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*Ai Weiwei and JR.*  
*Political Artists and Activist Artists and the Plight of Refugees*

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**Abstract**

The article will address Ai Weiwei's and JR's political engagement with the refugee crisis, the former as a political artist and the latter as an activist artist. Ai, in a series of conceptual installations and the feature film *Human Flow*, as did JR at Tecate on the Mexican-US border, have sought to shed light on the securitization of migration and the hollowness of neoliberalism's human rights discourse. More generally, the article will interrogate the roles of the socially concerned political artist and the socially involved activist artist. An underlying question deals with the power of representation inevitably wielded by artists. While the 'dilemma of representation' cannot be resolved, the article explores the different approaches to this dilemma employed by Ai and JR to mitigate the dilemma.

**Keywords:** Activist Artist, Dilemma of Representation, Movement Artist Scholars, Political Artist, Refugee Crisis.

*Introduction*

For Europeans the north-eastern rim of the Mediterranean Sea has been the focal site of the Syrian tragedy and refugee crisis. Fleeing the war in Syria Alan Kurdi's family set off from the Turkish coast for the Greek island of Kos in an inflatable boat. Within minutes of pushing off, a wave capsized the vessel, and the mother and both sons drowned. Photographer Nilüfer Demir of the Dogan News Agency found three-years-old Alan's lifeless body on a Turkish beach and the resulting image became the defining photograph of the on-going war and refugee crisis. The photograph galvanized public opinion across the globe in support of refugees, at least for a time (Sohlberg, Esaiasson & Martinsson, 2018). Similarly, non-verbal (and verbal) images and interactions can evoke

emotions of compassion and the humanitarian will to help and protect. The work of artists can educe empathetic insights into the plight of refugees.

Artists are involving themselves in different ways with what Passy (2001) calls the “altruistic solidarity movement” and the plight of refugees producing images and aesthetic interactions that are intended to awaken public support. The article addresses Ai Weiwei’s and JR’s political engagement with the refugee crisis and border life. More generally, the paper will interrogate the roles of the socially concerned political artist and the socially involved activist artist for political contention. Have they resolved the dilemma of representation? Do they as artist scholars bring their superior skills of representation to work *with* a movement, and/or an aggrieved community, or do they work solely *for*?

### *1. The roles of movement scholars and the dilemma of representation*

In this paper I argue that Ai Weiwei and JR strategically employ their celebrity status as darlings of the Western neoliberal art world to undermine the securitization and human rights discourses from the inside. In different ways Ai and JR represent the experiences and grievances of refugees and ‘paperless’ migrants—those who lack the “right to have rights” (Peterson, 2017)—to the outside world. Are they working within solidarity movements or outside? How have Ai and JR resolved the power of representation dilemma?

A wide body of social movement literature highlights the cultural spaces opened for movement intellectuals, what I call movement scholars along the lines of Dieter Henrich’s (1985) notion of the artist scholar, that is, authors, musicians and artists. In short, according to these theorists, social movements provide the cultural context for critical scholars. Social movements in general are breeding grounds for new forms of artistic, musical, and literary experimentation (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998; Kaplan, 1992). With the emergence of alternative cultural spaces, movement scholars, whether they are writers, musicians or artists, find new audiences of readers, listeners and viewers for which to direct their cultural and political challenges. The role of movement scholars is heatedly debated among activists and social movement researchers alike. One group of

theorists draw attention to the role scholars play for expressing the collective identity of social movements as “truth-bearers” for the movement (e.g. Eyerman, 2002; Eyerman and Jamison, 1998; Eyerman and Jamison, 1992; Frascina, 1999; Kaplan, 1992;). For these theorists, the work and lives of movement scholars provide the key for understanding the collective identity of the movement.

(Peterson,2012) took a different analytical strategy and used the life and work of one movement scholar artist, Anselm Kiefer, who was neither ascribed the role of movement truth-bearer nor bore the collective truth-claims of the German Student movement and New Left. Movement scholars are often understood as both embodying the movement and leading the movement. And while I agree that some movement scholars can be seen as embodying the movement (as long as they accept the role of truth-bearer), they more seldom lead the movement. It is not uncommon, I have argued, that movement scholars are at odds with the wider movement, expressing their challenges or alternative truth-claims at the outermost fringes of its context. Movement scholars not only challenge the wider society with their truth-claims, they challenge the movement itself, extending the cognitive boundaries for what can be acknowledged at a given moment in the movement’s history (Peterson, 1994). In short, movement scholars are often even uncomfortable for their social movement publics. Anselm Kiefer became a thorn in the side of the German Student Movements with his obstinate denial of moral innocence for German responsibility for the atrocities committed during World War II (Peterson, 2012).

