

Solidarity and the Aporia of “We” Representation and Participation of Refugees in Contemporary Art

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In all iterations of Olafur Eliasson’s *Green Light*, asylum seekers and refugees were asked to participate by producing crystalline *green light* lamps, consisting of polyhedral units fitted with small, green-tinted light fixtures. The module was invented by Eliasson’s long-time friend and collaborator, Einar Thorsteinn, as part of the numerous geometric studies they undertook at the studio. The small modules were made predominantly from recycled and sustainable materials (European ash, recycled yogurt cups, used plastic bags, and recycled nylon) and green LED lights that could function either as single objects or be assembled into a variety of architectural configurations. The lamps were ultimately sold for €250 each. Participants in the workshop, for their part, could access free language classes, counselling education and other workshops.

Eliasson is one of many artists who have attempted not only to depict or record refugees in the context of contemporary art, but also to invite them to participate directly in projects and events organized by art and cultural institutions.¹ In this manner, refugees become represented not only by “proxy”—in images, objects or recorded videos that represent their plight—but through their very presence in real time when they are invited to become participants, collaborators and co-producers of art projects.

When discussing his project, Eliasson stated:

“I want to thank you all for co-hosting us and one another because I think there is something very important going on here—the decentralization of hospitality, which means there is no center, but rather only periphery. Obviously, this is not completely true, because there is an organization, TBA21, behind this, but I would still argue that *Green Light* aims to decentralize hospitality.”²

¹ For example, Batycka’s “At Manifesta Artists Address Italy’s Migrant Crisis” was entirely dedicated to art about the refugee crisis, questioning whether in the context of international biennales such projects could have a purpose other than raising questions. In this regard, he mentioned *Trampoline House*, an art project in Copenhagen that exceeded and went beyond its original concept as an art project.

² This reflection on the first stage of project *Green Light* appeared in TBA21’s online journal in the conversation between the artist Olafur Eliasson and Andreas Roepstorff entitled “Hosting the Spirit of *Green light*,” which preceded the project’s presentation at the Venice Biennial in 2017.

There is nothing wrong with such a statement at first sight. The obvious question, however, is whether such “decentralized hospitality” can really occur in the contexts in which Olafur Eliasson staged his project, particularly when accounting for how profoundly integrated the art system’s institutions—TBA21 Vienna and the 2017 Venice Biennale—are in the capitalist mode of production.

In Venice, the project occupied a huge space in one of the first rooms of the prestigious Central Pavilion. Refugees were invited only for the duration of the professional and press opening, where the audience consisted primarily of journalists commissioned to review the Biennial, museum and gallery directors, employed and freelance curators, art collectors and dealers. The participants-turned-producers were instructed on how to make the objects—in other words, there was no creativity involved on their side; they were simply present in the installation—and their communication with the audience during the exhibition’s events was reduced to a minimum.

The budget and distribution of the initial funds, as well as those raised and obtained through the project, were not made transparent. In addition, thousands of images of the anonymous refugee participants have circulated ever since the installation. Alongside the green lights, then, the participants in Eliasson’s project were eventually nevertheless turned into images. One might also inquire about the fees, copyrights, and lecture honoraria generated from the project, and ask other difficult questions about the circulation and distribution of capital beyond the event itself.

This paper attempts to unravel the hidden contradictions and challenges stemming from prevailing expectations of this emerging strategy of participation. At first sight, by comparison with other art genres that use representation,³ such a strategy and mode of art production seems more appropriate to the current social climate (which the media refer as to a “humanitarian crisis” or “refugee crisis”). More traditional forms of artistic representation are frequently stereotypical and prejudicial, regardless of whether they involve fully documented citizens or refugees of various statuses who are kept marginalized and mostly invisible in the common social fabric. The so-called crisis has also made already existing social tensions more visible, exacerbated by the outburst of hatred and racism towards recently arrived refugees (for instance, with the anti-Islamist and neo-Nazi Pagida riots in Germany and Austria).⁴ Participation in art projects is, thus, to a large extent imagined as a kind of enacted compensation for both faulty artistic representations and the lack of inclusion and participation in socio-political life. Clearly, there is an ethical debate over whether and how to represent vulnerable and suffering subjects in general, but it nevertheless remains pertinent to ask whether and how people’s direct involvement in artistic projects substantially changes their existence and living conditions, or improves society in general for that matter.⁵

3. This is true even in cases where representation is applied in a more conceptual way, for example, with text, signs or symbols.

4. See, for example, the protests of Pagida anti-Islamist protests in Dresden, and the conflicts against the Akademikerball held in 2015 in Vienna’s Hofburg—the gathering of right-wing parties under the auspices of the Austrian radical right-wing party FPÖ.

5. In *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation, and Agency*, I argue that the neoliberal socio-political context turns many socio-political engaged projects into “infelicitous speech acts” that stem from the contradictions between the artists, institutional limitations and the neoliberal socio-political and economical paradigm of production and distribution of art. More recently Abreu’s “We Need to Talk about

Between saying and doing

According to various statements by Eliasson, *Green Light* was conceived as a metaphorical "device" for refugees and migrants (in Austria and beyond) in order to employ the "agency of contemporary art and its potential to initiate processes of civic transformation" by eliciting "various forms of participation and engagement."⁶ In an interview, Eliasson elaborates similar good-faith, critical intentions:

"Systems are normally defined as hierarchical, top-down, institutional, and exclusive—also systems that claim to be inclusive are in fact exclusive, systems that claim that we can identify with them but that we actually struggle to identify with. Let me give one example: one system that we like is the EU, but we have no emotional understanding of what on earth the EU is. Another system is the UN: we have come to love the UN, but we have no emotional narrative to understand what the UN is. We all think that these systems are important, but we feel disconnected. So I am very interested in when we feel connected and when we feel disconnected."⁷

While international asylum laws differ in the various countries that hosted the project, in most European countries (among them Austria and Italy, where *Green light* was installed) refugees do not have the legal right to be engaged in paid activities or to access free education if they have not been granted asylum. The political institutions responsible for either embracing or refusing the requests for refugee status, legalization, residential permits, or citizenship rarely contemplate the means for future inclusion of refugees or the political frames in operation. Accordingly, participatory art is often seen as the only alternative compensation for a situation in which it is not unusual that refugees' entire life is confined to in-betweenness and the non-spaces of refugee camps.

