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The Selfie on Europe's Shores: Ai Weiwei and the Selfie as a Means of Safe Passage

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Abstract
In the introduction to *On Histories and Stories*, A. S. Byatt argues that 'those of us who write about modern writing have a duty to keep the discussion open' in order 'to create new paradigms, which will bring new books, new styles, new preoccupations to the attention of readers'. This paper considers how Byatt's suggestion about the role of the critic writing about living authors can be adapted for scholarship and criticism that seeks to respond to new forms of life writing that have emerged in the digital age.

Keywords: Ai Weiwei, life writing, migration, selfies

This article considers Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's engagement with the issues raised by the recent rapid increase in the number of people arriving in Europe. The focus will not be the large-scale or event-based works that have garnered attention,[1] but on Ai's use of a contemporary form of life writing, the selfie. As discussed in more detail below, Ai has long used life narrative forms in his work, and this article will place his use of the selfie within that context. It will also consider what Ai's use of the selfie might tell us about this relatively new (but seemingly ubiquitous) form of self-representation, and how life writing has become an important mechanism in responding to the issue of migration in contemporary Europe.

This article focuses on the use of the selfie in a recent exhibition of Ai's work, *#SafePassage*, which ran from 16 September to 7 December 2016 at Foam photography gallery in Amsterdam. My argument is that in taking selfies with people arriving in Europe seeking 'safe passage' from war-torn countries, Ai critically engages with the selfie as a degraded aesthetic form negatively associated with celebrity and narcissism, while also presenting a critique of European governments' selectivity regarding whose rights are worthy of protection, and who will be the recipient of hospitality and welcome. By exhibiting selfies taken with the men, women and children seeking sanctuary from political and religious persecution and safety from civil war in the art galleries of Europe, Ai Weiwei refuses to allow his own status as a political refugee in Europe to be interpreted as inherently *different* from the request for refuge issued by the hundreds of thousands of people arriving on Europe's shores. Ai's use of the selfie is an attempt to use his status in Europe as a means of creating safe passage into the social field of Europe. I develop this interpretation through an engagement with Judith Butler's theories of the use of photography in establishing 'grievable' lives developed in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*,[2] and by proposing that we understand the selfie as an emerging norm of self-representation whose capacity to generate meaning is yet to be determined. Ai's use of the selfie in *#SafePassage* and other works gives some indication of the aesthetic, social and political work the selfie might undertake in the contemporary moment.

In *#SafePassage* Ai deploys the individualizing logic of the selfie to insist upon the recognition of people arriving in Europe as requiring an ethical response. This insistence, in turn, demands an ethical reading of Ai Weiwei's work and the role of life narrative in his oeuvre. However, as his fame has grown and his critique of Europe's response to the situation has become more pointed, some critics and commentators choose to ignore the connection between Ai Weiwei's intergenerational experience of persecution and of detention and torture and his work. This article situates Ai's use of the selfie within the larger context of his long-standing practice of life writing, and re-connects the selfies taken in Lesbos with key elements of Ai Weiwei's biography to demonstrate the complex and nuanced responses that life writing about migration demands of those of us who have not experienced forced migration and exile.

By using an autobiographical framework for reading *#SafePassage*, this article seeks to counter criticisms of Ai's direct engagement with,

and amplification of, the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Europe. One image which became a lightning rod for such criticism was the result of Ai's collaboration in the restaging of the widely-publicized image of the body of Alan Kurdi, a three-year old child who drowned when the boat his family was travelling in sunk off the shores of Bodrum, Turkey.[3] Sometimes wrongly described as a 'self-portrait',[4] or as an image initiated by the artist, Ai posed for the photograph at the suggestion of a reporter and photographer from the magazine *India Today.*[5] While initially seen as a powerful statement regarding the issue of Europe's response to the flow of people in unsafe boats,[6] commentary soon turned sour, with the photograph and Ai's participation in it condemned as 'a photo op' driven by self-promotion.[7] The turn in opinion was epitomized by Karen Archey, who responded to the photograph in a column for the influential online art journal *e-flux* by asking: 'Can you imagine the discomfort Ai Weiwei must have experienced while *acting* like a refugee [original emphasis]?'[8] Such a question disregards the reality of Ai's biography and the extent to which he has used life narrative as a means of responding to persecution and the violation of human rights, including his own. This article reinserts Ai Weiwei's biography, and the importance of life narrative to his art practice, into the critical response to his work in order to correct the erroneous phrasing of such a critique and to demonstrate that the discomfort we might feel viewing his selfies with people in Lesbos should not be misdirected into a critique of the artist. It is, rather, evidence of the ethical challenge his work sets those of us who live in safety and relative prosperity during a time of unprecedented violence and displacement. In the next section I will provide a biographical sketch of Ai Weiwei and discuss the importance of autobiography in his art practice and his celebrity.