However, none of the social movement theorists mentioned above have directly addressed the question of power within movements, what Walter Nicholls and Justus Uitermark call the “Power of Representation dilemma” (2015, p. 189).

Intellectuals can be a force *for* the movement but may also exercise power *over* others within the movement. The resulting Power of Representation dilemma – intellectuals have superior skills of representation but if they use them *for* the movement, they marginalize others *within* the movement – has been a topic of heated debate within many movements (emphasis in original).

Movement intellectuals are central players in all social movements, but they undeniably assume a position of power in the movement on the basis

of their superior skills and knowledge in producing discourses. But there are risks involved in the power of representation, as Nicholls and Uitermark point out. For example, artist scholars can repress images that do not 'fit' their representations, thereby marginalizing some groups. The risk is probably higher when the people they represent have scarce cultural and symbolic resources, which is the case of refugees, who, for the most part, do not represent themselves and their grievances but are represented by altruistic 'others' – movements and individuals.

A second group of movement theorists, trying to resolve the power of representation dilemma, outline a new role for movement intellectuals using the notion of "specific intellectuals", neither leading nor speaking for the movement. Specific intellectuals lend their concrete expertise in different areas (e.g. political, planning, law, psychiatry) to struggles, "speaking with the people in those struggles rather than speaking for them" (Nicholls and Uitermark, 2015, p. 190; also Kurzman and Owens, 2002). So rather than bearing the truth claims of the movement, specific intellectuals use their political, cultural and technical resources to facilitate marginalised groups to represent their own interests in public. However, this is often an idealised vision of the role of movement intellectuals. Highly marginalised groups, for example refugees and failed asylum seekers, most often lack the political and cultural resources to effectively represent themselves and their grievances in the public sphere. As Nicholls and Uitermark (2015, pp. 194-95) call attention to, then movement intellectuals are indeed key players in movement struggles in that they have the resources and knowledge which permits the experiences of marginalised groups to get into the "information system". Specific intellectuals "become key players as representational brokers mediating relations between marginalized groups and the outside world" (p. 201), thereby maintaining the representational gap between the people involved in the struggle—the aggrieved—and movement scholars. In these cases movement scholars inevitably exercise power in movement struggles.

## *2. Political artists and activist artists*

Art critic Lucy R. Lippard (1984, p. 342) succinctly defines political art as

an art that reaches out as well as in. To varying degrees it takes place simultaneously in the mainstream and outside of accepted art contexts. ... It often incorporates many different media in a long-term project. ... As an art of contact, it is often hybrid, the product of different cultures communicating ... [activist art] provides alternative images, metaphors, and information formed with humor, irony, outrage, and compassion, in order to make heard and seen those voices and faces hitherto invisible and powerless.

Lippard distinguishes between “political artists” and “activist artists”. The work of political artists is socially concerned commentary and/or analysis. The work of activist artists is socially involved within its contexts, with its audience. She emphasises that this distinction is not a value judgement on her part. Political artists and activist artists are often the same people. The subjects, and sometimes contexts, of political artists reflect social issues, most often in the form of ironic criticism. Activist artists work within the community in order to stimulate the active participation of their audience and mobilise for social change.

Ai Weiwei, in a series of conceptual installations and the feature film *Human Flow*, as did JR at Tecate on the Mexican-US border, sought to shed light on the securitization of migration and the hollowness of neoliberalism’s human rights discourse. Both artists are not solely producers of discrete objects, but are collaborators and producers of *situations*, or in the words of British artist Peter Dunn, they are “context providers rather than content providers (cited in Kester, 2005, p. 76). They facilitate dialogues between different communities around the refugee crisis. Both artists are politically involved with the refugee crisis, but in different ways—JR more from within movements, Ai more from without. I argue that Ai is the quintessential political artist, JR the quintessential activist artist. In the following pages I will look more closely at the roles these artists play for altruistic solidarity movements and their different approaches to the “power of representation dilemma”.