The substantial difference between *inclusion* and *belonging* (access to state institutions that secure such equal civic rights as rights to education, visas, residential and work permits, employment, and citizenship), and the symbolic inclusion and short-term participation in art projects is one of the main reasons it is urgent to analyze the political dynamics of participatory art practices that include refugees. While the representation of undocumented subjects in the context of political institutions operates on a different register, I would nevertheless like to challenge this difference and question the source of such assumptions, emphasizing that any political representation is also symbolic (and vice versa). The main questions, therefore, are twofold: first, whether inviting refugees to take part in art projects necessarily leads to an exploita-

⁶ Social Practice" offers an in-depth analysis of the contradictions at work between the promises and expectations of the art projects aiming towards social change and the final results that often hit the "wall" of the overall socio-political climate.

⁶ Eliasson, "Assembling a Light, Assembling Communities."

⁷ Eliasson and Roepstorff, "Hosting the Spirit of *Green Light*." Eliasson then takes a more personal tone: "We know a lot about the refugee crisis from the media and from one another because we talk about it, but the emotional narrative is very difficult. It is so abstract! I know what I think about the crisis, refugees, EU, the climate—you name it. I know what I think about it, but it is so difficult for me as a civic participant to engage with. If I cannot feel the 'we,' I am also a populist, because populism means anti-we. So I suffer because I have become numb and I don't have a sense of we."

tion of their (already) difficult position and condition; second, whether, in re-enacting their plight and their impeded political status time and again, such projects necessarily have an advantage over figurative and conceptual artistic representation simply because such representations are not “mediated” and (if possible) the participation is paid. Most importantly, it is important to discuss whether it is possible at all to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypical representations and to induce sociopolitical changes with participatory strategies that apply the instruments of direct democracy in an art context.

The Aporia of “We”

What form does “inclusion” take in participatory art projects? What imagined community is figured in and through the work? During the recent refugee crisis in Europe, perhaps the biggest since World War Two, the phrase “we refugees” became a slogan of apparent solidarity with exiles, a mode of offering one’s own home to those arriving. It involved a form of political overidentification, and proof of compassion and empathy for people who have been stripped of their basic human rights in their new domiciles. Of course those who mobilize this phrase (for my purposes here, the artists or organizations, such as BAK, Utrecht, organizing participatory works) are not refugees themselves and do not belong to the ones fleeing political turmoil in their home countries. Although accompanied by calls for equal participation of non-documented immigrants and refugees in civil society, claiming democratic rule of law and “equal justice for all,” the “we” of “we refugees” often rings flat, since the slogan is ambiguous and open to charges of self-interest, condescension, and even racism. The “we” can, even as it claims solidarity, conceal a suppressed fear of the refugee, of the ‘other’ who supposedly crosses the ‘threshold’ of one’s home without legitimate right to do so. It can also express the Eurocentric divide between ‘us’ (already settled and privileged citizens) and ‘them’ (the newcomers, including those, for example, from the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere in eastern Europe, or between Christian and Muslim immigrants).

Expressions of solidarity with refugees can thus conceal essentialism and condescension based on citizenship, class and religion. Governments’ flagrant neglect of responsibilities entailed by use of the “we” reveals the aporias of a solidarity founded in national belonging. Ever since Hannah Arendt’s essay “We Refugees,” the phrase has been used to express sympathy with the underprivileged, the precarious and the politically persecuted.⁸ Fifty years later, Giorgio Agamben borrowed it for the title of an essay comparing Nazi concentration camps and the contemporary detention centers.⁹ Agamben’s argument in favour of the use of “we,” emphasizing the need for compassion towards all political subjects, was directly influenced by Arendt, whom he quotes

⁸ Arendt, “We Refugees,” 110–119. The article was first published in *The Menorah Journal* in January 1943.

The English edition of the article appeared in 1951, the same year that Arendt received US citizenship, after briefly being detained by the Nazi regime in 1933 and fleeing illegally across the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia; in 1937, when she had been deprived of her German citizenship.

⁹ Agamben, “We Refugees.” Different versions have been published under the same or different titles, including “Beyond Human Rights.”

at the beginning of his essay. The sentiment organizes the politics of "inclusion" present in participatory art practice.

Jacques Derrida's term "hostipitality," however, points to the complexity of the concept of "belonging" and "hospitality," unravelling the challenges to the legislation and socialization of refugees. Hostipitality derives from the tension between hospitality and cosmopolitanism, or more precisely from the conflict between the privacy of the home and an unconditional ethics and openness to the world; the tension proceeds from fears for the stability of the home if the problems of the world enter in. Derrida has stressed that "If we try to draw a politics of hospitality from the dream of unconditional hospitality, not only will it be impossible but it will have perverse consequences."¹⁰ The aporia of absolute hospitality comes from the fact that it "requires that I open my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided by a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.) but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names."¹¹

The paradox of not being able to give a gift and still have it, of not being able to offer your home to the Other if you have already offered it to someone else, is related to issues of "power and possession." Yet the paradox of hospitality, according to Duformantelle, is that it is not confined to possessing a home:

