insidious is that it operates within and alongside institutional frameworks that are supposed to prevent discrimination. Jewish artists report being excluded from anti-racism conversations. They are told that antisemitism is "not the moment". They are subjected to the perverse inversion in which Jewish identity is treated as white privilege while antisemitic hostility is treated as legitimate political expression. In several cases, Jewish artists were accused of Nazism, Zionism or moral complicity simply by virtue of their heritage - accusations that may be instantly recognised as discriminatory if directed at any other ethnic group.

"Everyone was allowed to talk about prejudice except Jews."

"Antisemitism was either minimised or misunderstood, even in spaces supposedly committed to anti-racism."

In one anonymised case, a Jewish artist reported being targeted following public comments and a professional article addressing antisemitism after 7 October. An organised campaign sought to have the artist deplatformed from a professional conference and included the circulation of a graphic invoking the antisemitic trope of blood libel, visually linking the artist to the deaths of named Palestinian women and children through imagery of blood. While the conference proceeded, no public statement of institutional support was issued. The artist reported heightened fear for their personal safety, police involvement, visible security measures at the event and subsequent attempts to disrupt unrelated cultural work. Blood libel is a historically recognised antisemitic incitement associated with violence against Jewish communities.

The Erasure of Other Protected Characteristics

One final note before moving on: other protected characteristics are overridden once the antisemitic or ideological label is applied. Artists in our data note that race, disability, sex and class - all characteristics that the sector's EDI frameworks are designed to protect - cease to matter once an artist is designated as a "Zionist", "Terf" or other taboo or politically unacceptable individual.
In one case, a Black woman artist was removed from a project following the expression of gender-critical views relating to sex and women's rights. The decision was not communicated to her by senior management. Instead, another Black woman artist involved in the project, more junior and reliant on the same commissioning structures, was asked to inform her that the collaboration could not continue. The junior artist later said she felt unable to refuse this role, fearing consequences for her own work. No written explanation was provided to the artist who was excluded, and no senior figure took responsibility for the decision.

What it Costs - Financial Cascade

The costs to artists are professional, financial, psychological and, in several documented cases, physical. They are also cumulative. A single lost commission might be survivable. A pattern of lost commissions, combined with reputational damage that travels informally through the sector, combined with the psychological burden of constant vigilance and the loss of community and trust, this is not survivable in any meaningful professional sense. Artists do not simply lose one opportunity. They are rendered, as one respondent put it, professionally toxic.

Loss of Work and Income

Artists across our data describe losing work without explanation. In no case did an artist describe receiving a clear, written explanation for the loss of work that explained the actual grounds for the decision. The standard experience is silence, euphemism or the vague invocation of "sensitivity" or "timing." This is damaging the economic survival of artists.

Self-censorship, Cultural Erasure and Psychological Harm

Beyond the professional and financial damage, the responses from artists speak of severe psychological consequences. Artists describe anxiety, panic, loss of trust, identity fracture, grief, anger and, in several cases, symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress. Multiple artists describe withdrawing entirely from public life.

"I decided to shut up because I was pursuing a PTSD diagnosis and it was affecting me badly."

"I lost not just work, but my sense of belonging."

"My body started shutting down. I could not write. I could not think."

"I became hyper-vigilant. Every idea felt like a potential threat."

For Jewish artists, the self-censorship has a specific and devastating character: cultural erasure. Artists describe actively suppressing Jewish themes, removing markers of Jewish identity from their work, declining to speak publicly about Jewish experience, and reframing or abandoning projects that engage with Jewish history or culture. What is being suppressed is not merely a political opinion. It is a culture, a heritage, a way of seeing the world. The boycott crisis is not only excluding Jewish artists from the sector. It is excluding Jewish culture from art.

"I realised how much of myself I had edited out just to survive."

"This wasn't about politics anymore. It was about who I was allowed to be."

Self-censorship is described not as a single decision but as a daily discipline. Artists monitor their social media, edit their speech, decline opportunities, avoid certain colleagues, and suppress aspects of their identity and their work. The psychological cost is cumulative: several artists describe not single incidents but the grinding weight of sustained vigilance, sustained concealment, sustained pretence.

"You make terrible art when you're cowering."

"I could feel my confidence draining away. I started doubting everything I wanted to make."

Later-career artists with financial stability describe being able to absorb the costs of speaking honestly. Younger and more precarious artists cannot. The result is generational: younger artists learn, by watching what happens to others, that silence is the price of survival. The sector loses not only the artists who are forced out, but the work that is never made by those who remain.

"I can afford to be outspoken. Younger artists cannot."

The cumulative effect is not merely individual harm. It is a structural reshaping of artistic output. When Jewish artists suppress their identity, Jewish culture is diminished. When gender-critical artists cannot publish, the range of perspectives available to audiences contracts. When satirists cannot satirise, the culture loses one of its oldest corrective mechanisms. The boycott crisis does not only damage artists. It damages art.

Why Artists Cannot Resist

The artist data reveals a population that is structurally unable to resist boycott pressure. This is not a failure of courage. It is a consequence of the conditions under which artists work.

Most artists are freelance. They have no employer to lodge a grievance with. Their unions - in several documented cases - are actively involved in the boycott campaigns that target them. For Jewish artists, this is not an abstract problem: unions that have adopted the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) positions are simultaneously claiming to represent Jewish members whose livelihoods are damaged by those positions. The conflict of interest is stark and unresolved. Likewise for gender-critical artists, unions that adopt 'trans-inclusive' policies position gender-critical points of view as transphobic.

Artists have few contractual protections that are practically enforceable against the kind of informal exclusion they experience. Legal advice is expensive, and by the time an artist recognises what is happening, the damage is already done. The entire mechanism of quiet boycott is built to ensure that nothing is said, written or recorded that could form the basis of a legal claim.

Quiet boycotts also function to publicly isolate artists from their peers and communities of practice. A colleague, friend or member of their community of practice might offer a quiet word in their ear: we are with you. However, private solidarity does not translate into public support.