### 3. JR activist artist

JR, the French street artist who only goes by his initials, is a “self-proclaimed ‘artist’ somewhere between artist and activist—and a

‘photographeur’—somewhere between a photographer and a graffiti artist” (Ferdman, 2012, p. 12). He has built his reputation pasting over-sized portraits of individuals in cities and towns across the world. According to Ferdman (2012, p. 13), his exhibits perform alternative narratives of urban spaces by giving a voice, “through the medium of photography, to actors/inhabitants who are often otherwise ignored in mainstream media, and who often live in poverty”. JR’s work, which he calls “participatory art”, involves the communities — the audiences — he is engaging with in a lengthy process in which community members are involved in both the aesthetic decision making and the execution of the action. JR’s work is ephemeral; if authorities do not tear it down, it is washed away by weather. Only the documentation of the action process remains as proof that the work existed, and it is the documentation, which gets inside the gallery.

JR has addressed a number of issues, but in this paper I will focus his “border work” (Peterson, 2017). In 2007 JR and his collaborator Marco, aided by community volunteers, staged what they claim was the largest illegal photography exhibition ever. They covered the entire surface of the Israeli West Bank Barrier, on both sides, with monumental close-up photographs of paired Israelis and Palestinians who held the same jobs, making a similar expression for the camera—teachers, farmers, students, taxi drivers, and so on, laughing and grimacing. The large-format photographs were posted side-by-side, face-to-face, so that onlookers couldn’t tell who belonged on which side of the fence. Their intention was to make visible the similarities between Israelis and Palestinians — “twin sisters and brothers”—and the absurdity of the conflict and the border wall<sup>1</sup>.

Ten years later in 2017 JR again confronted the absurdity of borders walls, this time at the Mexican-US border at Tecate. In Tecate, JR, his team, and on-site volunteers, constructed a huge scaffolding and posted a monumental 20 metre high photograph of the year-old toddler Kikito innocently peering over the border fence between Mexico and the US. A month later on 8 October 2017, a huge dining table was constructed on both sides of the border wall, with the eye of a “Dreamer” on both sides. JR hosted a one-day gigantic picnic which gathered Kikito, his family and hundreds of guests from the US and Mexico to share the same meal.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jr-art.net/projects/face-2-face>, retrieved 18.04.2018;



“People gathered around the eyes of a Dreamer, eating the same food, sharing the same water, enjoying the same music (half of the band on each side). The wall was forgotten for a few moments...”<sup>2</sup>. The event of course could have been shut down, but it was not. One of his co-artists posted a video of herself bringing tea to a US Federal Agent on one side and JR on the other side. Standing on each side of the lathes of the wall, JR asks the border agent, “will you share tea with me now?” Whereupon the agent smiles as they clink their cups of tea with a *salud* from JR (Ibid.). The installation and performance offered a moment of humanity amidst the infected debate on Trump’s rejection of DACA a month earlier (but offering a six-month window to find an alternative solution) and the construction of a border wall<sup>3</sup>. And like the *face2face* exhibit, *JR in Tecate* received massive media attention in, among other venues, *CNN*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*.

In 2011 JR was awarded the prestigious TED Prize and the opportunity to “change the world”<sup>4</sup>. JR received \$1,000,000 and access to TED’s vast resources and professional networks to start his Inside Out Project— “a global art project with local ramifications, responding to local problems, mounted by local people. The work belongs to the people who created it and to those who saw it” (Ferdman, 2012, p. 22). The Inside Out Project that he initiated in 2011 has a relatively simple conception. Anyone can contact the Inside Out website with their photo portraits and a statement of their cause. If approved the action group is sent large-format copies of their photos (costing a suggested \$20 donation per photo) and their action group is then included on the website where the action process is photo-documented, the portraits are presented and archived, thereby spreading their messages beyond the communities that are engaged in the action.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jr-art.net/news/gigantic-picnic-at-the-US-Mexican-border>, retrieved 18.04.2018; Young undocumented immigrants were organised in what was called the “Dreamers Movement”.

<sup>3</sup> The Obama administration passed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012 and an executive order in 2014, which provided approximately four to five million young undocumented immigrants with temporary residency.

<sup>4</sup> TED is a non-profit organisation that promotes innovative ideas in such areas as technology, education and design. Each year the TED Prize is awarded to an individual to develop an initiative that can spark social change.