Ai Weiwei: Life Narrative, Detention, Celebrity and Refuge

While Ai Weiwei's recent activities have garnered global media attention, he has been recognized as an important figure in contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s. Born in 1957, Ai Weiwei is the son of a prominent Chinese poet, Ai Qing.[9] Shortly after Ai Weiwei's birth, the Ai family was sent into exile from Beijing, Ai Qing having been

labelled anti-communist by the Cultural Revolution. Ai Weiwei grew up in exile with his family in the isolated northern province of Xinjiang. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the family returned to Beijing. In 1981, Ai Weiwei moved to America and spent twelve years in the United States working odd jobs and making art. Ai Weiwei returned to China in 1993 when his father's health declined. Ai was an active participant in the emerging contemporary art scene in China in the second half of the 1990s.[10]

Ai Weiwei first became widely-known outside of China as a design consultant for the Beijing National Stadium (also known as the 'Bird's Nest') built for the Olympic Games held in 2008. He later disassociated himself from the project, and the Olympics, in criticism of the Chinese government's use of culture for propaganda purposes.[11] His prominence rose again in 2011 when he was arrested and held for eighty-one days in an undisclosed location by the Chinese government. His incarceration was the focus of considerable scrutiny in Europe, and many artists, curators, publishers and art institutions participated in campaigning for his freedom.[12] After his release, Ai Weiwei's passport was withheld by the Chinese Government for over four years. In June 2015, his passport was returned, and since then Ai Weiwei has been based in Berlin.

Several of Ai Weiwei's works testify to his experience of imprisonment by the Chinese government. In 2013, while still unable to leave China, Ai exhibited at the Venice Biennale a work titled *S.A.C.R.E.D*, six dioramas encased in iron boxes that recreated scenes from his detention.[13] He also created a video work, akin to a music video, responding to the strict and inhumane conditions of his imprisonment.[14] The exhibition of these works in galleries in Europe demonstrate what Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer have argued is the increasing complex intersection of life writing and human rights discourse in contemporary global culture by demonstrating the role of life narrative in drawing attention to human rights abuses in the globalized art world.[15]

Indeed, Ai Weiwei's own experience of political violence has been fundamental to his reception and status in the contemporary European art world. Ai Weiwei's considerable fame within Europe is partly constructed by the willingness of key actors in the art world to use their status to maintain the campaign for Ai Weiwei's release when he was incarcerated, alongside a commitment to exhibiting and commissioning work while he was under house arrest.[16] Since the events of 2011,

Ai Weiwei has become a representative subject within the European art world of Europe's willingness to embrace individuals as champions of human rights, and its preparedness to 'defend' and protect citizens in countries that have limited political freedom. Ai Weiwei's political asylum within Europe enshrines human rights as a core value of Europe. Ai's work and its reception in Europe sit at a complex intersection between the adoption of life narrative as a primary means for making arguments regarding human rights in the West, and what Christian Sorace has shown to be Ai Weiwei's use of life narrative within the tradition of public criticism and self-criticism in Chinese Communism,[17] discussed below. Ai's current status as a high-profile artist living in Europe as the result of sustained political persecution in his home country informs the reception of the work made on and inspired by his encounters with people on Lesbos in a variety of ways and, as I explore further below, produces both positive and negative assessments of his engagement with the humanitarian crisis.

In a 2014 article, Christian Sorace characterizes Ai Weiwei's work as a 'transformation of his life into an experimental work of art and political criticism'.[18] Providing much-needed insight into the relationship between the changing philosophies of the Chinese Communist party and Ai Weiwei's use of the Maoist practice of criticism and self-criticism, Sorace demonstrates that Ai's use of his life in his work is intimately and profoundly connected with the promise and failures of Chinese Communism. Ai Weiwei has long been both a presence within his own work and made work that is autobiographical: from early works such as *Studies of Perspective*; to his use of the blog and other documentary forms to hold the government accountable for the deaths of thousands of children in poorly built schools in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake; to the video, installation and photography works recreating the conditions of his imprisonment by the Chinese government in 2011. Sorace argues that this presence 'is a refusal of the autobiographical and confessional self' and a 'radical departure from the medium of biography'.[19] Yet such an assertion cannot account for the role of the discourses of confession and autobiography in shaping the reception of Ai Weiwei's art in the West – where these discourses are, as the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler demonstrate,[20] the dominant mode of structuring the entrance of the individual subject into the social field. While Sorace warns against assuming that life narrative

discourses developed in the European tradition inform the production and intention behind the work, given that Ai Weiwei's work is exhibited in the West and not in China, we cannot so easily dismiss the relevance of life narrative discourses to understanding the *reception*, or impact, of his work in Europe.