"People told me they supported it privately but could not be seen to support it publicly."

"I was told I would lose my community if I took part."

We heard of similar experiences by gender-critical artists. Artists described being warned that association with certain topics would jeopardise future commissions, funding or peer relationships. The mechanism was similar: exclusion framed as protection, silence framed as professionalism, and dissent treated as reputational risk.

[5] See: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/aug/19/polari-literary-prize-cancelled-over-the-boy-in-striped-pyjamas-author-john-boyne

[6] See, for instance: https://www.equity.org.uk/news/2024/equity-affiliates-to-palestine-solidarity-campaign

[7] See, for instance: https://musiciansunion.org.uk/news/mu-reaffirms-support-for-trans-musicians-amid-legal-definition-ruling

05.
Venues

If artists are where the damage lands, venues are where the decisions are made - or, more precisely, where the decisions fail to be made. Festivals, theatres, comedy clubs, literary organisations, local arts organisations: these are the institutions that programme the work, book the artists, and present culture to the public.

Venues carry collective responsibility in ways that individual artists do not. They employ staff. They serve audiences. They depend on funders, sponsors, ticket sales and local authorities. They maintain public reputations. All of these relationships create pressure points, and the boycotting crisis exploits every one of them. What follows draws on confidential survey data and in-depth interviews with people working across comedy venue networks, literary and cultural festivals, producing theatres, regional literature festivals, independent arts organisations, heritage bodies and small venues.

THE NEW BOYCOTT CRISIS

5. Venues

How it Happens
Pre-emptive Cancellation

The defining feature of boycott pressure on venues is not protest. It is anticipatory compliance. Across our data, the most common pattern is not a venue that faces a protest and capitulates, but a venue that acts pre-emptively to avoid a protest that may never have materialised. Decisions are shaped not by what has happened but by what the venue imagines might happen.

"There was no protest. There were no complaints. But we could see how it would go."

"We cancelled because we were afraid of what might happen, not because anything had happened."

For Jewish and Israeli artists, this anticipatory logic is particularly damaging. Venues do not need to receive a specific complaint about a specific Jewish artist. They have absorbed a general anxiety about hosting anyone perceived to be associated with Israel or Jewish identity. The risk calculation is applied before a name is even on the table. Jewish identity itself has become a filter in the programming process - not through explicit policy, but through the ambient fear that shapes every decision.

"We were worried about what hosting this artist might trigger, even though there had been no complaints."

This anticipatory logic is self-reinforcing. Each cancellation by one venue signals to other venues that the risk is real. Each capitulation becomes evidence that the threat was justified. The sector's informal networks - which once served to share opportunities - now also transmit fear. A venue that has never experienced boycott pressure programmes as though it has, because it has absorbed the sector's ambient anxiety.

Internal Pressure

Where direct pressure does occur, it overwhelmingly originates from inside the organisation, not from outside it. Staff complaints, union policies, advisory bodies, boards and partner organisations are the pressure points that produce capitulation. Public protest is frequently minimal or absent.

"There was no audience backlash. The pressure came from staff."

"The people most upset were not the people attending."

This inverts the common assumption that boycott pressure is always an external siege. In reality, the force is already inside the building. Staff who have absorbed the political logic of boycott campaigns - or who fear being targeted themselves - become internal enforcers. Their objections are framed not as political demands but as welfare concerns, safeguarding issues, or matters of personal safety. This framing triggers HR and duty-of-care processes that were designed for genuine welfare situations and that are profoundly ill-equipped to distinguish between a legitimate safety concern and a political objection in welfare clothing.

The weaponisation of safety language is one of the most effective tactics in the boycott playbook. Across the venue evidence, "safety" is invoked repeatedly to justify cancellations, but it is almost never accompanied by a proportionate risk assessment, a clear threshold, or evidence that

mitigation was attempted. In the context of Jewish or Israeli artists, "safety" frequently means the safety of the institution's reputation rather than the physical safety of anyone involved.

"We were told it was a safeguarding issue, but no one could explain how."

"Once staff concerns were raised, it felt impossible to push back."

In comedy and theatre contexts, staff discomfort with a performer's view is conflated with physical dangers. In other cases, HR processes are used by staff to escalate complaints. Complaints are framed as harm or harassment - especially in the case of gender-critical artists' work, which becomes the subject of complaints of transphobia.

"The complaints were bundled together with unrelated HR issues."

The effect is to grant a small number of internal actors, sometimes as few as one or two individuals, disproportionate influence over programming decisions that would ordinarily rest with senior leadership or boards. In practice, this can amount to an informal veto exercised through reputational anxiety rather than through established governance processes.

Our research identified one case in which a venue chose not to cancel a contested event despite advice to do so. The anticipated protest did not materialise and the event proceeded without incident. This example is significant because it suggests that the perceived risks driving some cancellation decisions may in certain cases be overstated. However, it remains atypical. Across the broader body of evidence, compliance in anticipation of risk was the more common institutional response.

Examples of Boycotts That Stop Art

Calls for boycotts can unfortunately be a very effective way to block artistic collaboration and presentation. In May 2025, UK concerts by Jonny Greenwood and Dudu Tassa were cancelled after the venues - Hackney Church and Bristol Beacon - chose not to proceed amid protest pressure and security concerns.

It is arguable that a cross-community collaboration involving Jewish, Arab and Middle Eastern musicians, exploring shared musical traditions, would be a positive and well-received programming decision at a time of war. However, The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, argued the project was "artwashing," and welcomed the cancellations. As the artists pointed out in their statement following the cancellations, "Intimidating venues into pulling our shows won't help achieve the peace and justice everyone in the Middle East deserves."

Despite the widespread evidence of pre-emptive cancellation, the power of orchestrated boycotts to destroy the art itself should not be underestimated. Shutting down collaborative cultural work, collapsing space for dialogue and treating cross-community practice as suspect rather than valuable, has become a staple feature in our sector.