"To offer hospitality, is it necessary to start from the certain existence of a dwelling, or is it rather only starting from the dislocation of the shelterless, the homeless, that the authenticity of hospitality can open up? Perhaps only the one who endures the experience of being deprived of a home can offer hospitality."¹²

The story about the Iranian refugee Mahboubeh Tavakoli cooking and feeding other refugees in Athens' Victoria Park only two years after her and her family arrived as refugees in Greece defies the logic of hospitality based on sharing wealth, comfort and political decisions, and comes as close as possible to this ideal of unconditional hospitality.¹³

Thus when Derrida and Dufourmantelle coined the oxymoron "hostipitality" they wanted to stress that the state becomes the "critic" endowed with the power to distinguish friend from foe, guest from parasite, hospitality from hostility, the "we" from an "us."¹⁴ In the context of contemporary art, the limitations and contradictions entailed in the concept "hostipitality" become more apparent in participatory art. Although not the initial aims of the artists, these contradictions cannot be reconciled by addressing only the figure of the refugee without taking into account the figure of the legislator and the political context in which such projects take place.¹⁵

¹⁰ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 72.

¹¹ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 25.

¹² Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 56.

¹³ Campana, "She arrived with nothing."

¹⁴ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*.

¹⁵ Milevska, *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation, and Agency*.

For example, two projects by BAK in Utrecht used similar phraseology: One of them, *We Are Here*, was dedicated to refugees, and was publicized as “the first large-scale organization of refugees” established in collaboration with artists and cultural workers.¹⁶ The other was a publication dedicated to the socio-political conditions of Roma: *We, Refugees* (2014).¹⁷ Both projects resonated with the practice of masking the sponsors or organization (otherwise known as “astroturfing”) because—although they were made to appear as though they originated from grassroots participants—there is little evidence of this. There is an inner split within the “we” itself, caused by its unspecified and heterogeneous alignment—as if the right to use the pronoun were allocated on a “first come, first served” basis. However, the question of whom it includes and how one gains the right to utter it is not only semantic. The origins of the distrust also need to be discussed.

Turning words into acts

English, unlike some non-European languages, has no exclusive form of the first person plural pronoun; in other words, no grammatical distinction is made between an all-inclusive “we” and a “we” that includes only certain addressees. Despite this fact, or perhaps exactly because of it, there are many possibilities for duplicity and hidden agendas in the use of the “we.” It is therefore necessary to discuss the difference between “saying” and “doing” in the use of the first person plural, and how its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion work in the participatory art context and beyond.

The emphasis on doing is particularly urgent given the responsibility of politicians and government representatives, non-governmental agencies or ordinary citizens to the “we,” and the flagrant neglect of those responsibilities in the case of refugees.¹⁸ In some cases, governments use refugees’ tragic destinies in political negotiations. In 2002, for example, the Macedonian government opened an inquiry into the shootings of innocent immigrants who were originally portrayed in Macedonia as Al Qaeda mujahideen. The alleged terrorism was used to avoid the expected solidarity—the “we”—with the refugees. However, autopsies performed on the men (as well as police photos) suggested that the police were responsible for the shootings and had even staged the crime scene. All bodies had multiple bullet wounds, in one case, fifty-three. Later it emerged that six Pakistani immigrants and one Indian had been even lured onto Macedonian soil with false promises and been ruthlessly killed as a part of Government’s strategy to flirt with NATO and the US administration.¹⁹

¹⁶ BAK, *We Are Here*.

¹⁷ Baker and Hlavajova, *We Roma*. This project was published in the context of the Roma Pavilion organized by BAK platform for contemporary art at the Venice Biennale in 2011. The project used the Open Society Institute, Budapest, and EU funds assigned to Roma, but mostly promoted artists and theorists of non-Roma origin.

¹⁸ Cole, “On the borders of solidarity.”

¹⁹ Wood, “A Fake Macedonia Terror Tale That Led to Deaths.” The terrorist background of the refugees, their false intent and the crime scene were all staged in order to prove the country’s dedication to the “war on terror,” to avoid sending local soldiers to Afghanistan, and to justify the use of disproportionate force in fighting local Muslims—the ethnic Albanians.

"We refugees" thus sometimes sounds like a hollow marriage proposal by a notorious philanderer. In this respect, the concept of "infelicitous acts" is a useful way of analyzing the aporias surrounding conflicting normative and legal obligations towards refugees.²⁰ According to J.L. Austin, the difference between what one says and what one does depends on context and circumstance; context can substantially affect the fulfilment of a promise. In speech act theory, an unfulfilled promise is referred to as an "infelicitous act."²¹ When a certain "we" is invoked, members of communities with different statuses and origins (African-Americans, Roma and travellers, homeless people, Syrian refugees or child-refugees of any religion) supposedly become, whether voluntarily or not, part of the community—a prime example of an infelicitous act.²²

The problem with the "we" of "we refugees" is that it is a no-win game: regardless of whether one is using it oneself or disputing the right of others to do so, essentialism is inevitable. The right to use the "we" is pre-determined neither by genetic nor by ethnic inheritance or simple grammatical appropriation. On the contrary, one has to earn the other's trust in order to secure the preconditions and illocutionary force to enable this speech act to count as having been felicitous vis-à-vis invisible hierarchies and privileges.