One means of approaching Ai Weiwei's work about his incarceration, the Sichuan earthquake and the more recent work responding to the humanitarian crisis in Europe is by considering his use of the gallery as a space of memorialization. Like the Colombian installation artist Doris Salcedo, who creates installations that respond to the survivors and victims of political and drug violence in Colombia, Ai uses the art gallery for testimony and witness. Salcedo and Ai Weiwei have had significant success in using visual art and its institutions as a means of generating acts of witnessing for political violence which cannot be, or are not, widely discussed within the communities affected by them.[21] Ai's use of multiple forms for life narrative – installation, video, photography, sculpture, social media – for testimony and witnessing can be read as combining the traditions of life narrative with the strategies and self-reflexivity of avant-garde conceptual art. The importance of this combination will be discussed in more detail below. Across his oeuvre, Ai's practice investigates the potential for combining life narrative and conceptual art to respond to political violence. His practice explores the space of the gallery as a site of inscription that will make the memory of that violence available in the future. Ai Weiwei has consistently used the gallery as an archive, a means of bearing witness and of issuing testimony.

At the same time, Ai Weiwei's blog, Twitter and Instagram accounts are used to extend the 'impact of "the artist"' beyond the circumscribed field of visual art. As the recent exhibition organized by The Andy Warhol Museum and the National Gallery of Victoria demonstrated, Ai has been strongly influenced by Andy Warhol's interest in extending the distinctive subject position of the artist beyond the gallery through the production of media. Warhol worked with the dominant popular forms of his time, the magazine (*Interview*) and film, and Ai has likewise become a prolific user of social media, such as the blog, Twitter and Instagram.[22] This both cements the role of life narrative in his practice, and makes life narrative a medium Ai reinvents through his conceptual approach.

Like Warhol's use of the popular media forms of his time, Ai Weiwei's use of social media allows him to 'reach new and diverse audiences, and to expand the influence of contemporary art'.[23] His tweets and Instagram feed are available to audiences directly on the social media platforms he uses, making his work available outside the gallery environment. He also consistently brings this work *into* the gallery. His works of digital life narrative are remediated through art exhibitions, art magazines and catalogues. For example, his blog, which was written in Chinese and ran between 2006 and 2009 before being closed by the Chinese government, is now available as a book published, in translation, by MIT Press.[24] Unlike his blog, however, Ai's twitter feed has a significant amount of English-language content, and his Instagram account – being dominated by photographs – includes content that often crosses language (if not cultural) barriers. The ephemeral status of online forms of life narrative – susceptible as they are to the sale or closure of service providers, political interference and the problems presented by software and hardware obsolescence – is a subject of Ai's use of social media.[25] *#SafePassage* is one recent example of how Ai Weiwei creates work that uses remediation across the gallery and the screen.

Having charted the importance of autobiographical practice and media in Ai Weiwei's oeuvre, I will now turn to the case study of *#SafePassage* and consider his use of the selfie as a concrete example of the intersection of the aesthetic strategies and the autobiographical I have just outlined.

#SafePassage

#SafePassage is an exhibition largely made up of photographic works shot by Ai Weiwei using his smartphone. The works have three distinct, but related, subjects and are grouped in three sequences in the gallery. The first group of images documents Ai's reaction to the subject of persistent surveillance by the Chinese authorities. In October 2015, during renovations to his Beijing studio, listening devices where discovered in the power sockets.[26] Images of these devices taken by Ai Weiwei and posted to his Instagram feed are included in the exhibition. This most recent act of surveillance is contextualized through images and short text works that document the longer history of Ai's responses to being

under surveillance by the Chinese government. *#SafePassage* presents several photographs of people Ai Weiwei suspects are conducting surveillance of him: they are snapped eating on nearby tables at restaurants, drinking tea in cafes and sitting in parked cars. Ai's self-surveillance is also documented through photographs and text from the internet-based work *Weiwei cam* (2012), a short-lived work that used a digital camera in his home to broadcast directly to the internet (the website was shut down by the Chinese government within two days of going live).

The second component of the exhibition consists of the remediation and exhibition of photographs from Ai Weiwei's Instagram account, beginning in December 2015 when he established a studio on the Greek island of Lesbos. Since December 2015, Ai has travelled to other sites where people fleeing war have congregated, including refugee camps 'all around the Mediterranean, including in Syria, Turkey, Italy, Israel and France'.[27] For *#SafePassage* large sections of Ai's Instagram feed have been printed as wallpaper and cover the walls of two rooms in the gallery in a work titled *iPhone Wallpaper* (2016). In the centre of each room, on the floor, lies a 1:1 reproduction of a personal flotation device in marble. The third component of the exhibition is short video works also shot along the Mediterranean coast.