"Forcing musicians not to perform and denying people who want to hear them an opportunity to do so, is self-evidently a method of censorship and silencing." [8]

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[8] See: http://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/may/06/jonny-greenwood-and-israeli-musician-dudu-tassa-condemn-silencing-after-uk-concerts-pulled

What it Costs

The consequences for venues are institutional, artistic and personal. They compound over time and they reshape not just individual decisions but the entire culture of how programming is done.

The Collapse of Artistic Mission

Venues describe operating in a state of permanent defensiveness: every programming decision weighted by political risk, every booking assessed for potential controversy, every season shaped by what might go wrong rather than what might be excellent. The artistic mission - the reason the organisation exists - is subordinated to survival.

"We worried more about reputational fallout than about fairness."

"Identity conformity matters more than artistic value."

Comedy venues describe maintaining unwritten lists of performers who are no longer booked. Festival directors describe filtering out work that might attract attention. Theatres describe seasons designed to avoid controversy. In each case, the programming logic has shifted from "is this good?" to "is this safe?". The consequence is not just the exclusion of individual artists. It is the systematic narrowing of what audiences are allowed to encounter.

"There is an unofficial list. Everyone knows it exists."

"We do not tell artists or comics why they are not booked."

"There was discussion about whether the work could be adjusted rather than cancelled."

The Pipeline Constraint

Venue leaders described not only pressure over specific artists, but a shrinking pool of available work. A senior literary contributor noted that "now it is almost impossible to get books published that are not left of centre. Gender-critical writers and Israeli writers have been historically hard to publish and almost impossible since 7 October." The issue described was not related to market viability. As another participant observed, publishers face "little economic jeopardy in avoiding such publications". The constraint appears to arise earlier in the commissioning chain, shaped by reputational caution rather than reader demand.

A festival director echoed this concern from the programming end, expressing a desire to host conversations and debate across contested themes but noting that the range of titles available each year was limited. The issue was not audience resistance, but supply. This reveals a pipeline effect. Artists may self-censor at conception. Agents may struggle to place manuscripts perceived as risky. Publishers may decline acquisition. By the time venues attempt to programme discussion, the material does not exist in sufficient diversity. As one contributor warned, "we are heading towards a situation in which only certain voices will be published." The consequence for venues is structural narrowing: less diversity of viewpoint, fewer opportunities for debate, and programming shaped not only by internal pressure but by upstream risk aversion.

Antisemitism in Venue Decision-making

The evidence suggests that antisemitism is not incidental in some venue decision-making. Across the venue evidence, Jewish identity was frequently treated as inherently controversial, and the exclusion of Jewish artists or Jewish-themed work

was often framed in the language of risk management, neutrality or community sensitivity.

Venues describe disproportionate scrutiny of Jewish-linked events. They describe reluctance to host Jewish speakers on subjects as apparently uncontroversial as Jewish history. They describe a pervasive anxiety about anything perceived to be associated with Israel or Jewish identity, an anxiety that extends to work with no connection to Israel whatsoever simply because the artist is Jewish. In literary and cultural festival contexts, Jewish women in particular report hostility and distress.

"It was not said outright, but it was clear this topic was too Jewish."

"They worried it would look like taking sides."

"Jewish women were visibly distressed, while others were performative."

Venues also reported scrutiny from other directions. One comedy venue described receiving criticism and pressure after booking a Palestinian artist, illustrating that programming decisions can attract political reaction from multiple constituencies. However, across the venue case studies, the weight and frequency of evidence concerning Jewish artists and Jewish-linked work was significantly greater.

Venues report confusion and fear about naming antisemitism. The challenge is that current EDI frameworks were not built to distinguish between a legitimate programming decision and a discriminatory one when the discrimination is conducted in the language of sensitivity and risk. The result is that antisemitism is simultaneously pervasive and invisible within venue decision-making, shaping outcomes without ever being named, challenged or addressed.

"It became impossible to separate identity from politics."

"Lawful dissent or lawful activity was framed as 'harm' or 'exclusion'."

The apology issued by the music venue Strange Brew to the klezmer dance band Oi Va Voi illustrates how venues' participation in boycott campaigns can draw them into decisions where the boundary between political protest and discriminatory treatment becomes unclear.

As a member of the Bristol Apartheid Free Zone[9], the venue had already pledged not to stock or purchase Israeli products. It then abruptly cancelled Oi Va Voi's gig. Following the band's complaint, Strange Brew later acknowledged in its apology that it had made a last-minute decision following complaints from activist groups. The Bristol Palestine Alliance had previously alleged that the band had "broken the artist boycott" by performing in Israel. Strange Brew accepted that its response, and decision to cancel the band, had been shaped by heightened sensitivity around Jewish identity, publicly stating: "We recognise that Oi Va Voi was likely only subjected to this level of scrutiny … because they are a Jewish band performing with an Israeli singer." While the PACBI guidelines for the cultural boycott of Israel 'rejects on principle boycotts of individuals based on their identity (such as citizenship, race, gender or religion),'[10] Strange Brew had done just that.

What this episode exposes is how boycott reasoning, once detached from clear institutional targets, can slide into practices that single people out by identity rather than action, normalising unequal treatment while still being framed as ethical or political conduct.

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[9] See: https://www.bafz.org/

[10] See: https://bdsmovement.net/pacbi/cultural-boycott-guidelines

Contractual and Legal Breaches

Across the venue evidence, institutions may be acting in ways that risk breaching contractual obligations or equality law and their own governance frameworks, often without recognising that they are doing so. There is some complexity here. The breaking of actual contracts is enforceable. So for instance, when The People's History Museum cancelled a contracted venue booking with human rights charity, Sex Matters, they were forced to make an embarrassing apology and swiftly backtracked, re-instating the booking and future bookings.

