



Ai Weiwei's *Laundromat* (2016) as currently exhibited at the National Gallery in Prague (Trade Fair Palace). Photo: Giorgio Strafella, 14 April 2017.

Ai Weiwei's #Refugees

A Transcultural and Transmedia Journey

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At least 5,079 people died in the Mediterranean Sea during 2016 while attempting to reach Europe's shores (International Organisation for Migration 2017). While many Europeans have responded to the struggle of the refugees and other migrants from the Middle East and Africa with either fear or indifference (Poushter 2016; Dearden 2017), a Chinese *artiste engagé* based in Berlin has employed installations, documentary filmmaking, as well as a sizeable social media presence to try and sensitise the West to this on-going tragedy (Sierzputowski 2016). Ai Weiwei

represents one of the most influential figures in the global art scene and his exhibitions attract hundreds of thousands of visitors around the world (Royal Academy of Arts 2015)—since 2015 even in China, although his recent shows in Beijing do not feature his most explicitly 'political' artworks. His stature as an artist notwithstanding, it was Ai Weiwei's advocacy of human and civil rights in China—and the price he paid for his outspokenness, including eighty-one days in jail and a brain haemorrhage (Grube 2009b; Branigan 2011)—that established him as a celebrity dissident in the West at the end of the past decade. Ai Weiwei's most critical art and activism now address the condition of refugees, rather than Chinese society, putting European governments rather than the Chinese state 'on trial' while adding a 'transcultural' dimension to his work (Welsch 1999; Ai 2013). Nevertheless, as we shall argue in this essay, Ai Weiwei's most recent work stems from the same philosophy he has espoused throughout his career.

Clarity and Awakening

Ai Weiwei states that ‘freedom of speech, human rights are related to my early struggle, or my family’s or the whole generation’s struggle, in fighting for those basic rights’ (Bloomberg 2017). As every Chinese person who has ever heard of Ai Weiwei knows, he is the son of Ai Qing (1910–1996), a famous poet imprisoned by the Kuomintang in the 1930s for his leftist activism (Gao 2012). Despite the mutual admiration between Mao Zedong and Ai Qing, the Communist Party persecuted him between 1957 and 1978, exiling his whole family from Beijing to the western provinces. At the onset of the Reform and Opening era in 1978–1979, Ai Weiwei joined an experimental artistic movement known as the Stars Group (*xingxing*). After the authorities shut down the Stars Group exhibition in Beijing on 1 October 1979, artists, poets, and intellectuals staged street protests demanding freedom of expression and fusing artistic creativity with political activism (Lu 2014). Ai Weiwei’s early encounter with Western society also contributed to shaping his political and artistic sensibilities. While living in New York between 1981 and 1993, Ai Weiwei studied the works of artists who still greatly influence his art to this day—such as Warhol, Beuys, Duchamp, and Kosuth. During this time, he also witnessed the limits of, and the struggle for, civil rights in a Western democracy (Mao et al. 2012).

Ai Weiwei’s theoretical writings on art published since the mid-1990s reveal the roots of the disposition and method that one finds in his on-going exploration of the refugee crisis as well as in his earlier works. In a 1997 artistic manifesto entitled ‘Making Choices’ (*zuochu xuanze*), the artist wrote that art ought to embody a critical reflection of the human condition and the ‘awakened’ artist’s ‘vigilance on society and the crisis of humanity’ (Ai 1997). Here Ai Weiwei

envisages a new modernist movement founded on the liberation of humanity and the victory of the ‘humanitarian spirit’ (*rendaozhuyi jingshen*), coupling a critique of traditional definitions of art with a reflection on the existential condition that should lead to doubt, befuddlement, and finally ‘awakening’ (*juewu*). Awakened artists, he hopes, will in turn awaken the rest of society by exposing reality ‘unpolished and unvarnished’ and its intrinsic ‘terror, emptiness, and boredom.’ Rather than leading to cynicism and inaction, this stance is closely linked to Ai Weiwei’s activism in that he believes artists who do so become a ‘virus’ of change by priming society to imagine and desire change (Ai and Zeng 1995). As Ai Weiwei wrote in 2013, first ‘you need people to recognize they need change. Then, you need them to recognize how to make change. Finally, change will come’ (Ai 2013). Echoing the wider intellectual debate of those years, in the 1990s (Strafella 2017), Ai Weiwei already rejected both emulation of the West and nativism as inadequate standpoints, advocating instead civic engagement, creative independence, and the courage to affirm the value of human life.

Centred around the values of ‘clarity’ and ‘awakening’, the approach described above represents what we have termed ‘communication activism’ and permeates Ai Weiwei’s art as well as his social media communication (e.g. blogging, tweeting, etc.) (Sorace 2014). Ai Weiwei designs both so that instances of oppression and injustice hit the audience with maximum brutality and effectiveness, delivering a clear message and eliciting compassion. His art documenting and mourning the death of schoolchildren in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake reflects this methodology (e.g. *Remembering*, 2009) (Grube 2009a), as do his recent installations in Amsterdam (*# SafePassage*, 2016), Berlin (2016), Florence (*Reframe*, 2016), New York (*Laundromat*, 2016) Vienna (*F Lotus*, 2016), Copenhagen

(*Soleil Levant*, 2017), and Prague (*Law of the Journey and Laundromat*, 2017), all related to the refugee crisis.