There are however strict guidelines for prospective participants; for example, only one subject in the photograph, no animals, objects or people in disguises. Portraits must be framed closely around the subjects face. The actions cannot involve commercial actors, be used for branding, nor actions, which do not promote a progressive cause. While the actions, carried out across the globe, vary, they share “the visual trope of striking, black-and-white portrait posters of diverse individuals that are grouped together in a public space” (Orpana, 2014, p. 68). At the time of writing the project has included 1.318 group actions with 260.000 portraits of participants in 129 countries worldwide<sup>5</sup>.

Many of the Inside Out action groups have addressed community causes along borders, for example, “Inside Out Juarez”, as well as in support of refugees, for example, “Justice for Afghan Refugees in Belgium”, support for Syrian refugees in Canada, “We Are People Too”, and for Syrian refugees in Turkey, “The Forgotten Refugees of Balaban”<sup>6</sup>. An Inside Out project in Palermo and Sicily sought to highlight the energy of departures and flows on the island with 4.000 portraits in a square. “They are the memory that intertwines past and future in a continuous exchange that makes possible a cultural rebirth based on acceptance and integration. Thousands of faces in one square that will show our desire to remain truly human”<sup>7</sup>. With Inside Out JR provides the resources for those working in support of refugees, which would appear that he is taking on the role of specific intellectual in the solidarity movement, and to a certain degree this is true. He does provide the technical resources and aesthetic trope to altruistic movement activists who are speaking for refugees, but they are most often not speaking with the refugees they in turn represent.

In 2017 the Emerson Collective launched a nationwide participatory art initiative, “Inside Out/Dreamers”<sup>8</sup>. According to their press statement, “Inside Out/Dreamers travel the country taking individual portraits that give visual expression to the overwhelming support for Dreamers”. They organize community events and pop-up press conferences with Dreamers,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.inside-outproject.net/en>, retrieved 09.07.2018;

<sup>6</sup> <http://insideoutjuarez.tumblr.com>, retrieved 03.07.2018;

<sup>7</sup> <http://insideoutproject.net/en/group-actions/>, retrieved 17.11.2018;

<sup>8</sup> The Emerson Collective centres its work on education, immigration reform, the environment and other social justice initiatives.

activists, elected officials and local leaders to underscore that “with the repeal of DACA in September 2017, hundreds of thousands will begin to lose their status early next year unless Congress acts now to pass The Dream Act”<sup>9</sup>.

On the Inside Out Dreamers website we find the following statement:

We are here. We are here with an open mind and heart, not an open hand. We are here to give. To add value. To be inspired. To inspire. We are here to start a small business, write a song, find a cure, open a law firm, become a teacher, discover a new star, bring home a gold medal, develop new technologies, and so much more — if you give us that chance. We are the same as every immigrant who has come before us. Filled with dreams. Determined to contribute. See our potential. We are all here. AND OUR STORY IS AN AMERICAN STORY<sup>10</sup>.

The Emerson Collective’s discursive strategy locks into what Nicholls and Fiorito (2015) have called the “bounded dreamers”. The strategy stressed the deservingness of this group of immigrants; these minors were “the best and brightest” and fully American in all but their social security numbers and who stood to make important economic contributions to the country. But this representation of the Dreamers neglects the fact that not all Dreamers are straight-A students. Many, living in severe poverty, have had a rocky road in the school system. Pragmatically the Emerson Collective is trying to deflect the dominant discourse in Trump’s US by emphasising the deservingness of a specific group of immigrants, thereby closing the door for other groups — the power of representation dilemma.

The new social turn, or more accurately labelled “social re-turn” (Bishop, 2012), in political art is situated within the many faces of neoliberalism, which is not only economic policies that are widening the gap between the rich and poor, but also a “powerful public pedagogy and cultural politics” (Giroux, 2005, p. 15). With the state rolling back, civil society is increasingly called upon to create innovative ways to revitalize local communities and fill the gap of a retreating welfare state. As a public pedagogy and cultural politics promoting creativity, flexibility,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/emerson-collective-launches-inside-outdreamers-project-to-underscore-urgency-of-passing-the-dream-act-300543154.html>, retrieved 06-05-2018;

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.insideoutproject/dreamers/>, retrieved 06-05-2018;

individualism, and entrepreneurialism the social turn in political art is embedded in these dominant neoliberal discourses (also Kester, 1995 and 2005). And as Bishop (2012) points out, the new re-turn to socially engaged participatory art projects emerged, at least in Europe, with the dismantling of the welfare state as a new form of community “soft engineering”. JR’s work can be seen in this context. His work has found considerable institutional support, despite his claims that most of his actions have been carried out illegally. And many of his photographic interactions have appeared to re-vitalise a sense of community, in, for example, Rio’s favelas, Paris’ banlieues, and Sicily. As an activist artist, using close-up facial portraits as his medium, JR is forced to engage with a given community in a dialogue to obtain their trust and involvement working with movements.