In its layout, *#SafePassage* positions the autobiographical work documenting Ai's harassment by Chinese secret police at the beginning of the exhibition. In doing this, the exhibition explicitly reminds, or informs, the viewer that Ai Weiwei has been subject to political violence, intimidation and ongoing surveillance in China. Ai responds to his position as a surveilled subject by using his iPhone to document – and expose – the people sent to observe him. By exhibiting these photographs, Ai testifies to the reality of political oppression in China, situating the viewer as a witness to these events. In the opening of the exhibition, taking and exhibiting the photographs becomes a means of speaking back to the power of the Chinese government. Ai refuses to submit to, or ignore, his surveillance and uses his iPhone and the gallery walls of Foam to refuse the subordinate position that surveillance and imprisonment create. This part of the exhibition establishes an important life narrative that the viewer then associates with the figure of Ai Weiwei they see repeated in *iPhone Wallpaper* in the next two rooms.[28] I will return to the importance of the relationship between these two elements of the exhibition later in my discussion. But first, I will introduce

the selfie as a form, and contextualize *#SafePassage* in relation to the consistent use of digital life narrative forms, and autobiographical works, in Ai Weiwei's oeuvre.

In many ways, the selfie exemplifies the undeniable force of life narrative and self-representation in contemporary culture and politics, and the continued challenge of developing responsive, sensitive frames for the analysis of everyday media forms of self-representation. I have chosen to consider Ai Weiwei's use of the selfie for several reasons. As a seemingly ubiquitous form of self-representation, the selfie is a divisive and degraded form.[29] The polarized response to the selfie in contemporary media – where it is decried as both the symptom and the cause of widespread narcissism or celebrated as form of empowerment – is the most recent example of the long history of contestation regarding the status of life narrative in modern culture.[30] While media and communications scholars approach the selfie through histories of celebrity,[31] ethnographies of everyday media use,[32] and the history of photography,[33] life narrative scholars have an important contribution to make to the study of the selfie. This contribution stems from the utility of existing theoretical frameworks and ways of reading for the task of interpreting the complex and sometimes competing desires which motivate selfie production. Life narrative scholars can bring much-needed insight to the challenge of accounting for the complex, and competing, desires that motivate selfie production and circulation, and how those desires respond to and are given new meanings through the encounter between a text and its audiences. What are the desires that motivate the selfie, and indeed many forms of life narrative? The desire for documentation, testimony, witness, or the act of putting something 'on the record'.[34] The desire for recognition by others, of an aspirational or idealized self, for a level of control or influence over how one is perceived by others. But, as Judith Butler has argued, acts of self-representation are also demanded of all of us if we are to meet the more fundamental requirement of subjectivity that facilitates entry into the social field.[35] Life narrative can also be motivated by the desire for recognition of the self *by* the self.[36]

Among media and communications scholars working on the selfie, there is agreement that the term 'selfie' refers to three distinct elements of self-representation: the practice of using a smart phone to produce self-portrait photography, the text that is produced by that practice, and

the circulation of the text through digital social networks.[37] While selfies are taken by a wide variety of people in a range of situations for very different purposes, scholars agree that we can refer to something called 'the selfie' which is commonly practiced and has established a level of coherence and function as a form of mediated communication. The selfie has grown in popularity and become of interest to media studies scholars because it exemplifies three defining characteristics of cultural, social and political life in the twenty-first century: the ubiquitous placement of humans and nonhumans in assemblages,[38] the democratization of media production that has seen everyday people producing media objects for circulation,[39] and the centrality of self-representation and life narrative in the media that is produced by everyday people.[40] Theresa M. Senft and Nancy Baym argue that while selfies are the products of humans and centred on human subjectivity and agency, 'selfies are created, displayed, distributed, tracked and monetized through an *assemblage* of nonhuman agents.'[41] Paul Frosh suggests that this assemblage creates an inherent reflexivity in the selfie; regardless of the specific purpose it serves, a selfie is 'a reflexive image'.[42] This reflexivity, or self-referentiality, occurs on two levels. At the level of mediation the selfie always calls attention to its mediated status, and at the level of action, the selfie is a 'genre of *personal* reflexivity'.[43]