The concept of the nation-state itself does not help, since it is founded on precisely the same mistrust and hierarchical differentiations. Étienne Balibar has critiqued modern conceptions of the nation-state and examined the uncertain historical realities of the nation.²³ He contends that it is impossible to pinpoint the beginning of a nation, or to argue that the people who inhabit a nation-state are the descendants of the nation that preceded it. Because no nation-state has an ethnic base, according to Balibar, every nation-state creates fictional ethnicities in order to project stability.²⁴

These stable identities are produced because the greatest threat to national identity are the different identities that pre-existed and preceded the more recent waves of immigration. As Balibar puts it, "the idea of nations without a state, or nations 'before' the state, is thus a contradiction in terms, because a state is always implied in the historic framework of a national formation (even if not necessarily within the limits of its territory)."²⁵ The "we" is therefore fated to be distrusted and feared, both by the included and the excluded, as already pointed out by Arendt in her early criticism of Herzlian Zionism, Minority Treaties after World War One, and her warnings about the problems she detected with any mode of linking the nation and state predicated on turning into stateless some other citizens.²⁶

²⁰ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. See also Felman's *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, on Molière's *Don Juan* and his character's double speech.

²¹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 100.

²² Thanks to Tyler Morgenstern, I became aware that the German word for promise "versprechen" by default anticipates the possibility of its unfulfillment because of the elusive prefix "ver" that could mean "miss" or "wrong."

²³ Balibar, "Is European Citizenship Possible."

²⁴ Balibar, "Is European Citizenship Possible," 329.

²⁵ Balibar, "Is European Citizenship Possible," 331, 351.

²⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 269–270.

“We Refugees” or the impossibility of “being with”

With the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015 at the height of “refugee crisis,” racism enhanced the pre-embedded Islamophobia against different ethnicities and communities practicing Islam already living in Europe for centuries, including Albanians, Turkish people, or Roma. Some European Roma are Muslim, but they often claim different religions in local censuses exactly to avoid the consequences of racism, and yet they are mainly perceived as Muslims.

Balibar offered a more profound analysis of the need, but also of the danger of the uncritical “we.” He made a clear distinction between the different types of “we,” pointing out the responsibility that is lost with the appropriative “we”:

“We, French citizens of all sexes, origins and professions, are greatly indebted to the ‘sans-papiers’ who, refusing the ‘clandestineness’ ascribed to them, have forcefully posed the question of the right to stay. We owe them a triple demonstration, which also gives us some responsibilities.”²⁷

Balibar’s skeptical view of the effects of the 1994 Maastricht Treaty are linked to the paradox that European citizenship was, from the outset, based on the false equation “citizenship equals nationality.” European citizenship is thus defined by restrictions on the right to asylum.²⁸ The hypocrisy of the promise behind the “we” is clearly stated in his proposition for a responsible position towards sans papiers:

“We owe them for having shattered the pretensions of successive governments to play two games: on one side, ‘realism,’ administrative competence and political responsibility (regulating population flows, maintaining public order, assuring the ‘integration’ of legal immigrants [...]); on the other side, nationalist and electoral propaganda (creating scapegoats for insecurity, projecting the fear of mass poverty into the phantasmal space of identitarian conflicts).”²⁹

Jean-Luc Nancy has argued that while sharing the world is an implication of our existence, and that the concept of “being” is always already determined by a certain “being with,” we cannot truly say “we,” or at least not ethically so. One cannot say “we” even about the community to which one undoubtedly belongs. The aporia of the “we” is the aporia of intersubjectivity.³⁰ Nancy warns us of the impossibility of pinning down a universal “we” whose components always remain the same. He argues that we have forgotten the importance of “being-together,” “being-in-common,” and “belonging”; that the “we” is not a subject, nor composed of subjects. According to Nancy, we live our lives “without relations.”³¹ There can be no “we” unless the relations are established as “being-in-common” rather than understanding them only in additive and accumulative terms.

²⁷ Balibar, “What we owe to the ‘Sans-papiers’.”

²⁸ Balibar, “Is European Citizenship Possible?”, 195–216.

²⁹ Balibar, “Is European Citizenship Possible?”, 213.

³⁰ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 75.

³¹ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 75.

This is linked to his concept of "inoperative communities," communities that refuse to be state "accomplices."³² In this kind of appropriation of the "we," there might be potentials for certain positive impacts of a new "we" not based on belonging as such. This is a "we" that wants not to belong but to appropriate belonging, but only if this triggers moral responsibilities not necessarily resulting from legal, political or social ties.³³ Nancy's notion of "inoperative communities" gestures in important directions for modalities of participation not premised on the dynamics of "inclusion" or "belonging" detailed above.

Kalokagathia: The reconciliation of aesthetics and ethics in contemporary art and theory

When it comes to general ethical principles, contemporary art remains experimental and, with few exceptions, not much has been formally drafted, although standard legal and institutional implications apply to projects in a variety of ways. Therefore, the generic and officially circulated and accepted ethical principles for social science research are often applied without necessary corrections.

For example, in March 2015 the British Academy of Social Sciences' Council formally adopted the five following guiding ethics principles:

1. Social science is fundamental to a democratic society and should be inclusive of different interests, values, funders, methods and perspectives.
2. All social science should respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values, and dignity of individuals, groups and communities.
3. All social science should be conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.
4. All social scientists should act with regard to their social responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research.
5. All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm.³⁴

However there is no official consent regarding any specific ethical principles to be applied in the context of participatory art, which often relies on artistic research. Given the complexity of different art media and the specificity of crossdisciplinary concepts, it is very difficult to conceptualize a uniformed set of rules to be followed by artists, particularly for an art form that by default tries so hard to resist rules.³⁵ Neither is it clear how to reconcile the long-term tensions between ethical and aesthetic values due to the prevailing dilemmas imposed already by modernist theories of art, mainly due to the complexity and diversity of artistic practices.³⁶

³² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 80–81.

³³ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 86–87.

³⁴ Academy of Social Sciences, "Academy Adopts Five Ethical Principles for Social Science Research."

³⁵ Bolt, Alsop, Sierra, Vincs and Kett, *Research Ethics and the Creative Arts*.

³⁶ Milevska, "Relations, Participations, and Other Dialogical Frameworks."