More often than not however, our data tells the story of venues implementing confused or possibly unlawful guidance. The treatment of Jewish and gender-critical artists documented throughout this report raises significant questions under the Equality Act 2010, which protects against discrimination on the grounds of sex, race and religion and belief - despite recent high profile employment cases such as Forstater v CGD EAT and the For Women Scotland Supreme Court ruling. What the evidence shows is a sector that has not carefully weighed its legal obligations and decided to break them. It is a sector that has largely stopped thinking about legal obligations. Instead, decisions are made on the basis of fear, not law. Risk is assessed reputationally, not legally. The question institutions ask is not "are we legally entitled to do this?" but "what will happen if we don't?"

"We didn't know what the right thing was legally, only what felt safest in the moment."

"Guidance issued under equality or inclusion banners was factually incorrect or legally unsound."

The Toll on Leaders

Venue leaders describe panic attacks, extended sick leave, career exit and loss of faith in the sector. The psychological toll mirrors what artists experience but with the added burden of institutional responsibility. Leaders who try to resist pressure are isolated. Leaders who comply carry the knowledge that they have failed the artists they were supposed to support.

"I witnessed too much ugliness."

"I left because I couldn't survive another one of these."

"I was signed off work for eight weeks."

"The board was not equipped to deal with the crisis. Responsibility was passed around, decisions were delayed, and the burden fell almost entirely on the senior leader, who absorbed the emotional, reputational and health impact alone."

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[11] See: https://sex-matters.org/posts/freedom-of-speech/peoples-history-museum-issue-apology-after-gender-critical-group-host-boardroom-meeting/

[12] https://www.gov.uk/employment-appeal-tribunal-decisions/maya-forstater-v-cgd-europe-and-others-ukeat-slash-0105-slash-20-slash-joj

[13] It is also the case that arts leaders may well be getting very poor training and guidance from their sector leaders, funders and support organisations. See for instance, Independent Theatre Council's advice regarding FWS - https://www.itc-arts.org/guidance-to-itc-members-following-the-uk-supreme-court-ruling-on-the-meaning-of-sex-in-the-equality-act-2010/

The cumulative effect is a leadership drain. Experienced, confident leaders who might be capable of resisting boycott pressure are leaving. They are replaced by a generation that has learned, from watching what happened to their predecessors, that the only way to survive is not to fight.

Funding Mechanisms that Nurture Activism

Large sections of the arts sector operate within a publicly funded landscape, and with that comes an evolving set of expectations that extends beyond financial governance. Funding frameworks emphasise demonstrable public value, including meaningful community engagement, relevance to underrepresented audiences and contribution to wider social objectives. Organisations that depend on public funding quickly learn what language to use, which priorities to signal and which positions to avoid.

"We never got told not to do it. We just knew what would happen."

"You learn the language quickly if you want funding."

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[14] See for instance the Museum Association's strong promotion of co-curation https://www.museumsassociation.org/category/co-curation/ which forms a significant element of exhibition Gender Stories which opened Summer 2025 Bristol Museum & Art Gallery https://collections.bristolmuseums.org.uk/exhibitions/gender-stories/. This exhibition touring to Brighton Museum & Art Gallery and National Museums Liverpool is the result of a new touring network, Magnet, initiated by the Horniman Museums https://www.horniman.ac.uk/project/museums-and-galleries-network-for-exhibition-touring/. Both this network and Leicester University's new Trans Inclusive Culture network (https://le.ac.uk/news/2025/may/leading-museums-trans-inclusion-partnership#:~:text=News%20Search-,University%20of%20Leicester%20announces%20partnership%20supported%20by%20Art%20Fund%20with,(Credit:%20Liz%20Isles)) is funded by the Art Fund. These alliances and structures both respond to and form funding priorities.

Smaller venues are particularly vulnerable. A national institution with diversified income can, in theory, absorb the loss of one funding stream. A small literature festival that depends on a single Arts Council grant cannot. For these organisations, the perception that they might be out of step with funder expectations is existential.

It is important to note that we are not claiming that funders have embedded political orthodoxy into their funding criteria. It is more that criteria lean towards arts as social activism and - given demand on resources - some projects will be prioritised over others. This is not an unconscious mechanism but nor is it deliberate. The subtlety of this point is best seen in relation to co-curation in museums. Co-curation is standard practice and is perceived positively because it gets people involved. However co-curation can also easily morph into group think. It can create artificial 'community voices' and invite activists into the museum. It is not the criteria itself that pushes a particular ideology, influencing programme decisions. Rather the criteria incentivises the involvement of activists thereby incentivising activism itself[14].

Struggling Boards

The venue evidence reveals boards that are consistently underprepared for the crises they face. They lack crisis training, legal knowledge and the confidence to make decisions when faced with political pressure and the threat of boycotts. When controversy arrives, boards often default to reputational containment rather than principled decision-making[15].

"The board wanted it to go away, not to be understood."

Several venue cases document boards commissioning reviews structured to avoid findings of fault, deferring responsibility rather than exercising it, and prioritising short-term reputation over long-term institutional integrity. In multiple cases, senior leaders resigned or left the sector entirely. The talent drain is real: experienced leaders who have the knowledge and confidence to

resist boycott pressure are being driven out, replaced by those who have learned that compliance is the only viable strategy. The boycott logic has done generational damage, creating a leaders' selection process in which attunement to compliance and appeasement are desirable features and where those with integrity in the face of boycott logic are seen as foolish or out of step.

EDI and Values Frameworks as Weapons

EDI frameworks can create institutional and organisational vulnerability. Across the venue data we heard accounts of complaints about Jewish or gender-critical artists or their work being framed as diversity issues. This framing can trigger formal processes that would not necessarily be activated by a complaint presented as a political objection. In some cases, political demands are articulated in the language of EDI, giving access to institutional procedures designed to treat such claims as serious matters. Those procedures are often not well equipped to distinguish between allegations of discrimination and disputes rooted in political disagreement.

So far we have sought to characterise the impact of boycott logic as creating an atmosphere of generalised fear and anxiety that drives anticipatory risk and fear-based decisions. However, our evidence also shows venues and leaders can be far more explicit in their use of boycotting logic.

