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Introduction

This essay will discuss the extent at which the artists Ai Weiwei and Richard Serra have successfully, or unsuccessfully, developed their art practice to utilise space and or place in context to art outside the gallery. This will be done by looking at how these artists have made practical and effective use of the space and or place they have used to help elevate the message of their artwork and to determine if it is appropriate use of that space and or place, or if there is any controversy behind their choice by the public resulting in the removal of the artwork, vandalism or the artwork becomes subject to heavy negative criticism. Further detail and information surrounding the context of the artworks will also be explored if relevant to the discussion. Finally, the essay will then come to a succinct conclusion on these matters.

Ai Weiwei - Refugee Life Jacket Installation

Weiwei, who currently lives and works in Berlin, was born in Beijing in 1957. Weiwei received the Human Rights Foundation's 2012 Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent as well as Amnesty International's 2015 Ambassador of Conscience Award. Strong aesthetic remarks made by Weiwei are well known for resonating with current events taking place all across the geopolitical landscape of today. Weiwei employs a variety of media, from architecture to installations, social media to films, as expressions of new ways for his audiences to consider society and its ideals. Recent exhibitions by Weiwei include Good Fences Make Good Neighbours with the Public Art Fund in New York City, Ai Weiwei: Resetting Memories at the MARCO in Monterrey, Ai Weiwei: Bare Life at the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum in St. Louis, and Ai Weiwei at the K20/K21 in Düsseldorf (Ai Weiwei Films, n.d.).

Weiwei has developed his art practice in a clear way to utilise space outside the gallery which we can see through his work relating to the refugee crisis. For example, back in 2016 where, for a photographer and journalist who was writing an article on him, he

posed for a re-enactment photo as the three-year-old toddler Alan Kurdi, who drowned off a Turkish beach in an attempt to flee Syria in 2015, which both humanised the refugee crisis in Syria and incited uproar around the world because of the original photo being so difficult to look at (Chung, 2016). The reenactment of the original photo may have been able to make the refugee crisis more relatable to western audiences to spread more awareness, but was also considered to be in poor taste, as it was an edited stylized black and white image, and a re-enactment of a horrible event that resulted in a lot of mental harm for the toddlers family (Shoichet, 2015). Weiwei felt that posing in a similar position felt particularly powerful and had the following to say about the photo:

You see so many children come off these boats. They are like angels -- they are the most vulnerable. You can see the world has put them in extreme, hopeless conditions. There are two worlds -- a world of adults and a world of babies, and they are not connected. (Chung, 2016)



Figure 1 (Chung, 2016)

Weiwei's temporary Life Jacket installation, in 2016 a couple of months after the photo seen in figure 1 above was published, shows a clear development of his art practice to utilise space in an effective way to further elevate his theme of refugee crisis awareness. The installation took place on the six front columns of the Konzerthaus Concert Hall, Gendarmenmarkt square in the central Mitte district of the city where

Weiwei used 14,000 life jackets, which were actually worn by refugees travelling to Europe via the Greek island of Lesbos. Additionally, a lifeboat bearing the phrase ‘#safe passage’ hangs in the middle of the installation. In addition to drawing attention to the refugee situation as a whole, Weiwei intended the art installation to emphasise “the countless lives changed by the crisis, with every single vest reflecting the individual life of a man, woman or child whose landing at Lesbos is just the beginning.” Weiwei has visited the island numerous times since the crisis started which helped him acquire the life jackets that were delivered to Berlin with permission from the municipal officials for the art installation (Howard, 2021) (Azzarello, 2016).



Ai Weiwei - Refugee Life Jacket Installation (Said-Moorhouse, 2016)

This development of Weiwei’s art practice to use this space was done in a really effective way. This is because the temporary installation was timed with the annual Berlinale film festival where the Cinema for Peace gala was being held at the Konzerthaus. The outcome of this was that famous celebrities and important members

of the film industry attend this event who have serious outreach and influence to millions of people. This resulted in an effective use of space because it means the message of the work has an even greater reach due to influence of the people attending Konzerthaus for the event and the further media exposure from the international press covering the event and the festival to broadcast the installation's message to a global audience (Neuendorf, 2016).

It can be argued that the use of real life jackets, while being really effective in portraying a real meaningful message of awareness for refugees, could have been used more practically by being reused if possible. This can be seen in the comments of the Der Standard article (an Austrian daily newspaper published in Vienna covering the art installation) where it was commented that, "It would have been more useful to send and distribute them [the life jackets] in north Africa " (Der Standard, 2016). Authorities, however, from Lesbos where the life jackets used in the installation were from, as previously mentioned, confirmed that they were unwanted life jackets meaning that this was a practical use for them in this space (Said-Moorhouse, 2016).

Weiwei's choice of place for the installation does have some issues because, more than any other member of the European Union, Germany took in over one million refugees in 2015 (Ridgwell, 2021). Furthermore, the Huguenot population that fled religious persecution in Catholic France in the 17th century and was given asylum in Berlin by Frederick the Great in 1685 is located in Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin, where the Konzerthaus is situated. Around 20,000 Huguenots immigrated to Berlin, and in the beginning of the 18th century, it was estimated that 1 in 5 Berliners were of Huguenot descent (Neuendorf, 2016). With this in mind it may have been more appropriate to have had this installation in a different country that was lacking in their acceptance of refugees.