Given the selfie's status as a ubiquitous form of everyday self-representation and its self-reflexivity, it is not surprising that Ai Weiwei has become one of the key proponents of the selfie in the field of art. That the selfie is a genre of photography is important here, given the role photography has played in undermining the aura of the individual art object.[44] Working across a wide variety of mediums, Ai's practice exemplifies what art critic Rosalind Krauss has described as a turn in conceptual art towards the 'reinvention of the medium'.[45] This reinvention, Krauss argues, is the response offered by the avant-garde to the changing status of the art-object in what Walter Benjamin famously described as 'the age of mechanical reproduction'.[46] The change in the treatment of medium Krauss identifies in conceptual and avant-garde art 'does not imply the restoration of any of those earlier forms [oil on canvas, sculpture]… that the "age of mechanical reproduction" had rendered so thoroughly dysfunctional through their … assimilation to the commodity form'.[47] Rather than try to reinstate the aura of the object, Krauss argues that 'post-medium' artists redefine 'a medium as a set of

conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support, conventions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic'.[48] It is as a medium in this sense, rather than as photography, that Ai Weiwei uses the selfie in *#SafePassage*. The selfie as a means of projecting experience and of making patterns for memorialization and memory is explored in *iPhone Wallpaper*. By using the selfie in this way, Ai critically engages with autobiography and celebrity as the discourses which underpin the selfie as a medium.

On the one hand, Ai's use of the selfie can be understood as a continuation of 'the general avant-garde practice of mimicry, of assuming the guise of whole ranges of non- or anti-art experience in order to critique the unexamined pretensions of high art'.[49] In his enthusiastic use of online platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, and of consumer grade hardware such as the iPhone camera, Ai takes up the role of provocateur in the gallery inaugurated by Duchamp. Ai's remediated selfies are a deliberate insertion of an out-of-place, non-aesthetic object into the rarefied space of the gallery. The use of wallpaper – famously used by Andy Warhol – strengthens the alignment of the work with the avant-garde tradition.[50] The selfie, as others have argued, is a common – rather than a rarefied – self-reflexive technical support for projecting and constructing an image of the self, while also commenting on the process of construction and projection.[51] By remediating the selfie into wallpaper in the gallery, Ai Weiwei maintains the avant-garde tradition of refusing an appeal to the distinctiveness of the art object.

Yet Ai Weiwei's work does not flow solely into the field of visual art; he takes the perspectives of the conceptual, avant-garde artist into the larger cultural field by publishing his work in online forums. We must, then, consider Ai's reinvention of medium as working in two directions: bringing the practices and aesthetics of social media into the field of visual art, and bringing the point of view of the conceptual artist to the broader media culture through platforms such as Instagram. Unlike the artists considered by Krauss, such as Sophie Calle and Jeff Wall, Ai Weiwei continuously uses public media spaces as sites of exhibition.

It is in accounting for the flow of images and aesthetic strategies between the gallery and the screen that Ai Weiwei's reinvention of medium can be appreciated. In order to understand this, we must return to *#SafePassage* and recognize that not all of the images in *#SafePassage*

make use of life narrative strategies. There are many images in the exhibition, particularly in *iPhone Wallpaper* (2016), and in Ai's Instagram feed, that work with the visual frame of the photojournalist.[52] However, in what follows I focus on the recurring use of the selfie – that ubiquitous and maligned photographic genre – as enacting a dual reinvention of medium to demand that Europeans act ethically towards the people arriving on the shores of the continent.

In going to Lesbos in December 2015 and explicitly stating that he was setting up a 'studio' on the beaches where people are, today, still arriving by boat, Ai Weiwei refused to recognize a barrier that might see the beaches at such a moment as 'off limits' to those not directly engaged in the provision of material assistance to the people arriving, or journalists reporting on the situation. Although Ai and his team did, reportedly, contribute to addressing the immediate physical needs of the people arriving, his presence on the beach was not solely directed at that need. His Instagram feed, and the later exhibition of the images in galleries in Europe, addressed an ethical need beyond helping people from the boats and providing them with food and water. Ai Weiwei's studio on Lesbos was attempting to offer a safe passage into European culture and media. Standing on the beach with his iPhone, Ai Weiwei offered the new arrivals an immediate opportunity to begin the work of entering the social field of Europe.

In thinking about Ai's use of selfies in this way, I am drawing on Judith Butler's theory of how it is that we become subjects in the social field. Butler argues that pre-existing norms structure the field of intelligibility; they frame the scene in which we might be apprehended as subjects by others.[53] Our ability to approximate those norms influences the extent to which we are recognized as living lives that are of value – or in Butler's formulation 'grievable'. In times of war, and here Butler agrees with Susan Sontag, photography holds a privileged place in providing evidence of war's atrocity.[54] At the same time, Butler argues, photography plays an important role in delimiting those lives which are considered acceptable losses, and those whose loss is considered unacceptable. The framing of grievable and ungrievable lives can work for the justification of war – by bolstering a sense of outrage regarding the loss of some lives, while minimizing the grievability of those on the other side of the conflict. Or, photography can offer alternative frames that seek to expand our understanding of whose lives matter. In this sense, for Butler the photograph has two interlocking frames:

the material frame – which limits the visual field – and the norms that frame the subject(s) depicted, making them legible within the social field.[55]

Following Butler, many critics have long argued that life narrative is a discourse which offers an important means for marginalized subjects to give an account of themselves by placing themselves in relation to the norms that make us legible as subjects.[56] Life narrative is a convention through which individual lives become intelligible within the social field.