The proliferation of "values" and "ethical" frameworks has created a new explicit institutional embracing of boycotts. Organisations that adopt

ethical sponsorship policies or EDI frameworks find that these instruments are weaponised by campaigns that demand ever-more-expansive definitions of what falls outside the ethical boundary. Each expansion narrows the pool of available sponsors, increases financial precarity and makes the organisation more vulnerable to the next round of demands. It is worth taking a close look at where the logic of boycott has the potential to end up.

Watershed: A Case Study in "Values-Led" Arts Management

Watershed, a Bristol arts venue, describes itself as a "value-driven venue" that reserves the right to refuse partnerships or bookings at its own discretion. In November 2025, its CEO hosted a conference called "Meeting the Moment"[16] for senior arts leaders and trustees, framed around apocalyptic concerns including "the extreme right taking to the streets," "genocide across the world," and the "EHRC ruling around toilet provision". The conference provided "practical tools" including training from HOPE not hate on conducting "difficult conversations" to "counter hateful narratives."

The CEO presented four "Watershed Moments" as institutional achievements: leading an open letter[17] demanding the EHRC withdraw guidance following the Supreme Court ruling on single-sex spaces; effectively supporting protests outside the venue against a Mayoral hustings debate, while allowing staff to refuse to work[18]; deliberately scheduling a film screening featuring Palestine Action before the group was proscribed to avoid prosecution risk[19]; and signing the Bristol Apartheid Free Zone pledge committing not to sell Israeli products[20]. Each decision was framed as "values-driven" providing a procedural veneer of legitimacy to

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[15] See for instance the speed at authors' boycott, initiated by Fossil Free Books, led to Baillie Gifford's sponsorship withdrawal from 9 literary festivals following https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/jun/06/baillie-gifford-cancels-all-remaining-sponsorships-of-literary-festivals

[16] See https://www.watershed.co.uk/news/standing-what-you-believe-announcing-meeting-moment-conference?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=23353130580&gbraid=0AAAAADkkfBDlRHV_5VWQ_JkSHmhJTDnpM&gclid=Cj0KCQiAhaHMBhD2ARIsAPAU_D5N7Zhq-VmCGwAhFejDiE6U93c6Mcfq0xUCu3xRb6Be_glxGViOlv4aArcxEALw_wcB

[17] See https://airtable.com/appJjTpDvAuSGrX37/pagdNlgDLD38RXbIt/form

[18] See https://www.watershed.co.uk/articles/note-watershed-ceo-weca-mayoral-transport-hustings

[19] See https://tokillawarmachine.com/

[20] See https://www.watershed.co.uk/news/watershed-signs-bristol-apartheid-free-zone-pledge/

actions that raise serious questions about equal treatment.

A delegate at the conference reported that a senior staff member articulated in her speech the venue's philosophy: "Say goodbye to people who police your values." This represents a significant departure from the traditional arts charity model - rather than impartially welcoming diverse perspectives and facilitating artistic exchange across difference, the organisation explicitly excludes those who do not share its political and ideological framework.

When values-led organisations, that have embraced the logic of boycott, dominate the sector, artistic freedom is diminished, not through state censorship but through organisational self-definition, with political gatekeeping determining who can speak, what can be shown and which viewpoints are legitimate.

The Special Vulnerability of Small Organisations

One set of responses was from small festivals, independent comedy clubs and arts bodies, and it reveals that the same boycott dynamics operate but do so much more quickly and with a far greater impact. Decisions are taken by a handful of individuals, sometimes by one person alone. There are no written freedom of expression policies, no access to legal advice, no formal risk assessment processes, no trained boards.

"I did not know what the law was. I only knew what would hurt us."

"I was making it up as I went along."

Small venues and organisations rely on informal labour, goodwill and personal relationships. If two volunteers walk out, a festival can potentially collapse. If a key staff member raises a grievance, the organisation may lack the HR capacity, legal knowledge or financial reserves to manage the process. The rational response is to comply. And because these organisations are embedded in local communities where everyone knows everyone, the reputational costs of controversy are amplified and inescapable.

One small literature festival provides a rare positive example. Faced with external pressure and internal anxiety, its leadership chose to hold the line, communicate clearly and publicly, and refuse to allow intimidation to determine programming decisions. The result was difficult but stabilising: the festival retained its integrity, signalled confidence to its community and ultimately emerged stronger. By contrast, a small arts organisation in a rural location illustrates the more common outcome. Embedded in a tight local ecosystem where reputational damage is inescapable, dependent on funders, staff and community goodwill and without access to specialist advice, the organisation felt it had no choice but to comply, soften decisions and avoid confrontation. This was not driven by ideological agreement, but by fear of collapse. Together, these cases show that for small organisations the issue is not values, but capacity: where leadership, clarity and collective backing exist, resistance is possible; where they do not, compliance becomes the rational, if damaging, response.

In small venues, the antisemitism documented in larger institutions is compounded by isolation. A small festival director who recognises that avoiding Jewish-themed programming may be discriminatory may have nobody to consult, no legal framework to rely on and no peer network to validate the decision to proceed. The path of least resistance is avoidance - and avoidance, in this context, is exclusion.

06.
Agents, Managers and Promoters

Agents, managers and promoters occupy the most exposed and least understood position in the boycott crisis. They are the connective tissue of the arts - the people who link artists to venues, negotiate deals, plan tours, manage reputations, and as our data shows, absorb risk on behalf of everyone else. In the boycott crisis, they have become the sector's primary shock absorbers: expected to manage pressure from all directions while having minimal protection themselves.

6. Agents, Managers and Promoters

The survey data and interviews tell the same stories which we have reported here about artists and venues, but from a very different angle. Agents, managers and promoters (what we are calling the 'intermediaries') are central to boycott dynamics but structurally unsupported. They are increasingly forced into roles that compromise their professional integrity and ultimately can undermine the economic sustainability of the sector. For those who represent Jewish or Israeli artists, the crisis has added a dimension that many describe as morally intolerable: they have become the people who mediate antisemitism, translating institutional discrimination into professional advice.

