Critically (In) effective?
Ai Weiwei on the European Refugee Crisis

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§1 The Refugee Crisis in the Artistic Sphere

Since 2015, Europe has entered into a full-fledged refugee crisis with more than a million migrants seeking asylum. Their endeavours are not without risk. The International Organization for Migration estimates that more than 5000 people have died in their attempts to reach Europe (IOM 2016). Although these numbers are staggering to say the least, it was the photo of a Syrian toddler named Alan Kurdi, who washed ashore in September 2015, which triggered international outrage. The emblematic image of his lifeless body on a Turkish beach threw a global spotlight on the refugee crisis and ignited a public debate on the plight of refugees. Crises like these do not only affect governmental and legislative arrangements. They often find their way into the artistic sphere, where artists try to challenge a dominant discourse and open up productive spaces for critical awareness and alternative representations (Giudice and Giubilaro 2015). If we seek to reconstruct political reality, artistic interventions are of paramount importance. It is part and parcel of the politics of aesthetics, whereby artistic practices have the potential to 'rethink possibility, impossibility, contingency and all the modalities of the probable that lie between', giving these practices both critical and political purchase (Rancière as cited in Downey 2009, 125).

In the case of the European refugee crisis, there is one artist in particular who comes to mind. His name is Ai Weiwei, a Chinese dissident and activist whose work often focuses on the infringement of human rights and freedom of expression. In January 2016, Ai set up a studio on the Greek island of Lesbos, where he replicated the image of the drowned toddler by laying face-down on one of its pebbled beaches. Although Ai is often praised for his ability to reconcile his artistic practice with his social activism, this particular photo has been met with some serious criticisms (e.g., Ratnam 2016; Steadman 2016).

Such criticisms raise several questions. Is Ai trying to reimagine a political reality? Has he opened up a space for critical thought and resistance? Or has he gone too far in emulating this tragedy? Through an analysis of the photograph, the following discussion seeks to analyse the critical effectiveness of Ai's replication of the Alan Kurdi photo.

§2 The Politics of Aesthetics, Ethical Engagement and Critical Imagination

In *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), the French philosopher Jacques Rancière claims that the turn of the twenty-first century saw a renewed faith in the political capacity of art. Rancière argues that, similar to politics, art has the capacity to steer into a direction of dissensus. To fully understand the politics of aesthetics, note that Rancière distinguishes between three different regimes of art. Only one, the aesthetic regime, is suited to bring forth political art. It forgoes the two preceding regimes (i.e. ethical and representative), inducing an aesthetic rupture 'between the intention of the artist and the outcome on the spectator's behaviour' (Corcoran 2010, 19). The loss of this cause-effect relationship lies at the heart of the aesthetic regime. It results in a production of dissensus 'precisely because they [the artworks] neither give lessons nor have any destination' (Rancière 2010, 140).

This strategy of rupturing the given relations between things and meanings – thereby causing dissensus - also prompts a paradox. With the intention to make the invisible visible, or to question the self-evidence of the visible, critical art 'cannot know or anticipate the effects that this strategy of subversion may or may not have on the forms of political subjectivation' (Corcoran 2010, 19). So, although critical art might aim to produce forms of political awareness and mobilization, its real forms of effectiveness can never be calculated.

In modern democracies, state power and the power of wealth have combined their forces to reduce political space (Rancière 2004). So where does that leave critical art? Rancière (2010, 145) alleges that the 'shrinking of political space has conferred a substitutive value on artistic practice', causing art to position itself as a space 'of refuge for dissensual practice.' In a similar fashion, Anthony Downey (2009, 125) speaks of a 'privileged role' bestowed upon art to unveil 'that which modernity has excluded, abandoned and repressed.'

Thus, given the paradoxical nature of critical art, it remains difficult to foresee its potential societal and political impact. In spite of this paradox, the artwork must aim to create dissensus to qualify as critical art, which may open up a space that has the potential for critical thought. The aforementioned privileged role of contemporary art strengthens the political influence of critical art. It facilitates artistic practices with the stature that is needed to lay bare 'the ambivalent margins and dissonances that underwrite modern life' (ibid.).