Part of what we see in *#SafePassage,* then, is the selfie as a norm – an established technical support for the convention of self-documentation which is embedded in everyday life. Ai Weiwei deploys the selfie on the beaches of Lesbos as a means of offering safe passage from the realm of ungrievable lives viewed as collateral damage in wars outside Europe, to lives that can be apprehended in their individuality and precarity within Europe.

The selfie in *#SafePassage* is both a non-aesthetic object inserted in the gallery through the logic of conceptualism and an attempt to extend our understanding of whose lives are grievable in the social field of Europe. On at least two levels, then, the very everydayness of the selfie – its use of technical supports available to most people (the smart phone, the digital network, the free Instagram app), and its status as a norm (a convention) for self-representation – is vital to the work that *#SafePassage* attempts.

But what kind of norm *is* the selfie? If, following Butler, we understand norms as both discourses and practices that constitute the field in which we are intelligible as subjects and standards that are maintained through their iteration, then we could suggest the following paradigm: that the selfie is a practice which has range of functions, some quite similar to the diary in terms of the recording of everyday life and the documentation of what Virginia Woolf famously called 'small lives'.[57] Making selfies is now an established means of making oneself intelligible as a subject to *oneself* (an act of self-assessment, for example), to *one's community* (through the posing together and sharing of selfies) and within the broader social field (as a kind of public statement of one's existence, for example).[58] Ai Weiwei's use of Instagram is important in this regard, as Instagram is a platform – a mode of exhibition – which is the selfie's indigenous habitat.[59] By posting his selfies with

people arriving in Lesbos to Instagram, Ai inserts them into the media environment which is a primary locus of the selfie's power as a norm. Instagram both evidences and constructs the ubiquity of the selfie; it is a technical support for the selfie as a norm that frames the subject.

Yet even on Instagram the work that the norm of the selfie does – as media object, as life narrative form, as practice – is not clear. For this reason, I suggest we think of the selfie as an *emerging norm*, one that is buttressed by more long-standing conventions associated with life narrative, but which has also established itself as a distinctive practice and object.

What, then, might Ai Weiwei's act of posing for selfies with newly arrived people on the beaches of Europe, and his exhibition of those photographs on Instagram and their remediation into artworks exhibited in art galleries in Europe, tell us about the selfie as an emerging norm and its status as a new form of life narrative? And how might we talk, even provisionally, about Ai Weiwei's use of the selfie in this exhibition and across his oeuvre?

The use of selfies in *#SafePassage* is but one instance of a consistent engagement with life narrative throughout Ai Weiwei's practice, in his enthusiastic use of digital life narrative forms, and his use of the gallery space to create opportunities for testimony and witnessing. In Sorace's words, 'Ai's politics of memory eschews compassion in its pursuit of justice,'[60] yet the artist's work can also be (mis)read within a 'cold war narrative framework'[61] that pits an individual dissident artist against monolithic state power. The controversies around Ai Weiwei's criticism of Europe's response to the people seeking refuge in 2015 and 2016 evidence the strength of the Cold War narrative in shaping some of the support for Ai Weiwei in 2011. The strategies he was lauded for using when they were directed at the Chinese government are re-cast as 'inappropriate', 'crass' or 'narcissistic' when directed at the liberal democracies of Western Europe. Over the course of four years, between 2011 and 2015, Ai became a potent symbol in Europe of the continued struggle for human rights in China and of Europe's role as a champion for global human rights.[62] This status is the product of many factors: Ai's consistent use of life narrative as a convention in his work, his status as a privileged subject of empathy in the eyes of influential cultural workers in Europe, and his subsequent role as a symbol of Europe's preparedness to stand up for human rights. This status is critically deployed as a

frame within the selfies in *#SafePassage*. As Ai Weiwei routinely points out, he is not alone in suffering imprisonment, loss of liberty, torture and intimidation. Standing on the beaches of Lesbos with his camera turned towards himself and the people fleeing the wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, he challenges the people and institutions who so readily accept – and valorize – his status as a political refugee in Europe to extend that apprehension to those who continue to arrive at Europe's borders. Ai's presence in the frame is a direct challenge to a selective view of whose flourishing should be fostered and whose life is grievable.