While JR’s work reflects what Claire Bishop (2005) calls “the social turn” in contemporary art practices, he has repeatedly separated his politics from his art, “clearly demarcating the ‘art’ as the autonomous space where things can happen” (Ferdman, 2012, p. 15; also Orpana, 2014). In his acceptance speech of the TED Prize on the topic “Can art change the world”, JR discussed the role of art for social change. He argues that it is possible for art to change our *perceptions* of the world by starting conversations and addressing stereotypes through creative strategies that make people, and their causes, more visible. He stated:

In some cases art can change the world. I mean, art is not supposed to change the world, the practical things. But it can change perceptions. It can change the way we see the world. Actually, the fact that art cannot change things, makes it a neutral place for exchanges and discussion<sup>11</sup>.

It is within this what he calls neutral space, that JR produces highly community-involved installations – challenging people to see the world in new ways. Ai Weiwei, in contrast, does not see art as an autonomous, neutral space disconnected from politics. According to Ai, “all creative activism, if it works well, is a work of art. The same way that every good

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/jr\\_s\\_ted\\_prize\\_wish\\_use\\_art\\_to\\_turn\\_the\\_world\\_inside\\_out](http://www.ted.com/talks/jr_s_ted_prize_wish_use_art_to_turn_the_world_inside_out), retrieved 18-04-2018;

work of art, if it concerns itself with reality and politics, is a form of activism”<sup>12</sup>.

#### 4. *Ai Weiwei—political artist*

According to Christian Solace (2014, p. 396), “Ai Weiwei’s artistic material is the flesh of politics: the decrees of China’s Communist Party. ... His defining artistic practice is to metabolize social contradictions and harsh realities”. His art has called attention to government cover-ups and corruption. Most controversially in connection with the Sichuan schools corruption scandal, when shoddily built schools collapsed in the 2008 earthquake. Ai initiated a “Citizens Investigation” to uncover the names of the children who had perished, which the government had refused to release. 5.219 names were collected and posted on his blog, which the government promptly shut down in 2009. Ai created the work “Remembering”. He covered the whole of the Haus der Kunst’s façade in Munich with 9.000 children’s backpacks, spelling out in Chinese a message that a bereaved mother had told him. Ai claims that it was this artwork, which made him the most dangerous man in China<sup>13</sup>. He was arrested in 2011 and held without charges for eighty-one days. In 2015 he was allowed to leave China and is now working in Berlin. Just as Ai took the empty gestures of the Chinese Communist Party as points of intervention when living in China, he, now living in Germany, takes on the empty gestures of neoliberalism’s human rights discourse with his political-aesthetic interventions.

Ai Weiwei has produced installations calling attention to the refugee crisis across Europe; the following is just a sample. For “Law of the Journey” at the National Gallery in Prague, Ai installed a seventy-meter long inflatable boat with 258 oversized faceless refugee figures. Ai draped thousands of bright orange life jackets discarded by refugees on Lesbos

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/17/ai-weiwei-without-the-prison-the-beatings-what-would-i-be>, retrieved 19-04-2018;

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/15/ai-weiwei-remembering-sichuan-earthquake>, retrieved 13-07-2018;

around the classical columns of the Berlin's Konzerthaus. Athens' NJ Goulandris museum of Cycladic art displays on one wall thousands of tiny photos of Lesbos taken with his smartphone; a marble sculpture of two rubber inner tubes from truck tyres used by refugees to float ashore. An installation places spent tear gas canisters from a riot at the Idomeni refugee camp in northern Greece next to ancient glass grief vases that held human teardrops. He has wrapped the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence with twenty-two orange lifeboats<sup>14</sup>.