That being said, we must bear in mind that creative resistance alone will not suffice to change the political status quo. Equally important is the artist's ability to imagine alternative meanings, visions and representations of the dominant narrative. Here, one could draw a parallel with Jacques Derrida's theory on deconstruction. As he explains in *Positions*, the first task of deconstruction is to 'overturn the hierarchy at any given moment' (Derrida 1981, 41). Only by pointing out 'the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition', we are able to reveal the existence of the binary, thereby undermining previously fixed categories of understanding (ibid.). But if deconstruction only inverts binary hierarchies by substituting the

dominant for the subordinate, then any form of intervention would simply reside 'within the closed fields of these oppositions', allowing the same structural conditions to prevail (ibid.). To move beyond this binary thinking, Derrida argued that the second task of deconstruction is 'to step outside of the oppositions [and] to remain in search of new meanings' (Turner 2016). If creative resistance aims to invalidate a dominant narrative, critical imagination is imperative to conceive alternative narratives. Hence the reason why both are important in asserting the effectiveness of critical art.

Critical imagination and creative resistance can be galvanised when the artwork employs 'a visuality that functions like a sense of touch', also known as "haptic visuality" (Marks as cited in Ball 2012, 179). As Anna Ball (2012) asserts, haptic visuality is closely related to intimacy and ethics. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ball argues that ethical engagement in itself is not futile, but something always remains secretive (Spivak as cited in Ball 2012, 180). This "secret", according to Ball, is a personal experience that cannot be fully passed on to the "other". However, the unattainability of total intimacy of experience does make engagement with the "other" possible at an ethical level, since "the acknowledgment of distance and difference prevents either individual involved in intimate exchange from assuming interpretative control within the encounter …" (ibid.). This shows that ethical engagement and impossible intimacy go hand in hand.

In sum, critical art aims to create dissensus through creative resistance and critical imagination. Being involved with ethical engagement, the artwork has the capacity to 'offer a level of intimate empathy that cannot be derived from political discourse' (Ball 2012, 192). Still, we must keep in mind that the usage of ethical engagement and visual intimacy does not come without risk. If the viewer or the artist fails to respect 'that which evades their experiential grasp' and as such impugns 'the complex distances and differences that accompany subject position', this will most likely lead to a desire 'to "claim" the experience of the "other" in a way 'that can never be ethical' (Ball 2012, 193).

§3 On Ai Weiwei's Political Activism and his Fake Death

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 as the son of the appraised poet and alleged "rightist" Ai Qing.[1] As a Chinese artist who spends most of his time abroad, he soon recognized 'an inherent conflict between the agenda of organisations recognised by the [Chinese] State and truly independent art' (Tancock 2015, 39). He further argued that when artists agree to comply with the State's agenda, they inevitably forfeit their independence. Ai therefore envisions the following role for artists and their artistic practices:

> In a rational society the artist should play the role of a virus, like a computer virus. A very small design is capable of effecting change throughout the entire rational world, and this change brings about chaos, so it is actually a process of eliciting the vigilance of the

rational world. (Ai as cited Tancock 2015, 39)

Ai has been able to effectuate his definition of artistic practices through his outspokenness on issues surrounding human rights and freedom of speech, often targeting the Chinese State. His relentless criticism of the Chinese Government and its authoritarian regime led to several notorious clashes with the Chinese authorities.

In December 2015, Ai travelled to Lesbos after accepting an invitation from the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens to stage an exhibition. Upon his arrival, Ai faced what he described as 'the biggest, most shameful humanitarian crisis since the Second World War' (ibid.). He decided set up a studio in Lesbos to work on several projects concerning the refugee crisis. One of these projects was the replication the image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who drowned off the coast of Turkey in September 2015 (figure 1). Some praised the image for its political purchase, arguing that it is 'an iconic image' involving 'an incredibly important artist like Ai Weiwei' (Angus as cited in Lakshmi 2016). Others described it as 'an opportunist move to hitchhike onto a current tragedy' (Davies as cited in Steadman 2016).