How it Happens

Intermediaries are frequently the first to know that trouble is coming. They receive the early warnings, the informal signals, the off-record phone calls that indicate an artist or project has become "difficult." They are expected to manage the fallout so that it does not become public, to find solutions that protect everyone, and to absorb the costs when solutions cannot be found.

"The pressure doesn't just hit the artist. It hits everyone around them."

The data provided by agents, managers and promoters reveals an important feature of boycott pressure. It moves laterally through the ecosystem, targeting promoters, touring partners and labels rather than artists alone. In one documented case, a venue verbally warned a promoter that they would "never work with them again" if particular shows were not withdrawn. The warning was not recorded in writing. Had it been documented, it could have constituted evidence of interference with contractual relations. Because it was conveyed informally, the promoter had no practical route to legal remedy.

The performances in question were the result of long-term cross-cultural collaboration involving artists from the Middle East. The pressure did not concern the artistic content of the work. It focused on the perceived identity and associations of one collaborator. Years of collaborative artistic development were effectively halted through informal political pressure rather than artistic assessment.

"It wasn't about the music. It was about who people thought the artists were."

This pattern - informal coercion replacing formal exclusion - runs through all the intermediary evidence. Agents report that threats to future working relationships are made verbally. Cancellations are framed as safety decisions without specific threats being identified. Labels and partners choose reputational separation rather than principled engagement, adjusting marketing strategies to distance projects from individuals without formal communication.

"Nothing is put in writing, which makes it very hard to challenge."

The absence of a paper trail allows coercion to operate below the threshold of legal accountability while producing outcomes that are every bit as damaging as formal exclusion. Intermediaries describe feeling trapped between a system that penalises them and the absence of any mechanism through which to push back.

"You're left feeling complicit in your own isolation."

What it Costs - Financial Cascade

Unlike venues, intermediaries share a similar fate to that of the artists they represent and often bear direct financial loss: lost commission, sunk costs, unrecoverable expenses. In one promoter case study, cancelled tour dates required management to continue paying musicians and crew, absorbing significant losses despite no fault on their part.

"It doesn't just cancel a show. It collapses momentum."

The financial harm cascades. A cancelled tour does not simply remove one date from a schedule. It damages relationships with venues across multiple territories and even nations, creating uncertainty that affects future planning. The hidden economic damage - the tours not booked, the deals not pursued, the relationships not developed because the intermediary has learned that certain artists or certain territories are too risky - is incalculable and almost entirely invisible.

Mediating Antisemitism

While intermediaries have had to deal with boycotts of gender-critical artists, at present there is a huge toll being paid by intermediaries who represent Jewish or Israeli artists. The antisemitism that runs through the wider boycotting crisis arrives at the intermediary's desk as a practical problem: a venue that is anxious about hosting a Jewish artist, a festival that does not want to be seen programming Israeli work, a region or state where touring has become untenable because of the artists' identity.

The intermediary's job is to solve this problem. The solution, overwhelmingly, is to advise concealment, avoidance and silence. Agents describe thinking twice about how visible a Jewish artist can be. They describe steering artists away from certain venues, festivals or regions. The boycott logic does its work most effectively when it drives intermediaries to pre-emptively withdraw from opportunities where they anticipate venue reluctance, sparing the artist the rejection by never putting them forward in the first place.

"I think twice now about how visible a Jewish artist can be, which is something I never expected to be doing."

"I am trying to protect my clients, but it feels wrong that identity is part of the calculation."

This places the intermediary in the position of mediating antisemitism (as well as hostility against gender-critical artists) on behalf of institutions, often without naming it as such. They absorb the discrimination, convert it into professional counsel, and pass it on to their clients as pragmatism. The intermediary has little choice but to become complicit in the exclusion they recognise as wrong, because the alternative - refusing to advise caution - would expose their client to greater harm. It is an impossible position, and many describe the moral strain in stark terms.

Self-censorship as Professional Survival

The broader pattern is that self-censorship has become a professional service. Agents advise artists to avoid public comment, withdraw from certain territories or regions, delay or abandon projects, and remain invisible during periods of controversy. They do this not because they believe it is right, but because they have concluded it is the only way to protect their clients. The agent who advises silence knows that the advice is unjust. But the agent who refuses to advise silence risks their client's career.

"You end up advising people to stay quiet, even when you don't agree with it."

"I spend more time managing political risk than developing careers."

One agent described the cancellation of shows after pressure was applied because "one member of a band was 'complicit' with Israel". The pressure came from "BDS associated organisations", after which venues cancelled on "safety grounds", despite the agent stating that "there really wasn't a security risk". The agent reported financial loss, reputational damage and significant time spent managing fallout, concluding that "the BDS movement got what they wanted, the cancelling of shows". In a related incident, the circulation of a private industry communication triggered significant internal pressure within an organisation. This resulted in a formal internal apology, the publication of a values statement and a series of internal meetings intended to stabilise the situation. The account illustrates how perceived Jewish or Israel-linked association was treated as sufficient grounds for withdrawal and reputational containment, even in the absence of substantiated risk.

In another agent account, pressure originated after a programmer at another festival made a public statement about the agent's position on "gender ideology as expressed on X". This escalated rapidly: "individual filmmakers and groups of filmmakers became involved". Media coverage followed, and pressure spread to the festival committee, team members and partner organisations. The agent described the risk as reputational, with economic consequences, and noted that the situation became so destabilising that "as a defensive measure" the organisation decided to bring forward the announcement that the next edition of the festival "would be the final one". The agent's narrative makes clear that informal ideological pressure, rather than any possible breach of law or policy, was sufficient to make continuation untenable.