He withdrew his exhibition at Faurshou Foundation in Copenhagen, in protest of a new law passed by the Danish parliament that allows authorities to seize asylum seekers' valuables and to delay family reunions. However, he did not boycott Australia's offshore detention policy by withdrawing his exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia; despite the Australian high court ruling that week that "the government had the right to detain people offshore, leaving the way clear for it to return 267 asylum seekers, including 39 children and 33 babies, to conditions in Nauru that the UNHCR has deemed inhumane"<sup>15</sup>. He donated to the museum his major installation there that gives homage to Australian activists involved in the refugee human rights movement. As *Guardian* art critic Toby Fehily points out, Ai is not consistent in his use of boycotts as a political tool, an example of the power of representation dilemma. Ai gave his support for Australian activists, but not for Danish solidarity activists—the power of representation dilemma.

In one of his most controversial works Ai posed lying face down on a beach in Greece, recreating the now-iconic 2015 photograph of drowned Syrian refugee infant Alan Kurdi for the magazine *India Today* and an accompanying exhibition at the Indian Art Fair. Fehily delivered a scathing salvo in *The Guardian*:

If he's identifying with Kurdi, he shouldn't – there are no useful comparisons to be drawn between a refugee child dead at the age of three and a highly successful living artist. It is, however, an accomplished piece of viral imagery – a very specific kind of viral imagery, too; the kind that piggybacks on another viral image with slight variation and

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<sup>14</sup> [www.aiweiwei.com](http://www.aiweiwei.com), retrieved 11.06.2018;

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/06/there-are-better-ways-for-ai-weiwei-to-take-a-political-stand-than-posing-as-a-drowned-infant>, retrieved 11.07.2018;

without adding anything. It is a meme. And like all memes, it got attention. But just because it gets attention doesn't mean it's good art, and it certainly doesn't mean it's good political art. The problem with the refugee crisis isn't a lack of attention; the problem is we are aware of their plight, but are not doing enough to help<sup>16</sup>.

Ai explained the photograph as a spontaneous idea reached between himself, the photographer and the journalist as they walked along the beach.

I [wanted] to be in the same condition – to touch my face on the sand, to hear the ocean – which that little boy had no privilege to do that. And that little boy Alan is not a single person: it's thousands of refugee kids [who] lost their lives...<sup>17</sup>.

Ai's caption for the photograph at the India Art Fair reads, "Artists are free to make art for art's sake, and I respect that, I do not criticize them. ... I am not born an artist. I am born a human. I care about human conditions rather than the opinions. I have no choice". Nevertheless the question is raised: how do you respectfully represent the situation refugees are facing?

Ai Weiwei's film *Human Flow* is an epic documentary about the world's response to the refugee crisis. It looks at mass movement from Syria, Iraq and parts of Africa to Europe; of the Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh; from Palestine to Jordan, at the Texas-Mexico border. In one shot, taken by a drone over a camp in Iraq, the beige tents appear like a vast abstract canvas. Then the camera is slowly lowered to show the viewers all the people who live there. Ai puts faces to statistics and through a series of intimate interactions between Ai and refugees tells individual stories. We see Ai handing out hot tea on the beaches at Lesbos, comforting a woman inside a makeshift studio and cooking kebabs in a dusty refugee camp.

Ai explains that he always tries to find a language, a medium that can bring the voices of those who have no voice to the people who will not hear.

I always have to try to find a language to build up this kind of communication between the people who [are] desperate, have no chance to have their voice to be heard, and the

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/06/there-are-better-ways-for-ai-weiwei-to-take-a-political-stand-than-posing-as-a-drowned-infant>, retrieved 11.07.2018;

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/ai-weiwei-invu-1.4309871>, retrieved 11.07.2018;

people who [are] privileged and almost think those incidents have nothing to do with our real life and turn their faces away. So as an artist, I always have to make this kind of argument and try to find a language to present my ideas'<sup>18</sup>.

Having been exiled as a child with his family during the Cultural Revolution, Ai seeks a common ground with his subjects. "I am a refugee, every bit," he says. "Those people are me. That's my identity"<sup>19</sup>. Ai intends to represent the face of refugees, but is it possible? Can the very real differences that exist between artists and a given community, in our case refugees, be transcended by well-meaning rhetoric and acts of aesthetic 'empowerment'? In one film sequence, he humorously swaps passports with Mahmoud, a Syrian refugee. Mahmoud is happy to do so and adds they should probably swap houses as well: a nice Berlin studio in return for a hot, crowded tent. Ai laughs, but won't take him up on the offer. "It's a moment that exposes the gulf between them" (Ibid). In an interview with Xan Brooks Ai remembers the sequence.