Yet there is also no reason why some (if not all) of these ethical principles could not apply to artists' accountability when artistic research involves live participants (or human remains), although additional principles should be drafted specifically in the context of participatory and collaborative projects with a focus on the performativity and involvement of members of various vulnerable communities. One reason for such thoughts is the numerous different understandings of what art is among audiences coming from different social and cultural contexts not necessarily informed by the rapid reformulations of art and eventual challenges related to what is expected from or of them.³⁷

The rigorous formalist division between aesthetic and ethical aspects of art, or more precisely the polarized distinction between form and content, or between the "beautiful" and the "good," has in any case yielded some of the most debilitating outcomes of modernist and formalist theory. The either-or polarity that often results from hierarchical positioning of one of these poles still has a key bearing on our understanding of art's position and its role in different cultural contexts and in contemporary society in general. The conflation of the realm of philosophy—to which the aesthetic category of the beautiful belongs—and the realm of art has gradually resulted in a contradictory long-term pursuit of an ever more precise (and false) dichotomy between art and society, as if they could ever be isolated from each other.

Taking the current neoliberal political context as a point of departure, it is necessary to reveal and disentangle the difficulties that still prevent many art theorists from completely (or at least partially) abandoning modernist ideals and formalist criteria regarding art and the valorization of its production. I find it urgent to discuss why and how the sociopolitical factors that enabled the long-term dominance of modernist aesthetics still affect—or more precisely prevent—the embracing of institutional critique and participatory art as relevant contributions to art theory and art practice.

The criticism, for example, that participatory art merely caters to societal needs is one of many commonplaces stemming from modernist aesthetic principles—the death grip of formalist aesthetics' invigilators—surrounding issues of autonomy and positioning and other contradictions. For a certain limited period after the World War Two, the *l'art-pour-l'art* position enjoyed widespread acceptance in Western art theory, as if the ancient ideal of *kalokagathia* had never existed, and as if the ideals of an otherwise autonomous pure art should be protected from any societal values.³⁸

The modernist myths of originality, authenticity, uniqueness, universality, artistic genius, and autonomy were also influenced by the Russian early formalist school of Viktor Shklovsky and the semiotic analysis of art, wherein the issue of the arts' autonomy stemmed from political interventions in both art's content and form.³⁹ Joseph Kosuth published his early attack on the modernist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg, addressing Modernism's fallibility deriving from its equation of aesthetics and art, and stressing the relevance of conceptually focused art vs. form-driven and form-eval-

³⁷ Carroll, "Art and Ethical Criticism"; Lillehammer, "Values of Art and the Ethical Question."

³⁸ *Kalokagathia* (Ancient Greek: καλὸς κἀγαθός [kalos kā athós]) means beautiful and good, the Ancient Greek ideal of harmony between noble human personality and any art action (documented in Herodotus and other texts).

³⁹ Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde*.

uated art.⁴⁰ He was not yet ready, however, to fully abandon the understanding of art as an entity separate from society. The problems with calling for art's *autonomy* from its contextual background have become clearer, although such anti-aesthetic art tendencies had already co-existed with modernist art in the past, in avant-garde movements in both East and West.⁴¹

In this respect, attempts to detach art from the ethical, cultural and social codes and norms prevailing in the period and geopolitical context of its production became questionable and unattainable, for various geopolitical, sociological, and cultural reasons. Thus, the reframing of the triangular relation between ethics, aesthetics and art is still partial, although the position of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline (and not only a modernist one) has weakened relevance in defining art. Modernist and formalist aesthetic ideals endured for only a couple of decades, but the unwinding of the short modernist time span via poststructuralist and postmodernist debates became a lengthy endeavour that continued throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and prevails even today.

Participatory art as a critique of institutional structures

I have argued elsewhere that the emergence of a participatory paradigm shift in the arts is urgent, stemming from the uneven development of theory, which lagged behind art practices that challenged institutional structures in art and culture.⁴² The shift from art that focused on the production of art objects towards art that implicated and engaged various subjects (such as art producers, mediators, audience members, and citizens), in order to create new and relevant relations amongst them, was imagined as an inevitable strategy of intervening in existing distinctions and hierarchies in order to change them, or to dismantle them entirely. This is one of the obvious reasons that participatory art, I would argue, has the potential to address, extricate and redress contentiousness in various cultural heritages and the issues as provenance, the decolonization of museums, the repatriation of looted artefacts, etc.

However, it must be acknowledged that there are still tendencies to keep art discourses away from issues of social justice and political reality—justified by the absence of relevant artworks (read: objects)—as well as to interpret art's involvement in such changes as irrelevant and counter-aesthetic. Such tendencies implicate art-world structures in the overall socio-political and economic systemic structures, to which the art production system belongs by default. Ultimately, the remnants of modernist definitions of art are directly linked to this compromised position, to the production and distribution of art in the market, and to the other usual suspects of the prevailing late capitalist and neoliberal economy. I want to stress, therefore, that some of the issues regarding aesthetic and artistic criteria for evaluating participatory art still remain unresolved, even as they remain pertinent to a more profound understanding of art's changing role in society, and its effort to break with the inherited socio-political

⁴⁰ Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After*.

⁴¹ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*.

⁴² Milevska, "Participatory Art"; Milevska, *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation, and Agency*; Milevska, "Shameful Objects, Apologising Subjects." See also Bishop, *Artificial Hells*.

and economic relationships that facilitated the preservation of the strict division between art and society in the first place.

The fight with the formalist aesthetic canons and criteria that were instrumental to the emergence of “autonomy” as a privileged posture in and for artistic practice continues, inducing social change in the art world and elsewhere. Artistic concepts, genres and theoretical terms like *community-based art*, *institutional critique*, *social intervention*, *relational aesthetics*, *participatory art*, *socially engaged art* and *artivism*—all conceived to provide adequate analytical means for better understanding the problems with such modernist dichotomous interpretations of the relations between art and society—survive. They continue to fight against conservative attempts in the art world to use autonomy as a tool for maintaining the status quo.