Figure 1. Reprinted from [Ai Weiwei posing as Alan Kurdi] (2016), by Rohit Chawla. Copyright 2016 by India Today. Retrieved on May 30, 2016, from http://edition.cnn. com/2016/02/01/arts/ai-weiwei-alan-kurdi-syria/

In Ai's attempt to function as a "virus" and effectuate change, we could argue that this image exemplifies the paradox of political art. If we assume that Ai created this image with good intentions, the criticism it received reveals how the effectiveness of political art cannot be anticipated and as a consequence, might even cause harm to a worthy cause. That being

said, with the residual decline of political space, the dissensual capacity of politics has been transferred to critical artistic practices. Again, we see this attitude towards art being reiterated in Ai's definition of the role of artist, who is supposed to bring about chaos and elicit the vigilance of the rational world (Ai as cited Tancock 2015). But do his good intentions render the Ai-as-Alan image as something praiseworthy and deserving of the term "critical art"?

Seeing Ai's image as a critical artwork implicates a form of creative resistance to the dominant representation concerning the crisis. Recently, Ai has addressed the EU-Turkey refugee agreement as illegal and immoral (Ai as cited in Tagaris 2016). Framed in this context, Ai may have replicated the image to highlight that which has been repressed by the EU. He is intimately aware of the privileged role of contemporary art, which strengthens its political influence, but he would do well to remember that this power is to be handled with caution. Nonetheless, the image fails to deliver on the level of critical imagination. His replication of Alan Kurdi's photo is purely mimetic and does not imagine alternative visions of the dominant narrative. Consequently, this image will never be able to intervene in the field of oppositions, consisting of the hegemonic EU and the subordinate refugees which the image aims to criticize. Both the artist and the artwork remain stuck in the closed fields of these oppositions.

Simply mimicking a tragic event and the situation of the subordinate will not open up a new space for critical thought. It is impossible for Ai to capture or even replicate the personal experience of Alan Kurdi, let alone all refugees. In light of ethical engagement and impossible intimacy, such an experience can never be passed on to an "other". This is arguably the kernel of the criticisms Ai received about the image. Disavowing 'the complex distances and differences that accompany subject position', Ai has claimed the experience of Alan Kurdi in a way 'that can never be ethical' (Ball 2012, 193). Since Ai failed to recognize his distance from the crisis as a privileged point of view, this image can, at best, be characterized as critically ineffective.

§4 The Ai-as-Alan Image: Critically (In) effective?

Using several theories on the politics of aesthetics, ethical engagement and the transformative power of critical imagination and creative resistance, this paper set out to assess the critical effectiveness of Ai Weiwei's replication of Alan Kurdi's photo. Considering Ai's preoccupation with human rights and free speech issues, most likely instigated by his own experience as the son of an alleged "rightist", his interest in highlighting the plight of the refugees is not atypical for his body of work. With the Ai-as-Alan image, he undoubtedly wished to raise concern about the fate of those thousands of refugees who have risked their lives in their attempts to reach Europe. Recently, Ai has made several critical remarks concerning the EU-Turkey refugee deal. This would imply that he replicated the Alan Kurdi photo as a form of creative resistance directed at the dominant representation of the refugee crisis. But if we abandon the realm

of intention, the question remains why Ai chose to imitate this photograph. If he was trying to render the invisible visible, then mimicking a viral image was bound to fail from its inception. Doing so nonetheless, the image fell short on the level of critical imagination and, as a consequence, contributed next to nothing to the public debate on the refugee crisis. We might even argue that the only thing it contributed to has been Ai Weiwei's flourishing career.

Ai did not give a human face to Alan, nor did he give a human face to the refugee crisis. Reflecting on the ethical engagement of the Ai-as-Alan image, Ai disregarded his distance from the personal experience of Alan Kurdi and instead tried to claim it as his own. Mimicking the boy's death can only be described as an unethical artistic attempt to represent something which perhaps defies any form of representation, leaving the Ai-as-Alan image critically ineffective.

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Notes

1   "Rightists" were considered to be intellectuals who opposed collectivization.