Yeah, that was the worst feeling. That really got me. Because [if] you're passionate, you think you mean what you say. You tell these people that you're the same as them. But you are lying because you are not the same. Your situation is different; you must leave them. And that's going to haunt me for the rest of my life (Ibid.).

Ai is painfully aware that he cannot fully represent the people who he identifies with; their situations are vastly different. A highly acclaimed artist with free mobility (at least in the west) does not share the same situation as a refugee trapped in a crowded dusty camp. He cannot resolve the dilemma of representation by denying difference. Ai is speaking *for* refugees from an elevated position of power. His voice is heard, but it is not the voice of refugees.

Brooks posed a question Ai was anticipating:

All day long, the media ask me if I have shown the film to the refugees: 'When are the refugees going to see the film?' But that's the wrong question. The purpose is to show it to

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/ai-weiwei-invu-1.4309871>, retrieved 11.07.2018;

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/17/ai-weiwei-without-the-prison-the-beatings-what-would-i-be>, retrieved 11.07.2018;



people of influence; people who are in a position to help and who have a responsibility to help. The refugees who need help – they don't need to see the film. They need dry shoes. They need soup (Ibid.).

Ai makes a relevant point here. He is acutely aware that art on its own cannot change a situation. It is not enough to produce political art. The plight of refugees must be taken over by the institutions and people who have the influence and the responsibility to address the situation. Ai's audience is not the refugees he is representing. His expressed mission is to give voice to the refugees, which is the signature of a political artist working for marginalized 'others'.

### *Conclusions*

A now dominant trend in the discourse on political art in general and participatory art in particular is an emphasis on a compassionate identification with the other, in which, Claire Bishop (2012, p. 241) warns that an ethics of interpersonal interaction risks prevailing over a politics of social justice.

In insisting upon consensual dialogue, sensitivity to difference risks becoming a new kind of repressive norm – one in which artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or over-identification are immediately ruled out as 'unethical' because all forms of authorship are equated with authority and indicted as totalising. Such a denigration of authorship allows simplistic oppositions to remain in place: active versus passive viewer, egotistical versus collaborative artist, privileged versus needy community, aesthetic complexity versus simple expression, cold autonomy versus convivial community.

As an activist artist JR is involved in the communities he approaches and arguably co-constructs the aesthetic representation of the community. He is committed to the participatory logic of his aesthetic community interventions. In the case of the group actions in the Inside Out Project he even denies authorship. However, JR's reliance on black-and-white poster portraits, in his own work and in the Inside Out Project, determines the aesthetic framework for the representation of the community. In this sense, in the end, he nonetheless retains (partial) authorship of the work.

JR's work can be characterized by a playfulness that does not seek confrontation, but dialogue. His work tends to elicit a smile, as was the case with the US Federal agent at Tecate. While perhaps not always appreciated by the authorities, it opens a convivial and welcoming space for human interactions.

Bishop (2012) critiques the influential art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) who contrasts contemporary relational art from that of previous generations.

The main difference, as he sees it, is the shift in attitude toward social change: instead of a "utopian" agenda, today's artists seek only to find provisional solutions in the here and now; instead of trying to change their environment, artists today are simply "learning to inhabit the world in a better way"; instead of looking forward to a future utopia, this art sets up functioning "microtopias" in the present (Bishop, 2012, p. 54).

Bishop neatly sums up JR's political intentions in her critique of Bourriaud. JR is quoted as saying:

(A)rt is not meant to change the world, but when you see people interacting, when you see an impact on their lives, then I guess in a smaller way, this is changing the world. ...So, that's what I believe in. That's why I'm into creating more interactions<sup>20</sup>.

Even Ai Weiwei, while not enacting "microtopias" in the present, sees the demise of "big politics". Ai is quoted as saying: "I think that our age, the age of big politics is vanishing, and that the micro-politics of countless individuals will begin to emerge. As Chairman Mao said: politics is the soul. I am now dealing with the soul" (quoted in Sorace, 2014, p.406). Ai is, however, not as modest as JR with the micro-politics of his aesthetic interventions. He is convinced that individual micro-politics, and his individual aesthetic interventions, can bring about social change.

