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Will we ever learn?



Fig. One

I have decided to curate an exhibition including photography, artwork and installation art to ask the question “Will we ever learn?”

This is an important question to me as we now live in a world where politicians in many nations hold the key to important decisions which can literally mean life or death.

It could be argued that in a time of pandemic that this is truer than ever.

The main theory I wish to explore from this curation is linked to the etymology of curating which has historically meant – to care, as explained by Hans Ulrich Obrist in a Guardian interview from 2014.

Because I care about humanity so deeply I wanted to ask the question - will we ever learn? The themes from these photographers and artists are quite dark but I feel they have been extremely important in the field of photojournalism to change people’s views and opinions. Two won Pulitzer prizes for their content and all caused controversy when printed on the front pages when first published, causing sadness, anger and in the case of Alan kurdi, governments to act.

The main theme of the exhibition revolves around individuals who have in some way or another changed the world but also asking if we will ever learn from them.

In an article from February 2019 Noam Chomsky stated that ‘In a couple of generations, organized human society may not survive. That has to be drilled into people’s heads constantly.’

He also discussed the issue of a migrant crisis but asked the question “what’s it going to be like when Bangladesh is flooded, hundreds of millions of people have to flee? in relation to the climate crisis we also find ourselves in.

While China is currently involved in a blame game by Trump in regards to the coronavirus I felt it was important to place some art in this exhibition that shows that although its government has many questions to answer, many of its people are often against their decisions.

I feel that Ai Weiwei’s installation piece perfectly shows this along with “the complexity of the Chinese individual’s relationship with society, the authorities and tradition.”

Given that Ai wanted to portray a kind of “Made in China” point around his piece I wanted to place this in the mission gallery space below the other two images depicting individuals, as consumerism, materialism and slave labour have an impact on people’s lives daily.

The three images combined give a sense that we all need to fight to combat authoritarian governments, help migrants and stop poverty worldwide.

The artwork of Boris in a separate room or space of the gallery could be interpreted as being a person responsible for such troubling images seen at the beginning of the exhibition.

I first saw the image of the Tank man on a tv screen when I was 8 years of age. It moved me to tears because I’d never seen anything like it. In a sense it opened my eyes to the world for the first time. The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 by students protesting against their communist government may not have been remembered by many in the west if it was not for a bunch of photographers in a high-rise hotel that managed to capture the scenes as they unfolded in front of their eyes on that 5th of June.

The image of a lone protester standing in the road, trying to wave down a tank that led a troop of other tanks, was to be plastered over the front pages of many newspapers all over the world in the next few days.

One of the photographers, Charlie Cole, would later comment that the photo diminished the accomplishments of the other photographers on the scene that day documenting the crackdown against the demonstrators in the square. Many of whom had to dodge bullets while trying to flee the massacre.

To highlight the fact that the Chinese communist party was to push the economic agenda for China and crush any kind of questioning of their politics I decided it would be interesting for people attending the exhibition to view the Tank man photo while standing in Ai Weiwei’s installation piece called Sunflower Seeds.

The piece was installed at the Tate modern gallery, London, in 2010 and consisted of millions of individually handcrafted porcelain sunflower seeds.

I feel that it would fit well in a small floor space like that of the mission gallery beneath a picture of the tank man and the sense of “one and the many, the individual and the masses, self and society” that Ai wanted to portray with his work, I feel would be highlighted more so with both pieces next to each other.



Fig. Two

The next picture I decided to choose for the exhibition is that of “The vulture and the little girl” which was captured by Kevin Carter in Sudan, 1993.

The image of the young child, later found to be a boy, stooped to the ground with the vulture in the background, won Carter the Pulitzer prize for feature photography in 1994, but he was later to take his own life in despair at the things he had witnessed.

Now immortalized in the Manic Street Preachers song, Carter’s picture was used by many aid organisations to raise money to stop the famine in Sudan after it was published in the New York Times.



Fig. Three

There were other images I considered using as alternatives to this such as The Terror of War image by Nick Ut taken in 1972 as the war raged in Vietnam.

The image was of a young girl who had been burnt by napalm dropped on her village and it also won a Pulitzer prize.

Another image which I considered using was that of an Iraqi girl at checkpoint by Chris Hondros, taken in 2005. It again depicts a young girl bloodied by war.

The fourth picture I have chosen to use is to highlight the migrant crisis. The picture of a young child washed up on a beach in Bodrum also hit the tabloid front pages a few years ago. The image of a 3-year-old Alan Kurdi, from Syria, was captured by Nilüfer Domir of the Dogan news agency.

The picture speaks to me on a personal level having been to the beaches of Bodrum and Kos ten years previously.

It's also an image that was recreated and caused controversy by Ai Weiwei as he himself enacted the scene.

It shares similarity to the other two images in that the threat, like the tanks and the vulture are present as the sea in the photo.

Within a week or so of the photo being published I remember seeing German's clapping Syrians from a train as they welcomed them to their country.

The child's red t-shirt may well have highlighted the danger that many children had to endure while crossing seas to seek a better life.

As the civil war in Syria continues the migrant crisis is still a huge problem, highlighted once more by Ai Weiwei in his film Human flow. In the UK during the pandemic there have been more reports of crossings from France to the shores of England, mainly by Iranians.

Their plight was also raised by a striking documentary podcast called girl taken which has been aired at the start of the pandemic by BBC radio 4.



Fig. Four

The fifth image I want to include in my mission gallery space is the Wefail.art painting of Boris with his bloody hands in the background of a poem called The Man of double deed by an anonymous poet.