While the message of the installation is extremely important and the use of the space is very effective in reaching a wider audience to spread awareness, it can be questioned that Weiwei's use of place could be considered self-serving to raise awareness of his

own art practice, using the message of refugee awareness to further his own career (Said-Moorhouse, 2016). However, this isn't necessarily a true or a negative thing because Weiwei's overall theme to his art practice is awareness of various issues that he does his best to spread to the general public as an activist, which can be seen quite clearly with how he developed his art practice for this installation so that he could effectively and practically use space and place to his advantage for a good cause.

Richard Serra - Tilted Arc

Serra, born in 1938 in San Francisco and now lives in and works in New York and on the North Fork of Long Island, created large-scale, site-specific sculptures for architectural, urban, and landscape sites all around the world, and is considered one of the most notable artists of his time. He has awards, such as, Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, US & Canada, the Leone d'Oro for lifetime achievement, Biennale di Venezia, Venice (2001), Orden Pour le Mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste, Federal Republic of Germany (2002), Orden de las Artes y las Letras de España, Spain (2008), President's Medal, Architectural League of New York (2014), Chevalier de l'Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur, Republic of France (2015), and J. Paul Getty Medal (2018). The Museum of Modern Art in New York has held two retrospectives of Serra's sculptures and drawings, twenty years apart: Richard Serra/Sculpture (1986) and Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years (2007). Serra has also had various solo and international exhibitions throughout his career (numbering to 30 plus solo exhibitions since 1983) (Gagosian, 2018).

The Art-in-Architecture programme of the United States General Services Administration chose to commission a sizable work of public art for the plaza in front of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in New York City in 1979. Serra was awarded the commission to produce this work, given by this committee of experts and then two years planning it because he thought it would be a permanent installation to this busy part of the city. The 120-foot-long wall of unfinished steel that was 12 feet high, followed a

modest arc along its length, and leaned slightly to one side, titled *Tilted Arc* was installed in Federal Plaza, New York, in 1981. The installation split Federal Plaza in half, which was done on purpose to force people who frequently visited the building to find alternative routes (Tate, 2019) (Campbell, 2020). Serra explained:

The viewer becomes aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza. As he moves, the sculpture changes. Contraction and expansion of the sculpture result from the viewer's movement. Step by step, the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes. (Campbell, 2020)



Tilted Arc 1981 - Richard Serra (Tate, 2019)

This was an effective use of space and place for Serra's vision for how the installation would interact with the general public because it was located in a busy cross section in New York between office buildings where it did force people to observe the different and changing perspectives of the artwork. This forced observation was not taken as positive

for the workers who had to frequently use this route as it was called oppressive, which would lead you to consider that Serra did not successfully develop his art practice to work with the public's interests and needs for this space, however, that would defeat the whole purpose of the installation (Tate, 2019) (Campbell, 2020).

This stance on the work from the local public was immediate with the installation being called ugly, a graffiti catcher being prime for vandalism and two petitions seeking the removal of the installation quickly acquired 1,300 signatures which was a minority among the 10,000 employees. For this reason the General Services Administration (GSA), which commissioned the work, remained faithful, and would not remove the installation (Tate, 2019).

However, the appointment of William Diamond as a new regional administrator by the Republicans resulted in a significant shift in the GSA's policy in 1984. This led to a three-day public hearing in 1985 on the prospect of moving the work, and the head of the panel of adjudicators was William Diamond himself. 180 people spoke during the open forum, including Serra, who emphasised that the installation was site-specific and would cease to be an artwork if relocated, which evidently shows how Serra used the two years of planning to develop his art practice to effectively and practically use the space he had been commissioned. Serra rejected that the plaza's social use was hampered, which technically it wasn't because it didn't completely cut off access, it only made you have to reevaluate your route and look at and take in your surroundings, which was the successful aim of the installation (Tate, 2019) (Campbell, 2020).

Only fifty-eight people, mostly employees of the surrounding offices, voted against keeping the piece and overall, 122 people, including many prominent names from the art world, such as Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, and Phillip Glass, supported keeping it. This again illustrated how Serra had successfully developed his art practice to suit the space and place which was recognised by other artists. Despite this support, the panel decided to move *Tilted Arc* despite these numbers, finally being removed from the space in 1989 and put into storage where it has stayed since because Serra insisted

that the insulation never be exhibited again because as previously stated he had specifically developed his art practice for this piece to be only shown in its original space that it was commissioned for. This would suggest the installation was unsuccessful, but as previously mentioned this was not the case, shown by the overwhelming minority who were against the work, but were still somehow able to get it removed and by the overall public reaction to the installation (Tate, 2019) (Campbell, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion these artists, Ai Weiwei and Richard Serra, have both been more successful the majority of the time in utilising space and place in most instances to elevate the meaning or message behind their installations. They did this through research, past experiences and systematic planning to ensure they could effectively and practically use the space/place to their full advantage to elevate the meaning or the message behind the work. Both artists had controversies in response to their artwork, but this only further helped to spread the message of their work or illustrated exactly what was intended of the artwork. This shows some main principles of what to expect when working outside the gallery space where the general public is involved because they are not actively looking for this artwork, it is instead placed in front of them with no option but to experience it. This is why there will always be controversy surrounding public space artwork because not everyone will deem it appropriate to the space or place no matter how much preparation there was to utilise it, but as long as the artworks message or theme is effectively presented by utilising the space or place then it will be successful.

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