What I am suggesting is that the selfie in *#SafePassage* sits within multiple frames, both norms and material. Within Ai Weiwei's body of work it is but one instance of a longstanding use of life narrative such as the blog and the self-portrait. It is also an example of his conceptualism, his interest in bringing non-aesthetic forms into the gallery and his work within the 'post-medium' tradition theorized by Rosalind Krauss. At the same time, Ai extends his art practice beyond the traditional sites of the art gallery into vernacular digital culture, and here life narrative is also central. Ai Weiwei's Instagram feed – containing images of his meals, his son, exhibitions being installed, selfies with friends and fans and photographic works themselves – is in its own right an autobiographical work and a form of exhibition. And, as he reminds us in the first section of *#SafePassage,* his autobiographical works sit in relation to the shadow biography that is created by his ongoing surveillance by the Chinese authorities. Digital life narrative forms are, in his work, a powerful means of exposing surveillance as a form of intimidation in China. Now that he works outside of China, he continues his use of life narrative forms as a medium of critique.

When I visited the *#SafePassage* exhibition in September, having recently arrived in Europe myself, I was struck by Ai Weiwei's deployment of these multiple frames. It seems a powerful indication of what the emerging norm of the selfie might do. Looking at the selfies in the exhibition it is clear that it is a practice which is already normative: many of the people who pose with Ai Weiwei know what to do when they see the iPhone pointing at them and Ai framing the shot. Whether the selfie can, indeed, act as a norm which offers these people access to the social field of Europe is less clear. Do we, looking at these pictures on Instagram or in an art gallery, accept these lives as ones whose flourishing is to be valued, and whose loss we might grieve?

About the Author

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Notes

1 See Lauren Said-Moorhouse, 'Ai Weiwei covers Berlin landmark in 14,000 refugee life jackets' *edition.cnn.com* http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/14/arts/ai-weiwei-berlin-life-jackets/, accessed 30 March 2016; Kimberly Bradley, 'Ai Weiwei: 21er Haus, Vienna, Austria', *frieze.com* https://frieze.com/article/ai-weiwei-2, accessed 3 November 2016.

2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London, 2009).

3 Monica Tan, 'Ai Weiwei poses as drowned Syrian infant refugee in "haunting" photo', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/01/ai-weiwei-poses-as-drowned-syrian-infant-refugee-in-haunting-photo, accessed 14 February 2016.

4 Bradley, 'Ai Weiwei: 21er Haus'.

5 Tan, 'Ai Weiwei poses'.

6 Rama Lakshmi, 'Chinese artist Ai Weiwei poses as a drowned Syrian refugee toddler', *The Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/30/chinese-artist-ai-weiwei-poses-as-a-drowned-syrian-refugee-toddler/?utm_term=.28f88aed543b, accessed 14 February 2016.

7 Karen Archey, 'For photo op, Ai Weiwei poses as dead refugee toddler from iconic image' *e-flux* http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/for-photo-op-ai-weiwei-poses-as-dead-refugee-toddler-from-iconic-image/3169/1, accessed 3 January 2017.

8 Ibid.

9 Max Delany and Eric Shiner (eds), *Andy Warhol | Ai Weiwei*, (Melbourne and Pittsburgh, 2016); Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speaks With Hans Ulrich Obrist*, Second Edition, (London, 2016).

10 Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Preface', *Ai Weiwei Speaks With Hans Ulrich Obrist*, vii–viii.

11 Jonathan Watts, 'Olympic artist attacks China's pomp and propaganda', *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/09/china.artnews, accessed 3 January 2017.

12 Many prominent figures in the art world have championed Ai Weiwei, including Hans Ulrich Obrist (a renowned curator of contemporary art) and Uli Sigg, former Swiss Ambassador to China and prominent collector of Chinese contemporary art. A political economy analysis of the role of specific institutions and individuals in the production of Ai Weiwei's fame is beyond the scope of this paper, but much needed. I thank Rachel O'Reilly for giving me some insight into the structure of the field.

13 Liz Stinson, 'Ai Weiwei's Shockingly Detailed Remake of His Life in a Chinese Prison', *Wired*, https://www.wired.com/2013/06/ai-weiweis-self-referential-work-in-venice/, accessed 3 January 2017.

14 Edward Wong, 'Prison Was Awful, but He Likes the Video Version', *The New York Times*, 21 May 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/22/arts/design/in-new-video-ai-weiwei-recreates-his-detention.html, accessed 3 January 2017.

15 Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (London, 2004); Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, 2005).

16 The Tate Modern, for example, exhibited the sign 'Release Ai Weiwei' on the exterior of the museum for the duration of his incarceration. The Kunsthaus Bregenz (Austria) displayed a sign on its façade that read 'Free Ai Weiwei'.

17 Christian Sorace, 'Ai Weiwei: China's Last Communist', *Critical Inquiry*, 40:2 (2014) 396–419.

18 Sorace, 'Ai Weiwei', 418.

19 Sorace, 'Ai Weiwei', 407–408.

20 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (London, 1990); Judith Butler, *Giving An Account of Oneself* (New York, 2005).