Denouncing European Indifference

In 2015, the Chinese government returned Ai Weiwei's confiscated passport. It is hard to speculate under what conditions his passport was returned, except that he promised to inform the Chinese authorities of any upcoming exhibition (Bloomberg 2017). Even though Ai Weiwei appeared to make relatively benign statements regarding the Chinese legal system to the German press (Sorace 2015), he continues to denounce censorship in China (Hantzschel 2015a; Han 2017). It is worth remembering that Ai Weiwei has been long critical of US and European authorities, criticising civil rights abuses in the United States and showing support for Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and even Julian Assange on social media.

Shortly after Ai Weiwei relocated to Berlin looking for 'a normal life' (Hantzschel 2015b), he left on a journey around the Mediterranean Sea to document the conditions of refugees and migrants in the region. Ai Weiwei's portrayal of their lives, their odyssey, and their clashes with the European authorities have reached a global audience through various artistic mediums, a constant stream of Instagram and Twitter posts, and now also a documentary film entitled *Human Flow*. Furthermore, news media and online art magazines have conveyed images of that art to an audience much larger than the number of people who could see it in person (PBS 2016). It is worth noting that during the years when Ai Weiwei aimed his activism mainly at the Chinese Party-state (i.e. 2008–2014), news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*,

and *CNN* played a key role in establishing his celebrity status. As Chloe Preece wrote in 2015, they framed Ai Weiwei as 'a political hero/martyr' who fought for freedom of expression against a repressive regime—a narrative that provided 'reassurance of the West's ideological superiority' and thus contributed to his popularity among their audience/readership. Ai Weiwei's art and activism with regard to the plight of Middle Eastern and African refugees—a plight exacerbated by the policies of European countries, which he accuses of culpable indifference—undermines that narrative and partially recasts his media persona from one extolling the virtues of Western political systems, to one lambasting the moral paucity of their current leaders.

On the other hand, the portrayal of refugees in Ai Weiwei's photographs—and occasionally even in his artworks—tends to decontextualise its subject. Similar criticism was raised against his appropriation of the image of Alan Kurdi, a child who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to reach Greece, and his recent documentary film *Human Flow* (Mortensen 2017). Ai Weiwei's Mediterranean journey mainly reached us via a stream of snippets and images usually provided with little background information or references. In particular, portraits of refugees on Ai Weiwei's Instagram commonly lack details with regard to where they were taken, by whom, or the identity of those portrayed: Who are the men and women appearing next to Ai Weiwei in his selfies? The same questions could be asked of the photographic wallpapers in *Laundromat* and *Law of the Journey*. Moreover, on social media Ai Weiwei intertwines refugee-related fragments—photos, headlines, data, etc.—with equally fragmentary peeks into his professional and private life, including selfies and images of exhibitions, famous friends, press photographers, his son, and so on. Images of life in refugee camps alternate seamlessly

with snapshots from the glamorous life of a celebrity artist. Some of the latter could be read as portraits of the artist as a celebrity, à la Warhol, the difference being that Andy Warhol posed as politically neutral while Ai Weiwei as hyper-political. When one looks at Ai Weiwei's photo-blogging as a whole, it appears to translate his preference for clarity and transparency into a one-man reality show. Drawing on Preece's analysis (2015), one may view this as the artist's 'celebritised selves' constructing and managing authenticity as a pillar of the Ai Weiwei brand.

Not unlike Ai Weiwei's work on the Sichuan earthquake, his artistic endeavours on the refugee crisis develop a narrative that 'unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole' and where 'each medium does what it does best' (Jenkins 2010). Ai Weiwei's 'transmedia' narrative on the refugee crisis unfolds beyond the artwork across platforms, such as: Instagram, where one can pore over a first-person documentation-cum-spectacle of the journey that brought about the works of art (Debord 1983); Twitter, where one can peruse the artist's own selection of news articles on the issue and thereby appreciate its importance; interviews in newspapers and magazines in which the artist expounds his vision; YouTube videos; a documentary film; etc.

A Lost Battle?

One would expect the sophisticated web of content offered by such a 'transmedia storytelling system' to multiply the power of Ai Weiwei's communication activism (Scott 2010). But Ai Weiwei himself appears to have identified a crack in this mode of activism (Benney and Marolt 2015). The centrepiece in one of his most recent installations, *Law of the Journey*, consists of

a seventy-metre long overcrowded lifeboat. Currently displayed in Prague, the lifeboat is suspended in the hall of the Trade Fair Palace, which Nazi Germany utilised during the Second World War as an assembly point for Jewish prisoners before deporting them to the concentration camp of Terezin. The visitor enters the hall from the short side facing the front of the lifeboat. A series of quotes are arranged on the floor across the entire room in a way that forces the reader to walk backwards towards the opposite side, where the exit is located. One of the last quotes, right behind the stern of the lifeboat, is an extract from *Letters to Olga* (1988) by Vaclav Havel and it reads: 'The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.'

When addressing the scandal of the children who died when poorly built schools collapsed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Ai Weiwei's adversary was a Party-state that regarded even the *number* of said children as a sensitive piece of information. The simple yet brave act of researching their identities through a collective effort and then hanging the list of the children's names on a wall as a piece of art—as Ai Weiwei did in the *Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* (Grube 2009a)—sends a clear and shocking message that compels the viewer to demand more transparency and accountability from the Chinese government. With his work on the refugee crisis, Ai Weiwei brings a method designed and honed under that regime to a continent where most citizens have access to exhaustive data and reportage on the issue, but few demand their governments to respond to it by saving as many human lives as possible. As Ai Weiwei may have realised when he added that quote on the floor of the Trade Fair Palace, European indifference and prejudice may be at least as stubborn and difficult to defeat as the Chinese Party-state.

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