These two cases demonstrate a shared mechanism rather than isolated controversies. In both, agents respond to identity or belief-based pressure by advising withdrawal, silence or termination of activity, not because they believe the pressure is justified, but because they judge resistance to be professionally catastrophic. In one case, Jewish identity or perceived association with Israel is treated as an inherent reputational risk. In the other, a privately held, protected belief relating to gender becomes grounds for informal sanction. The agent's role in both cases shifts from advocacy to risk containment, illustrating how self-censorship has become a risk-management service delivered under duress.

Why Intermediaries Cannot Resist Isolation and the Absence of Support

Within the sector, intermediaries can be cut off and unprotected. Legal advice is expensive and even potentially risky. Peer support has to be informal and by nature can be inconsistent. There is no trade body advising how to manage boycott pressure, no shared standards for what constitutes acceptable coercion, no established route to legal help at the point of crisis.

"You're on your own when this happens."

"There is no guidance when pressure hits."

The promoter examples discussed above illustrate this starkly. Legal challenge was not pursued, not because it was unwarranted, but because there was too much else happening and no clear route to help. The intermediary was managing a live crisis across multiple territories, with artists to protect, crews to pay, and relationships to salvage. Initiating legal proceedings in that context was simply not realistic.

The Impossible Structural Position

The isolation is compounded by the intermediary's position in the ecology. They sit between artists who need protection and venues that are capitulating. They are expected to manage both sides without antagonising either. To challenge a venue's decision is to risk the future relationship. To fail to challenge it is to fail the artist. There is no position from which they can act without cost.

Challenging a venue's reluctance to host a Jewish or gender-critical artist means naming the antisemitism or possible unlawful belief discrimination that the venue does not want named. It means converting an unspoken anxiety into an explicit accusation - and in the current climate, the accusation of antisemitism is treated not as a legitimate concern but as a hostile act - likewise the accusation of possibly unlawful belief discrimination on the basis of gender-critical views of the artist. The end result? The intermediary who names the problem risks being treated as the problem.

The Ecosystem Effect

What the intermediary evidence makes visible is something that the artist and venue evidence can only imply: boycott pressure does not operate on individuals or institutions in isolation. It operates on the ecosystem. When a venue capitulates, the consequences travel outward through intermediaries to artists, to other venues, to funders and sponsors, to audiences. When an artist is targeted, the consequences cascade through their agent to every venue considering booking them, every sponsor considering supporting them, every collaborator weighing the risk of association.

Intermediaries are the transmission mechanism. They are the people through whom pressure propagates and through whom consequences cascade. This is why evidence from intermediaries is central to understanding the boycott crisis as a system rather than a series of isolated incidents. The crisis is not a collection of individual cancellations. It is a network effect, operating through exactly the connective tissue that intermediaries provide. The signal of risk and boycott courses through informal sector networks to programmers and commissioners, through the ambient culture of risk-avoidance to every part of the sector that might otherwise have offered support. The exclusion of the artist or art is not local. It is systemic. Because it operates through informal channels rather than formal decisions, it is almost impossible to trace, to evidence or to challenge.

7. What Works and What Doesn't

The Failure of Appeasement

The evidence suggests that appeasement rarely resolves the underlying pressure. Institutions that capitulate to boycott pressure do not purchase peace. They purchase temporary quiet at the cost of permanent vulnerability.

Each concession establishes a precedent. Each cancelled event signals that cancellation is possible. Each statement of political alignment invites scrutiny of whether the alignment is sufficiently pure. The institution that gives in to one demand finds itself facing the next demand with less credibility, less authority and less room to manoeuvre.

In multiple documented cases, institutions that issued statements, cancelled events, or dropped artists in response to pressure found themselves targeted again within months. The appetite of boycott campaigns is not satisfied by concession. It is fed by it. The institution that demonstrates it can be moved will be moved again.

Worse, appeasement demoralises those within institutions who might otherwise resist. Staff who believe their organisation stands for something discover it stands for nothing except avoiding trouble. Leaders who might show courage discover their boards will not support them. The institutional culture shifts from principled decision-making to permanent anxiety management.

"We thought giving in would make it stop. It made it worse."

"Once you show you can be pushed, everyone pushes."

The Evidence for Resistance

The scant counter-evidence is clear: when institutions hold their ground, the predicted catastrophe frequently fails to materialise. Protests do not appear. Audiences do. The community that the institution feared to offend turns out to be smaller, less organised, and less committed than the community that wanted the event to proceed.

One festival director described receiving an open letter calling for the cancellation of a speaker. The letter carried around seventy signatures, roughly half from individuals outside the local area. After internal discussion, the director issued a brief statement confirming that the festival would proceed in line with its stated commitment to hosting a range of viewpoints. The events went ahead. Attendance was steady. While there was online criticism, there was no organised protest on site and no disruption to the programme.

A comedy venue facing internal staff objections to a controversial performer chose not to cancel the booking. Instead, management communicated a clear protocol: staff who felt unable to work the event could opt out without penalty, but the performance itself would proceed. In the end, no formal walkout occurred. The show sold out as scheduled. Subsequent complaints from staff who had chosen to attend were addressed by reference to the voluntary nature of participation and the venue's existing policies.

In another case, a theatre that had become the focus of boycott pressure sought police advice. The police indicated that they had identified no specific or credible threat to the venue, though they could not guarantee officer deployment due to limited resources. The event proceeded with proportionate security measures in place. There was no protest outside the building and the audience attended as planned.

What these cases share is clarity: a clearly articulated purpose, a defined process for decision-making, and a refusal to depart from established procedures in the absence of proportionate grounds. In each instance, the outcome was shaped less by counter-argument than by institutional coherence. The organisations were able to proceed because they were clear about their remit and consistent in applying it.

What Successful Resistance Requires

The evidence suggests that resilience to boycott pressure is more likely where certain conditions are in place.

First, clarity of purpose: a clearly articulated statement of what the organisation exists to do, distinct from the political or social positions it may hold, against which programming decisions can be assessed. Organisations that have defined their remit are better able to explain and justify decisions when challenged. Where purpose has not been clearly articulated, responses to pressure are more likely to be reactive.

