

Ai Weiwei in Florence and Amsterdam: Crossing national, artistic and ethical borders?

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Ai Weiwei is a crucial political artist in our time. Currently, his exhibitions are prominently present in two cities of the two countries where our research is based: Italy and the Netherlands. Because his artwork addresses refugee migration, we visited the exhibitions to see how his work represents current social issues related to migration. In this post that we based on our observations, we explore ways in which Ai Weiwei's art connects to our research: the study of migration in oral and visual memory.



Figure 1. Ai Weiwei, "Reframe." Taken on 28-10-2016. © Babe Project 2013-2018. All rights reserved

Let us start with the most visible and impressive work, which is in Italy. In Florence, Ai Weiwei's exhibition is located in three different locations: the Strozzi Palace, the Uffizi and the Food Market. At the Strozzi Palace, 22 orange rubber life boats hang on the early 16th century facade (the work is called "Reframe"). The round bow of the boats align beautifully with the arched windows of the old palace. The rubber

boats are a clear physical reference to the boats used by refugees to cross the Mediterranean, in life risking ways. Using the boats as decoration can be seen as, besides a symbol of border crossing, as on the border of what can be considered "ethical": utilizing the struggle of others for dramatic effect. In our research we interview people who have crossed the Mediterranean in these life threatening ways. We wonder how such a representation would be seen by the subjects who cross the Mediterranean, but perhaps they are not the aimed audience. "Reframing" brings important issues closer to residents and visitors who might feel a great distance between themselves and the cross-Mediterranean migration. The artwork crosses borders between the interior and exterior of the museum, using the outside walls instead of only the spaces inside. Using publically visible space in this "shocking"/disrupting way connects the affluent city centre, surrounded by high end fashion stores, to refugee migration, bringing what is perhaps considered distant to inhabitants and rich international tourists who walk the streets of Florence. In this way, the artwork disrupts and raises questions.

We also noted that "Reframe" is highly reminiscent of Kallilopi Lemos' "Crossroads," an artistic trilogy (2006-2009) most notable for the installation at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, which consisted of stacked boats, abandoned and subsequently collected in Greece and Turkey, that had carried migrants and refugees to European shores. Like "Reframe," this work represents a de-territorialization of European borders, or a re-configuration that brings the border zone from the periphery into the affluent center. Lemos' piece was strategically chosen to coincide with the 20-year anniversary of the Berlin Wall, reminding Europe that while one liberatory struggle was being celebrated, another ideological barrier was being constructed. Similarly, Weiwei's "Reframe" can be considered a border-crossing work in the sense that it disrupts the center-periphery binary. Moreover, being placed on the museum's outside walls, it foregoes the traditionally designated art space and in making this piece "accessible for all," it forms an institutional critique as well.



Figure 2. Kallilopi Lemos, "Crossroads." 2006-2009. Source: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/bob-chaundy/kallilopi-lemos-sculpting-b-8702374.html)

Inside the museum, Ai Weiwei's art addresses several social issues, of which some are related to his personal experiences. In his work on the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, he responds to the poor way in which the government constructed classrooms in an earthquake sensitive area: the art shows a snake made out of schoolbags to represent schoolchildren who had lost their lives (perhaps chosen here because of Italy's experiences with earthquakes). Some of his work is clearly anti-establishment in a broad and international way. In photographs he pulls his middle finger towards establishment buildings and national symbols: government buildings and buildings like the Eiffel Tower or the Colosseum. The same photographs are shown publicly inside the food market of Florence.

Ai Weiwei addresses surveillance in his country of origin and his personal experiences with the phenomenon by using surveillance in reverse: photographing and filming the officials who watch him. This work of art shows the power of visibility in contemporary times, which works in constraining, but also enabling and liberating ways when used in reverse. Weiwei seems to be aware of the panoptical ideology of our times, which operates according to surveillance as a disciplinary practice and produces subjects that are not so much coerced by law, but actively reinforce it by participating in its regulatory mechanisms (Foucault, 1977). Weiwei's obsessive documentation of himself as well as the world around him is a response to the constant disciplinary gaze that is set on him, an attempt to re-direct it and re-appropriate it through his own visual field by creating a representational overload.