Adorno's reflections on the relationship between art and society gave way to different interpretations of autonomy, so there can be several different levels of autonomy in art, which makes intersections across different levels and registers even more complex.⁴³ Thus a more specific analysis of conceptions of autonomy could clarify the inner paradox of arts' claimed right to autonomy. Obviously, there is an overall distinction between social and aesthetic autonomy, but artists and their artworks also belong to differing and often contrasting registers of autonomy depending on their institutional affiliations and/or allies.

Representation, institutional critique and participation

The turn towards a participatory paradigm in the arts is based on the main assumptions in institutional critique that institutions, experts and artists have a monopoly on defining art and that they control access to its production. Also, they give priority to discussing problems on behalf of “others” (whose problems they discuss) and to representations by proxy, thus giving priority for example to art “about” rather than to art “with” or “by” refugees. Starting with the 2015 photograph in which Ai Weiwei famously (re)staged a press photograph of the drowned Syrian infant refugee, Alan Kurdi, by posing his apparently lifeless body in the same position as was pictured in the original photograph, the questions of who represents, how and on whose behalf, raises serious questions about the various means, methods and regimes of representation employed when addressing the refugee crisis.⁴⁴

Ai Weiwei's practice was even more spectacularized, objectified and commercialized in his metaphoric *Law of the Journey* (2017), where he filled a 70-meter-long inflatable boat with 258 large faceless refugee figures filled with helium. In doing so, he created an ostentatious, oversized, and over-prized monument of the current problematic human condition.⁴⁵ His more recent film, *Human Flow* (2017), continued to “ex-

43 Hamilton, “Adorno and Autonomy of Art,” 287–305.

44 Monica Tan, “Ai Weiwei poses as drowned Syrian infant refugee in ‘haunting’ photo.” For a more fulsome discussion of the impact of this image, see Ghosh's chapter, included in this anthology.

45 @aiww#refugeecrisis. See www.twitter.com/hashtag/refugeecrisis?src=hash. In my article, “‘Infelicitous’ Participatory Acts on the Neoliberal Stage,” I argue here about the sociopolitical limits of participatory art, addressing the neoliberal socio-political and economic context, and the pressure for

plore" the same topics, advertising the documentary as a "detailed and heartbreaking exploration into the global refugee crisis."⁴⁶

Distinguishing between two different types of participatory art projects could help clarify some of the contradictions between the enthusiastic aims of participatory art and the pitfalls set by institutional power: The first type, based on the various waves of artistic institutional critique is concerned with the critique of art institutions, and calls for more substantial participation within the art system, in the presentation and/or production of art projects and in making decisions regarding art.⁴⁷ Such projects deal in a critical way with the relationship between a) art, art institutions and audiences, b) artists and art institutions (museum, gallery), and c) artists and curators. Although important, I see this first branch of participatory art as too self-referential and self-indulgent, and consequently easier to incorporate and co-opt within existing art institutions and immanent institutional frameworks.⁴⁸

The second type of participatory art, that can be defined as "participatory institutional critique," aims towards a more substantial critique and a deeper societal change, beyond the confines of the art world. Participatory institutional critique has more ambitious goals and potentials, but it also faces stronger adversaries: the general political climate and its conflicts, or the inherited colonial pretext. Hence, the artistic goals and media of such projects vary: performing social and/or anthropological research; issuing calls for restitution, repatriation, and decolonization of institutions; engaging with conflicted local communities, often with unforeseeable but imminent results.⁴⁹ With this form too, pertinent questions remain: Which representations in which art objects, images, and spaces are considered contentious cultural heritages, and who decides this?⁵⁰ How are they transmitted and reflected in European "culturescapes" and "memoriescapes"? More precisely, in Regina Römhild's words, "What we tend to forget is that this fragility and contestedness have always been the case. There was never a clear-cut, consensual entity called 'Europe,' nor a geographically defined continent or a cultural formation."⁵¹ These issues are extrapolated regardless of whether the researched materials are included or displayed in collections of various European art and cultural institutions, or are presented in public spaces or kept in other contexts. Moreover, questions arise as to how and why these objects became contentious in first place.

Art involving refugees does not raise the question of whether and how artistic research contributes to a politics of emancipation for the first time. The question of the relations between ethics and aesthetics—and form, social content, and conduct—in artistic research have been addressed in various academic and artistic contexts. The issue of representation in different artistic and curatorial projects and institutional

spectacles and commercial ventures in the arts as one of the major obstacles for fulfilling the promise of participatory art for social change.

46 Knowing that the film had gross earnings (as of December 21, 2017) of \$527,845 in the US only (according to www.IMDB.com), the term "explore" even sounds cynical.

47 Alberro and Stimson, *Institutional Critique*.

48 Milevska, "Infelicitous' Participatory Acts on the Neoliberal Stage."

49 Milevska, "Shameful Objects, Apologising Subjects."

50 MacDonald, "Contentious Heritage."

51 Römhild, "Reflexive Europeanization, or: Makings of Europe."

decisions towards the making of images and objects representing difficult ethical contents (dead and wounded bodies, human remains, Holocaust victims, poverty, amongst others) as well as their different approaches towards reproduction, display, distribution and circulation also have been debated in various contexts.⁵² These involve discussions around stereotypical and racialized representations, institutional reluctance to acknowledge the questionable provenance of unlawfully acquired objects and unethical sponsorship, propositions for how to deal with the repressed memory of the spaces once inhabited by conflict or marked with contested monuments dedicated to disgraceful historic figures or events, collective memory about commoning movements that contested the appropriation of public space.⁵³