In sharp contrast to JR's interventions to create cosy spaces for human interaction, Ai Weiwei's work is based on political confrontation; confrontation is the precondition, the motor for his art. Ai has spent his life in opposition to his homeland – in a perpetual state of friction. Ai is quoted as saying: "Duchamp had the bicycle, Warhol had the image of Mao. I have

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/18/opinion/zhang-jr-inside-out/index.html>, retrieved 12.07.2018;

a totalitarian regime. It is my readymade” (quoted in Sorace, 2014, p. 396). Sorace (2014, p. 397) claims, that “it would not be an exaggeration to argue that without the Chinese state there would be no Ai Weiwei”. Xan Brooks also suggested in an interview with Ai that without China he wouldn’t be an artist at all.

Yeah, exactly, says Ai. The notion pricks his interest. I would be what? he asks. Without all the yelling, without the prison, the beatings, just what would I be? Probably right now I’d be walking down Broadway, just like all the other immigrants. Trying to find the next job, pay next month’s rent. Or I’d be back in China, running a restaurant. Or in a suit, in an office, another Chinese citizen<sup>21</sup>.

Ai’s work has readily elicited criticism: for over-identification in the Alan Kurdi mock-up, for heavy-handedness with his political messages, in China he is portrayed as the “running dog for Western interests, obsessed with money” (Sorace, 2014, p. 404), for egomania, or simply for his phenomenal fame as the art world’s superstar—*Art Review* named him the most powerful person in the art world.

While between forty and one hundred assistants work in his Berlin studio (16.000 Chinese artisans in his “Sunflowers” exhibit at Tate Modern), Ai’s art, unlike JR’s art, is not collaborative. He certainly does not declaim authorship; he claims sole authorship. “I’m the one who makes all the decisions, covers every inch, every setting, material, paragraph, I try to do as much as I can”<sup>22</sup>. His activism is as well more or less a one-man show. Unlike JR Ai does not ordinarily directly engage and co-operate with the communities whose grievances he aesthetically represents (an exception is perhaps the “Citizen’s Investigation”). The refugees he interacted with in *Human Flow* were not co-producers of their representation in the film—this was Ai’s work. He is passionately engaged in the refugee struggle but he does not seek collaborators. His role in the altruistic solidarity movement is one of individual entrepreneurial provocateur. Ai is in a sense a one-man

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/17/ai-weiwei-without-the-prison-the-beatings-what-would-i-be>, retrieved 11.07.2018;

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/sep/12/ai-weiwei-exhibition-royal-academy-from-criminal-to-art-world-superstar>, retrieved 14.07.2018.

refugee movement who bears the truth-claims of refugees who do not have a voice, the classic example of the role of intellectuals. While JR works comfortably within the neoliberal discourse of community revitalisation, Ai works in direct confrontation with neoliberalism's hollow promises, just as he head on confronted the Chinese government in regards to their broken promises. I agree with Sorace (2014), Ai Weiwei does not practice liberal politics, but is rather in conflict with the neoliberal global discourse. For sure he exploits his celebrity position in the neoliberal art world, but to undermine the politics of neoliberalism.

By cutting short the post-production process—which their status allows—both Ai and JR use the temporality of their political-aesthetics to retain (more or less) control of their artistic products and the political messages they are intended to convey. Neither Ai nor JR resolve the “power of representation dilemma”, but one can argue that the dilemma is unresolvable, even for the most well-meaning specific intellectual as championed by Foucault (1984). Suffice it to simply recognize that the power of representation is unequally distributed. Artist scholars such as Ai and JR, with their valuable resources of aesthetic representation, exercise their power to bring the grievances of refugees to the public and authorities. Whether they like it or not, some refugee voices are heard, some are not.

Paradoxically, the “Trojan horses” (Bishop, 2004) Ai and JR are both minions and critics of neoliberalism—but in different ways; the political artist Ai speaking *for* refugees, the activist artist JR speaking *for* but even *with* movement activists and border communities. As an artist scholar Ai effectively represents in his art the plight of refugees, revealing to the world the grievances of refugees and the vacuity of neoliberalism's human rights discourse, but his art is not produced within a movement context that can bear a truth claim as to what a better world might be. His art is a plea to the world, to those who bear responsibility, to address the grievances of refugees. JR's art—his “microtopias” in the present—produced within movement contexts, not only calls attention to the plight of refugees but also provides a glimpse as to what the world might be were there no borders and respect for human rights prevailed.

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