21 See Anastasia Maloney, 'Silence surrounds Colombia's 92,000 disappeared: ICRC' *Reuters World News* http://www.reuters.com/article/us-foundation-colombia-missing-idUSKBN0GT22520140829, accessed 3 January 2017, for context on Salcedo's work.

22 Ai Weiwei has long cited Andy Warhol as an important influence on his work. See, for example, 'Andy Warhol' in *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and*

Digital Rants 2006–2009, edited and translated by Lee Ambrozy (Cambridge, MA and London, 2011) 127–131. See also Max Delany and Eric Shiner (eds), *Andy Warhol | Ai Weiwei*, (Melbourne and Pittsburgh, 2016).

23 Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speaks,* vii.

24 Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006–2009*, translated by Lee Ambrozy (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

25 A recent example of this is the work *An Archive* (2015), which remediates Ai's tweets and blog writings from the period 2005 to 2013. In this work, Ai's entire twitter feed and blog posts are printed on sheets of rice paper and displayed in frames and in boxes.

26 Tiffany Ap, 'Artist Ai Weiwei discovers hidden "listening devices" in Beijing studio', *edition.cnn.com*, http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/05/asia/china-ai-weiwei-finds-listening-devices/, accessed 3 January 2017.

27 *FOAM* https://www.foam.org/museum/programme/ai-weiwei, accessed 3 September 2016.

28 The structure of the exhibition could also be interpreted as an example of what Rosalind Krauss describes, following Derrida, as the 'invagination' involved in the reinvention of medium that defines some the trend in current contemporary avant-garde art that I am suggesting Ai Weiwei contributes to. See Rosalind Krauss, 'Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition', *October* 116 (2006) 55–62.

29 See the overview of controversies about the selfie in Therese M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym, 'What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon', *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015) 1588–1606.

30 Julie Rak, 'Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity' *Genre* 37:3–4 (2004) 483–504. Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York 2009).

31 Alice E. Marwick, 'Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy', *Public Culture* 27:1 (2015) 137–160.

32 Katharina Lobinger and Cornelia Brantner, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: Subjective Views on the Authenticity of Selfies', *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015) 1848–1860.

33 Paul Frosh, 'The Gestural Image: The Selfie, Photography Theory, and Kinesthetic Sociability', *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015) 1607–1628.

34 G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*, (Oxford, 2011); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narrative*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, 2010).

35 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself.*

36 Nancy K. Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (New York, 2002).
37 See Frosh, Marwick. See also Senft and Baym, 'What Does the Selfie Say?', and Patricia Routh, 'The Politics of Transformation: Selfie Production of the Visually Marginalised', in Athina Karatzogianni et al. (eds), *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere*: *Conflict, Migration, Crisis and Culture in Digital Networks* (London, 2016) 363–381.
38 Senft and Baym, 'What Does the Selfie Say?'
39 Marwick, 'Instafame'.
40 Frosh, 'The Gestural Image'.
41 Senft and Baym, 'What Does the Selfie Say?', 1589.
42 Frosh, 'The Gestural Image', 1621.
43 Ibid.
44 Ai Weiwei emphatically established his position on the issue of the status of the aura of the object with a series of works that took Han Dynasty urns as their basis. See *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), a tryptic of photographs documenting Ai releasing his grip on an ancient urn and allowing it to smash at his feet; the series *Coloured Vases* (2009–2011), where ancient ceramics are painted over with contemporary, industrial paint; *Coca-Cola Vase* (1994). See also Christian Sorace's discussion of these works as evidence of Ai Weiwei's continuation of the Chinese Communists Party's practice of 'destroying traditional religious and cultural objects' during the Cultural Revolution 'in order to shatter superstition' (Sorace, 402).
45 Rosalind Krauss, 'Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition' and Rosalind Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, 25:2 (1999) 289–305.
46 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1969).
47 Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', 296.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 295.
50 In the photographs in *iPhone Wallpaper* that are not selfies, Ai Weiwei references the tradition of photoconceptualism, which 'mobilized the unexpected formal resources in the look of "nonart" contained in the haphazard spontaneity of the documentary photography', Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium' 295.
51 Frosh, 'The Gestural Image'.
52 It is interesting to consider this element of the work in relation to Rosalind Krauss's analysis of the importance of the adaptation of photojournalism to the reinvention of medium in the works of Jeff Wall and Sophie Calle.

53 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*; Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*
54 Butler, *Frames of War*, 69–71; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977).
55 Butler, *Frames of War*, 51.
56 Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction.*
57 Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009).
58 Senft and Baym, 'What Does the Selfie Say?'
59 See Marwick 'Instafame', 141.
60 Sorace, 'Ai Weiwei', 414.
61 Ibid., 405.
62 See Micheline R. Ishay's argument that the dominant conception of Human Rights has its roots in European intellectual and religious traditions in *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004) 63–107.