Starting with invisible heritages and contentious objects, images and spaces (as I proposed in *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation, and Agency*), one needs to clearly declare the urgent need to acknowledge past wrongdoings in order to rethink, deconstruct and dismantle pre-existing regimes of representation and systemic malfunction, all the while proposing alternative trajectories for future research and more engaged participatory artistic practice. The application of various theoretical and research methodologies (as developed in art history, museology, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, pedagogy, political sciences) together with artistic research methods, artistic media, strategies and actions allows for specificity, appropriateness, applicability, affordance and efficiency in accomplishing these challenging goals, on both ethical and conceptual levels.⁵⁴

Some contemporary artistic strategies stem from the legacy of postcolonial and feminist critique, and the research practices around various theoretical analyses and case studies which have developed in the frame of the humanities and social sciences. Here, I refer to art projects that use different research means and methods, such as field trips, photography-as-research, interviews, focus groups, contextual inquiry, usability studies, surveys, diaries, critical databases, video essays, forensic research, militant image research, institutional critique, thought experiments, social interventions, participatory research of vernacular art made by different self-taught artists and communities, as well as elements of material culture, re-enactment, activist campaigns for naming and renaming, counter-monuments, social design, agonistic research, critical friendship, creative co-production, petition, public apology, manifestos, critical and social advertising, advocating and lobbying for decolonization, repatriation, return and restitution.⁵⁵ Particularly important is for artists to team up with existing professionals and organizations that are completely dedicated to the issues stemming from the refugee crisis in order to avoid doing more harm than good.

52 These include, for example, the discussion regarding the photographic (Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*) and video representation of the Holocaust, the debate about the making, displaying and circulation of images of human remains stored in museum collections (Harries, Fibiger, Smith, Adler, and Szöke, "Exposure") and the more general debate about Jacques Rancière's concept '(re)distribution of the sensible' and 'indisciplinarity' (Birrell, "Editorial: Jacques Rancière and The (Re)Distribution of the Sensible").

53 Milevska, "Shameful Objects, Apologising Subjects."

54 Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.

55 Milevska, "Relations, Participations, and Other Dialogical Frameworks."

While audiences typically do not take an active part in the creative process of art's production and presentation, participatory art argues that audiences should, precisely because of the many problematic decisions made by institutions that do not take into account the communities which are implicated and/or contested. Participatory art therefore offers an approach to artistic processes in which the process is considered incomplete without the viewers' involvement—turning audience members into co-authors, editors, or active performers who complement and resolve the artist's concept.

The main intent behind the emergence of participatory art is not simply to add a new genre to existing art genres and media. This conception is instrumental for challenging dominant forms and relationships in the art world: a small protected class of professionals which has a monopoly over making and defining art, and who conceive of the audience as the "other": passive and marginal observers celebrating the results of the creation. Participatory art projects, and collaborative research with other professionals continue to promote the understanding that an artwork is not just an object that you passively enjoy while quietly looking at it; it is rather a creation in which even non-specialized viewers actively participate, a dynamic collaboration between the artist, the audience and their environment.

Often, objects are produced in and through such participatory processes, however these material outcomes are not the main priority because relational, interactive, and collaborative structures established in the process are also considered part of the artwork. Thus, participatory projects often initiate the emergence of new communities and instigate new and complex relations between the artists, produced objects and images and participants.

Although the results of participatory art may be documented using photography, audio, video, broadcast media, or other media technologies, the artwork is really to be found within the interactions and relations that emerge from the audience's engagement with the artist and the situation created. Even so, participatory art cannot always overcome societal strictures, and despite the attempt to erase divisions between the artist as a producer and the audience as participant, very often new hierarchies are created depending on class, ethnicity, access, etc.

Given all of this, living with and within the current reigning contradictions in the art world is difficult. It is especially difficult to juggle all these contradictions for artists and curators collaborating with high-profile art institutions with inherited colonial or other contentious pasts. According to George Lipsitz, the inability to speak openly about contradictory consciousness from within or outside of institutions can lead to a self-destructive desire for 'pure' political positions that ultimately have more to do with "individual subjectivities and self-images" than with "disciplined collective struggle for resources and power."⁵⁶ Lipsitz states that "the ultimate goal behind the pertinent critique of the exclusive and hegemonic institutional models is to overcome the deterministic approach."⁵⁷

I would like to conclude with a similarly positive and optimistic understanding of participatory art. Its full potential is still to be unleashed and developed. This can happen only if achieving a quality of relationship among the participating subjects (artists, theorists, curators, audiences and other implicated and interested individuals) is fully

56 Lipsitz, "Academic Politics and Social Change," 80.

57 Lipsitz, "Academic Politics and Social Change," 80.

accepted as a possible ultimate goal of art. One should not expect this goal to yield any beautiful objects in the conventional sense. Regardless of whether this is interpreted as anti-aesthetic, counter-aesthetic, or artistic, it doesn't allow institutions to perpetuate difficult issues and relations without acknowledging and challenging their problematic systemic nature. To challenge of the relations among the subjects that are instrumental for producing and transmitting contentiousness is one of the most pertinent aim of participatory art and artistic research employed in such projects.

The recent hateful outbursts from the far right in Europe and elsewhere (such as anti-Semitic and anti-Roma sentiments, racism towards Indigenous and Black populations, patriarchal violence towards women and prejudices and aggression towards LGBTQ communities) can be confronted only with clear critical arguments against similar hatred from the past entailed in some of the prestigious European art and cultural institutions, and by establishing reciprocal and intersectional relations between art, academia and political activism that would work as control mechanism of the socio-political ruling socio-political structures.⁵⁸

I want to argue that contemporary art projects that focus on participatory research and collaboration have enhanced potentials for catalyzing social change and fighting systemic racism precisely because of their "affordance:" they focus on dialogical relations rather than on objects and images that often lacked referencing contentious pasts. In this respect participatory art's potentials for collaborations, alliances, commoning and non-hierarchical "we" that is not based on patronizing are undeniable, but only when imagined as parts of long-term structures rooted in communities, rather than one-off spectacles in restrictively art-designated spaces.