I envisaged this piece being in the curved space of the gallery right at the back and I wanted it to be placed there as though it was at the back of refrigerator akin to the one that Boris hid in during his election campaign. I wanted the particular space in the mission gallery to be made cold in some kind of way using fans to blow ice cold air towards anyone visiting it.

The painting (without the poem which I decided to add myself) has drawn criticism from the right-wing media since it has been created but I feel it perfectly represents the total negligence with which Boris has dealt with the Pandemic, considering we now have the highest death toll in Europe.

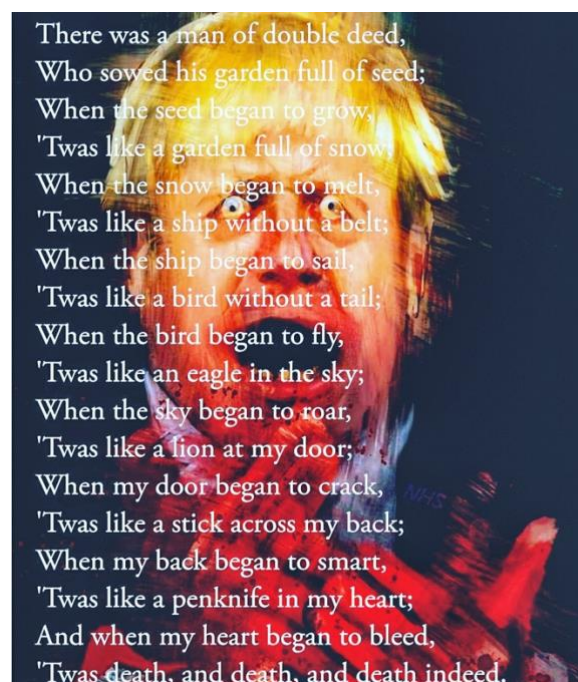


Fig. Five

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Fig. One

The Tank Man. Various (1989)

Fig. Two

Sunflower Seeds. Ai Weiwei (2010)

Fig. Three

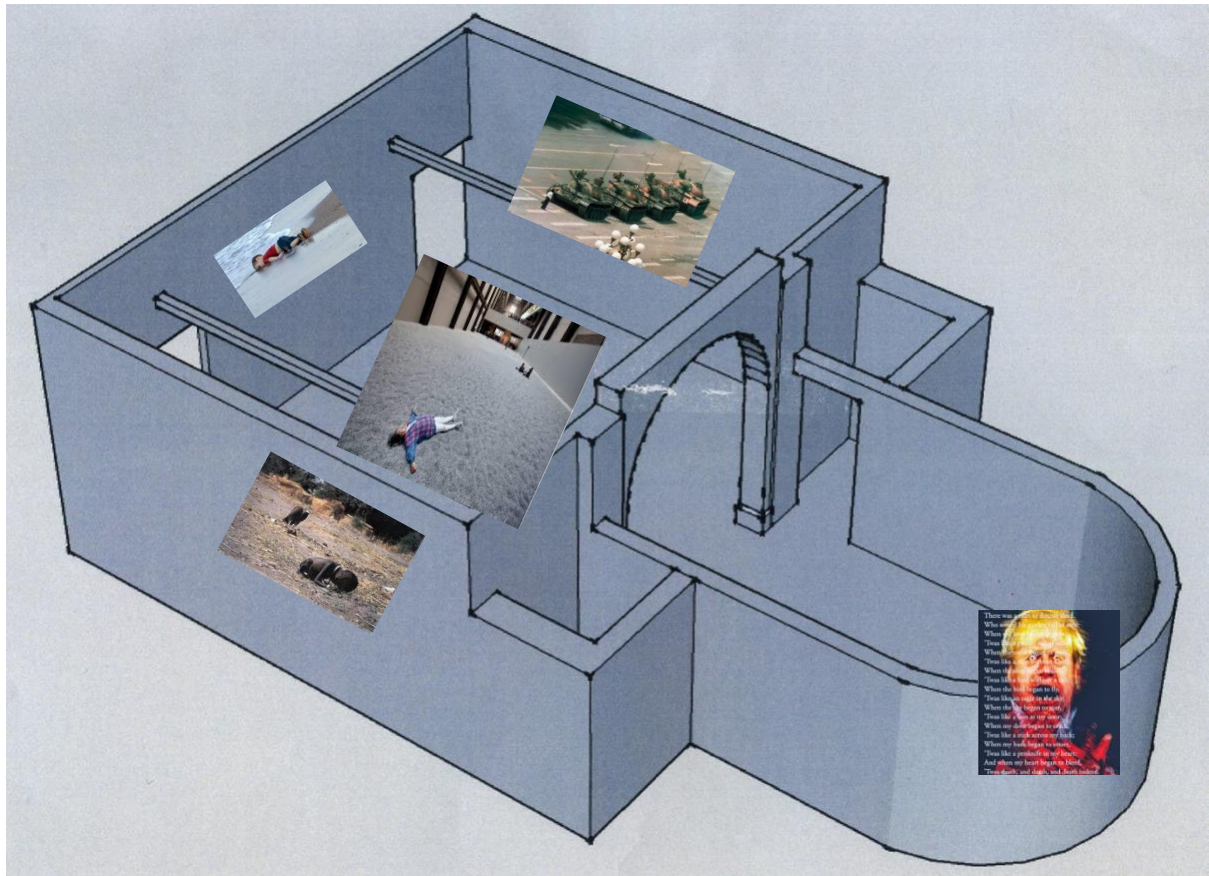
The Vulture and the little girl. Kevin Carter (1993)

Fig. Four

Alan Kurdi. Nilüfer Demir (2015)

Fig. Five

Boris, The Man of double deed. Wefail.art & Ben Evans (2020)



Mission Gallery, envisioned exhibition floorplan.