A second explicit reference to migration in the Strozzi exhibition is his representation of famous “exiles”. Among his artworks are portraits of noted historical Italian/Florentinian artists and scientists, such as Dante and Galileo. By representing well-known artists and scientist who were exiled, Ai Weiwei connects himself to the topic of exile in Italian history. He bridges the location of the exhibition and its history to his own memory and to the broader topic of exile. Clearly influenced by pop art, he crosses borders between high culture to popular culture by making the portraits (humorously) out of Lego bricks. The Lego portraits of famous historical “exiles” pose questions about differences between the exile and the refugee. One seems to have more status than the other. Especially in the current socio-political climate in Europe, “refugee” is a loaded term carrying with it notions of dispossession and conflict, but not infrequently also backwardness and religious and political fundamentalism. Although both might be arguably considered travellers in a broad sense, “exile” is not so much marked by forceful relocation as it is by heroism and even cosmopolitanism, its movements less constricted. By connecting himself to famous exiles, Weiwei puts himself in “good company”, in a way he increases his own status as a dissident and exile. At the same time, he popularizes (or de-elitizes) the historical dissidents, by making them out of Lego pieces.

Similar but different bridges are crossed in the exhibition in Netherlands. In the Foam photography museum the Ai Weiwei exhibition is smaller, only covering several spaces in the museum. It is however more specifically focussed on migration. At the entrance there is a self-portrait of Ai Weiwei, standing at the sea shore, holding a board with the text: “Safe passage”. One room is used for his work on surveillance, with some of the same photo’s as in Florence. Two rooms show many photographs of refugee migration. Weiwei has covered the walls of these two rooms in almost its entirety with mobile phone pictures of people on the move: he shows photographs he made in Greece, Turkey, Germany, Libanon, Gaza, Jordan, Israel and Kenya (the work is called “Iphone Wallpaper”). The photo’s show refugees and remnants of their journeys: rubber boats, improvised camps, people wrapped in thermo blankets, faces of refugees that in most cases show hope and resilience, but also some despair. There are regularly selfies in between the photograpgs: the artist with a refugee, volunteer or professional working with the refugees.



Figure 3. Ai Weiwei, "Iphone Wallpaper" and "Surveillance Camera" in Foam Amsterdam. © Babe Project 2013-2018. All rights reserved

The amount of photos is staggering. A description reads that there are 16.500 photos on the walls. The large amount enables to perceive movement of people and sometimes almost comes across like film. The large amount also represents the scale of the mobility of people who seek safety. At the same time it is relatable for current younger generations who take unprecedented amounts of photographs of their everyday experiences, including many selfies. The photographs are the same size as the images on "our" smartphones. The selfie is a medium that is used regularly by Ai Weiwei, (again) connecting art to popular culture and therefore becoming relatable for a large audience.

The selfie moreover puts the artist into the picture and with his familiar face brings us (the viewers) closer. By using his own image there is however also a risk of self-indulgence, for which Ai Weiwei is questioned by others (Jones, 2016). At the opening in Amsterdam (according to someone who works at the museum), Ai Weiwei was openly criticized for "using" migration for his own work, for comparing his own situation to those of refugees who leave everything behind, while he is a successful artist who owns several houses in several countries. An image that was specifically criticized (not shown in both exhibitions) was one of Ai Weiwei posing as Alan Kurdi, laying face down on the beach with his arms lifeless beside him, which according to some is crossing ethical boundaries. The same ethical boundaries have been crossed for some time now; the overrepresentation of refugees in European and world media has been sensationalist and exploitative, strategically using traumatic occurrences as "clickbait" to increase readership and viewership. Rather than viewing Weiwei's self-insertions into these narratives as exploitative, it is equally possible that they might be pointing to the static overrepresentations of

refugees in the media in the first place. The fact that it is difficult to determine whether Ai's work is ultimately subversive or exploitative leaves us with a tension that in itself might be productive for dialogue.

Altogether, it becomes clear that Ai Weiwei crosses many borders. His art bridges between personal and collective experience, between high and low culture, between history and modernity, as well as national borders, not only literally, but also by combining visual memories across national and historical borders and placing them in the same room. This border crossing is multi-faceted; it is disruptive and uneasy. At the same time, these tensions make the works stand out (which is not to say that ethical questions do not remain important). As Mary Douglas puts it: "matter" that does not align with society's categories are often considered "dirt" (Douglas, 2003). Therefore, they are either hidden and seen as taboo, or ascribed powers to disrupt and to call attention to something. What is a political artist to do than to be questionable and let viewers question distinctions and borders?

References

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