The urgent task of countering the re-racialization of a distinctly "European" identity, and of acting in solidarity with communities driven from the regions where they have lived for a long time—consider the Roma across Europe, the Albanians from Serbia, or the Serbs from Croatia—or who have newly arrived as refugees, are two sides of the same coin. These are the main assumptions behind the participatory projects that invite and include refugees in the process of conceptualization or production of art projects.

Instead of dwelling on negatively charged memories, participatory projects mostly cherish research processes that deal with shared or multidirectional memory,⁵⁹ and productive shame⁶⁰ in a committed and catalytic way. It should be emphasized, however, that the contradictions are not easy to circumvent. Regretfully, this affordance and potentiality is easily hindered by the concrete contexts of a spectacularized world of international art biennials' "assembly line," to which participatory art practices are not immune, but which they rather serve quite perfectly due to the numbers of participants and audiences they include and attract.

The main contradiction of the project *Green Light*—as in many other participatory art projects dealing with the refugee crisis that have been presented in the recent in-

⁵⁸ In this regard, see van Brummelen and de Haan's chapter in this anthology, which develops an argument about the irony of the repatriation of colonial objects, even as the borders of the Eurozone are strengthened.

⁵⁹ Rothberg, "From Gaza to Warsaw," 525.

⁶⁰ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*.

ternational exhibitions⁶¹—stems exactly from the fact that refugees without legal status in Europe are for the most part not allowed to receive directly any compensation for their work,⁶² so that when they are engaged in participatory projects, the payment comes in the form of compensation or trampa (the simple exchange of labor for goods). Thus, even when Eliasson continues to criticize the political system—full of contradictory protocols, rules and laws—and even when he honestly confesses and apologizes for the limitations of his understanding of the refugee crisis, he nevertheless fails to acknowledge the “hostipitality” at the heart of refugee participation.

The project *Shamiyaana—Food for Thought: Thought for Change*, presented by Rasheed Araeen at Documenta 14 in Athens (2017) also deserves a rigorous extrapolation in this context because it raises very sensitive ethical concerns. In the work, the artist and the Documenta 14 curators established a communal-like free-kitchen under a colorful Pakistani wedding tent installed at Kotzia Square. The project obviously aimed to attract refugees as a kind of compensation for the well-reported lack of financial support for refugees in Greece. However, its strategy of participation and hospitality (or rather “hostipitality”) faced many challenges and obstacles internalized in the context of the hierarchical art world and usual elitist divisions inevitably reinforced by art management in such huge events (due to budget and organizational restrictions). The main problem was that the project was based on the strategy of redistributing funding, and thus on delegating the performative agency to the institution (Documenta 14), in a kind of a philanthropic rerouting of the resources assigned to art, rather than to the refugees who became passive recipients of help (in the form of food). It was not so much a question of the formal and aesthetic aspects of the project, as its questionable and consequential ethics—particularly if one takes into account how sensitive the act of eating in public (in front of the elitist art professionals and other aficionados) may be for the vulnerable community of refugees.⁶³ At the heart of the project’s problematic consequences was the fact that the project somehow contributed to the societal and class contradictions regardless of the artist’s sincere concerns and good intentions, invested in societal transformations, and regardless of his hopes invested in the potential and agency of participatory art.

In another instance, when I visited the Venice Biennale in 2015, I came across a small sign simply stating “Anonymous Stateless Immigrants Pavilion—A New Pavilion for the Unrepresented at Venice Biennale 2015;” I followed the arrows but did not find the Pavilion. Only much later, I found out that the work was by the Anonymous Stateless Immigrants Collective. The Pavilion/conceptual project was a kind of laby-

61 For more information on other art projects dealing with statelessness and refugees at the National Pavilions and collateral projects during the 57th Venice Biennial, Venice 2017, see Ellis-Petersen, “Art of the state: how the Venice Biennale is tackling the refugee crisis.”

62 Eliasson, “Assembling a Light, Assembling Communities.”

63 During an intense conversation with the Greek artist and researcher Sofia Grigoriadou, she expressed some concerns regarding the realization of the otherwise good artist’s intentions and aims of the project. According to her, the project resulted in a lot of contradictions and hierarchies on a local and international level. For example, during the distribution of food and tickets for gaining access to the communal-like kitchen, the project attracted simultaneously the people attending similar local communal kitchens for the homeless and international curators, so the long queues for food replicated the world contradictions and hierarchies between different communities.

rinth within the Venice labyrinth of streets, consisting only of the graffiti-like text and arrows: signs that were meant to trick you into following the directions and imagining what such a pavilion might look like. There was no building, no installation, no spectacle, no queues of visitors, no paid or unpaid artists, no paid or unpaid participants, no paid or unpaid attendants (some Pavilions go so far as to use the unpaid labour of students or refugees for attending to their expensively rented spaces).

The Anonymous Stateless Immigrants Pavilion was also a participatory project: any audience member who tried to find this project employed her own imagination and creativity while following the directions and inevitably activated the remnants of various already-seen representations of immigrants and refugees that are profoundly engraved and thus hard to be erased from the visual memory. Representation and participation are inevitably intertwined and only careful extrapolation and conceptualization of art works could think one from another and prevent the proliferation and perpetuation of the already internalized socio-political prejudices that are at work in the media, institutions and policies that regulate immigration and refugees interstate and inter-continental flows.