

We Are Here: A Demand for Visibility through Artistic and Collective Organizing

In May 10th 2016, I attended the public lecture and presentation of the “We Are Here” refugee collective at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam. I had been following the activities of the WAH collective closely for quite some time; as a growing group of some 225 undocumented refugees and migrants, they represent a unique voice in the Dutch sociopolitical sphere – but only since recently has this been the case. As persons whose appeals for citizenship have been rejected by the Dutch government, but who cannot leave the Netherlands or return to their home countries, this group finds itself in a social, cultural and political ‘limbo’ in the Dutch landscape: “a myriad of new invisible borders that are ideological, radicalized and politicized,” to quote Sandra Ponzanesi and Bolette Bлагаard. Their marginalization has at times taken quite literal shapes as, since they first started organizing in 2012, they have been uprooted from temporary shelters on the outskirts of Amsterdam by the city’s municipality. Without citizenship they have no social and political standing, and therefore do not have a right to education, health care and employment. The subalternity of this situation cannot be ignored, as these undocumented peoples find themselves in a kind of social and political ‘deadlock’ in not being able to enjoy the rights of full citizens but at the same time being ‘stuck’ in the Netherlands. Having no political standing and no stable place of residence, undocumented individuals in the Netherlands are effectively rendered voiceless and invisible. Hence the critical importance of the “We Are Here” collective; since they started organizing in 2012 (starting with a mere handful of people), the group has progressively carved out a visible platform for themselves in the Netherlands. Since 2012, they have held protests, public meetings, realized theatre plays, created public art and had several ‘spin-off’ projects such [We Are Here Academy](#); an educational platform for undocumented migrants offered by various scholars working in the Dutch academic context and the “We Are Here Cooking” cookbook, which is currently being developed. I think it is necessary to closely consider some of the strategies of the “We Are Here” collective in the context of the BABE project. I consider it a matter of utmost importance to recognize how, in this situation, a political voice was able to be formed through largely ‘de-politicized,’ that is, aesthetic means. An example of this type of activism through art was the carving out and painting in red-and-white of nine person-sized letters that spelled out the words ‘We are here.’ This piece was an obvious play on the **I amsterdam** sculpture located on the Museumplein, which is a hub of several main national museums, including the famous [Rijksmuseum](#). The sculpture is a central site, one of Amsterdam’s most well-known, and a big touristic magnet.

[I amsterdam image.](#)

The fact that the “We Are Here” group modeled their own art piece on this iconic monument signifies for me a symbolic, if not literal, move from the center to the periphery and a re-configuration of the city’s artistic canon. The Dutch law prohibits undocumented migrants from organizing institutionally or politically, however, there are no laws saying that they

cannot organize “creatively”. Hence I see artistic output in this case as an agential tool – one that allows these people entry into the political realm. In other words, artistic organizing is a particular tool with which the “We Are Here” collective has found a way to “speak truth to power,” to quote Edward Said.

[“We Are Here” image.](#)

Another important organizing strategy of the “We Are Here” group lies in the fact that their members are fairly heterogeneous when it comes to age, gender and also ethnic/national background. Despite internal differences, they have found common ground in the shared experience of displacement and dispossession and in creating a community have contributed to voicing the group’s concerns in a public, political sphere. Here, I see Spivak’s strategic essentialism in action: “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.”

[“We Are Here” image](#)

By creating a collective, “We Are Here” have also created a community that is able to voice their concerns to the Municipality of Amsterdam in a more direct, effective manner. The now infamous BBB (Bed, Bad, Brood or Bed, Bath, Bread) policy was only adopted upon insistent protesting from the “We Are Here” group and its supporters and was envisioned to give every undocumented person the right to shelter, a bath and a meal. The policy has subsequently been heavily criticized for offering only the barest of minimums of the necessary provisions for these undocumented persons; for instance, BBB only concerns overnight accommodation, which means that people are still placed on the street during the day. I have chosen to focus here on two strategies employed by the “We Are Here” collective in carving out a visible platform for their group in the Netherlands: collective organizing and artistic interventions. I see both strategies as political tools that are particularly effective in their case; not because they make use of institutional channels of communication (since these are wholly out of the collective’s reach) but precisely because they circumvent them, thereby possibly opening up an alternative domain of signification. "References": Edward Said, “Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures”, London, Vintage, 1996 Gayatri Spivak, “In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics”, New York, Methuen, p. 205, 1987 Sandra Ponzanesi; Bolette B. Blaagaard, “In the name of Europe, Social Identities”, 17:1, 1-10, 2011