Second, legal literacy: a working understanding of equality law, contractual obligations and the distinction between genuine safeguarding concerns and political demands framed in safeguarding language. Organisations that understand the legal framework are better positioned to distinguish between obligations and external pressure. Without that understanding, decision-making can become driven by uncertainty.

Third, governance capacity: leadership and boards that are prepared for controversy, understand their fiduciary responsibilities and are able to support executive decision-making under scrutiny. Where governance structures lack confidence or clarity, organisations are more vulnerable to informal vetoes and reputational anxiety.

Fourth, collective support: connection to peer organisations facing similar pressures, access to shared expertise and the knowledge that difficult decisions are not being made in isolation. Institutions that feel isolated are more likely to take defensive decisions. Those embedded in supportive networks are better able to act consistently and proportionately.

08.
The Case for Action: Why Leadership Matters

The dynamics documented in this report are unlikely to dissipate on their own. The evidence suggests that boycott pressure is sustained by structural features of the current arts ecosystem: the asymmetry between organised pressure and fragmented response, the rational incentives for silence, and the vulnerability of institutions whose legitimacy depends on funding, reputation, and internal cohesion. Left unaddressed, these dynamics are likely to continue, and in some areas to intensify.

The costs are already visible. Artists report exclusion from professional opportunities on the basis of identity or belief. Work is withdrawn, delayed, or altered before it reaches audiences. Areas of cultural inquiry become quietly off-limits. The range of perspectives available to the public narrows. At the same time, organisations that sincerely value inclusion struggle to reconcile those commitments with practices that result in exclusion, revealing a growing tension between stated values and lived outcomes.

There is also a longer-term risk. Many artists are learning that silence is the safest strategy. Many leaders are learning that compliance appears to be the least damaging option. Over time, this reshapes who remains in the sector, who enters it, and what kinds of work are imagined as possible. The cumulative effect is not a single crisis, but a gradual thinning of cultural life.

Importantly, this is not a problem that can be solved by individual acts of courage alone. Artists who speak out without institutional backing are exposed to disproportionate damage. Organisations that resist pressure in isolation face significant risk. Leaders who act on principle require governance structures that can support them through controversy rather than retreat from it.

What the evidence points toward is the need for systemic responses that change incentives and expectations across the sector.

Governance and Leadership

Boards and leaders now operate in an environment that demands different forms of preparedness than in the past. Scenario planning, legal literacy and clear protocols for decision-making under pressure are no longer optional. Reputational management, while important, cannot substitute for governance that supports leaders when principled decisions are challenged.

Attention must also be given to board composition. Legal expertise, communications experience, and the capacity to make decisions under sustained pressure are increasingly essential. Without these capabilities, even well-intentioned boards may struggle to fulfil their responsibilities.

Clear statements of artistic purpose and commitment to freedom of expression can also play a stabilising role. When organisations are explicit about why they exist and how programming decisions are made, leaders are better equipped to respond proportionately and consistently when pressure arises.

Legal Clarity

The research highlights widespread uncertainty about the law. Many organisations are unclear about equality protections, contractual obligations and the legal thresholds for cancellation or exclusion. This uncertainty creates a vacuum that is readily filled by fear.

Accessible, practical legal guidance would help shift the balance. Organisations that understand their obligations are better positioned to act with confidence and consistency. Artists and intermediaries need access to advice at the moment pressure emerges, not after decisions have already been taken and precedents set.

Collective Capacity

Finally, the evidence suggests that isolation is a key driver of capitulation. Organisations comply because they feel alone. Artists withdraw because they feel exposed. Intermediaries advise silence because they see no collective protection.

Greater coordination across the sector could change this calculus. Networks that share information, resources, and support would reduce the sense that any one organisation or individual must face pressure alone. Cross-sector collaboration - spanning publishing, theatre, music, comedy, visual arts and festivals - would strengthen the capacity to respond thoughtfully rather than reactively.

The aim of this report is not to assign blame, but to illuminate patterns that have become normalised and to open space for informed, collective leadership. The choices facing the arts sector are difficult, but they are not predetermined. With clarity, coordination, and support, different outcomes remain possible.

09.
The Art Beyond Boycott Toolkit

Accompanying this report is a practical toolkit designed for artists, venues and intermediaries who are navigating boycott pressure in real time. It does not offer abstract principles alone, but structured guidance drawn from the evidence documented here: how to assess risk proportionately, how to distinguish political pressure from legal obligation, how to protect both artistic mission and institutional integrity, and how to avoid decisions made in fear. The patterns described in this report are serious, but they are not irreversible. The sector retains agency. With clarity of purpose, legal understanding and collective support, it is possible to respond differently. The aim is not to eliminate disagreement or political conviction from cultural life, but to ensure that disagreement does not become coercion and that artistic freedom is not quietly surrendered through isolation and uncertainty.

**Scan QR Code for
toolkit.freedominthearts.com/**

Acknowledgements

Disclaimer Statement

This report draws on qualitative and survey data
collected between October and December 2025.
The findings and interpretations are those of the
authors and are offered in good faith on the basis
of the evidence available at the time of publication;
they do not constitute legal advice.

Who We Are

Freedom in the Arts (FITA) was founded in October 2023 by Rosie Kay, an award-winning choreographer, and Denise Fahmy, a seasoned arts professional. Both founders have firsthand experience navigating the challenges of today's increasingly censored arts landscape. FITA emerged as a response to these challenges, aiming to safeguard artistic freedom and ensure a thriving, fearless arts sector.

Our Mission

Freedom in the Arts champions artistic freedom as a fundamental pillar of democracy and cultural innovation. We believe the arts must be a space for open dialogue, bold creativity and diverse perspectives. By confronting censorship, supporting artists, and influencing policy, we aim to restore an environment where creative expression can flourish without fear, ensuring the arts continue to inspire and challenge society for generations to come.

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