

Servicing the Story First:
**The Aesthetics and Politics of
the Representation of Refugees**

Alison Ranniger | Student Number 1943391

Master of Arts and Culture

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Alison Ranniger

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Supervisor: Prof.dr. Kitty Zijlmans

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Abstract:

This thesis reflects on historical and contemporary issues around representational practices and visual politics of creating and displaying refugee subject matter in art. This paper aims to open up broader discussions about cultural institutions and artists' responsibilities in producing counter-narratives that service refugees' perspectives and voices. By doing so, museums and relevant artists can avoid perpetuating existing tropes and ensure that their own agendas are secondary to what the subject of their work (in this case, refugee and asylum seekers) wishes to convey. By means of concrete examples of artists and artwork, the author attempts to bring forth a discussion on the ethical considerations for artists involved in collaborative projects with refugees and asylum seekers by questioning and challenging various frameworks and existing modes of representation within contemporary art discourse. The author proposes different modes of representation that service the 'protagonist's' story first, referring to concepts and practices through which to understand the construction of visual narratives surrounding refugees; thus establishing how these practices can be effective beyond simply making things visible.

Keywords: artists, refugees, asylum seekers, ethics of representation, rehumanization, We Are Here/ Wij Zijn Hier

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Introduction

Despite the growing acknowledgment that visual representations more broadly influence the general public's perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers, the process and framework through which artists and the media represent refugees has not been problematized or critiqued in depth. Addressing this gap has become all the more relevant due to the radical expansion of new technologies that allow for the easy and expeditious distribution of images across national boundaries, thus posing fundamentally new political and ethical challenges in our increasingly globalized world. In this era of radically new image consciousness, artists and visual media producers have yet to fully understand how this influences political and artistic thought and action. This thesis reflects on the historical and contemporary issues around representational practices and visual politics of creating and displaying refugee subject matter in art and media. The term 'refugee' is used broadly throughout this thesis to include refugees whose status has been approved, as well as asylum seekers who are in limbo or in detention, whose claims for status have yet to be determined.¹ The title of this thesis was inspired by refugee artist Omar Imam in the critical debate entitled "Can photography change the image on refugees?"² Using his own work³ as a basis in this debate, Imam argued that he uses his images to break narratives of the visual rhetoric of refugees and asylum seekers, by making the image accessible to his subject and by *servicing their story first*.

By the means of concrete examples of artists and artwork, I attempt to bring forth a discussion on the ethical considerations for artists involved in collaborative projects with refugees and asylum seekers by questioning and challenging various frameworks and existing modes of representation within contemporary art discourse. I also propose different modes of representation that service the protagonists' story first, referring to concepts and practices through which to understand the construction of visual narratives surrounding refugees; thus

¹ Throughout this text I will use this term only in order to denote the political status of the group of people to whom I am referring, as their status plays an important role in the research compiled here. Yet, so as not to rob these people of their individuality and inherent complexities, I will aim to provide a sense of the people behind the word "refugee" through their stories and their contributions.

² Imam, Omar, et al., "Can Photography Change the Image on Refugees?" Humanity House: In the Picture. *Studio Aleppo debate: Can photography change the image on refugees?*, 22 Sept. 2017, The Hague, Netherlands.

³ Imam, Omar. "Live, Love, Refugee." (2015) *Omar Imam*, Accessed at www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee

establishing how these practices can be effective beyond simply making things visible. By examining how the activities of refugee collectives and artist-refugee collaborations overcome dominant visual narratives and nationally constructed identities by means of self-presentation of refugees, this paper aims to open up broader discussions about cultural institutions and artists' responsibilities in producing counter-narratives that service refugees' perspectives and voices. Through this, museums and relevant artists can avoid perpetuating existing tropes and helps ensure that their own agendas are secondary to what the subject of their work wishes to convey.

In 2012, the refugee collective based in Amsterdam known as Wij Zijn Hier (ENG: We Are Here) was organized to make visible the inhumane situation in which they live and to advocate for the human rights of refugees in limbo in the Netherlands. The name of the group, We Are Here, was introduced in 2006 by Papa Sakho who stated, "We are here, to make a life again, together as one. Today we can say we are here to make a normal life, all together."⁴ This protest initiative is designed to draw attention to the shortcomings of the current system, advocating to for the government to expand asylum to provide further shelter, implement opportunities for jobs and education, while at the same time facilitating their own opportunities for refugees in limbo to emancipate. In order to share their own stories and effectively spread their call for recognition and human rights, We Are Here has set up an independent media platform to facilitate their protest. This media platform, known as the We Are Here Media Team, creates a space for self-representation through independent videos, photography, and journalism. Harnessing this independent media has given them a voice in the public discourse about the refugee and migrant crisis, providing a new vocabulary that counters the imagery of refugees spread through mass media. This self-organization of refugees has produced a social movement that has strengthened awareness of their situation and increased diplomatic pressure on the Dutch government. By challenging this systemic and narrative framework, "the group insists that their presence has to be dealt with publicly and openly, choosing the strategy of creating visibility of a problem that society otherwise prefers to ignore."⁵ Furthermore, it establishes how these practices can be effective beyond

⁴ Sakho, Papa. "Commemoration of the Schiphol Fire." 2006. Web.
<<http://wijzijnhier.org/tijdslijn/we-are-here-is-four-september-4th-2016/>>.

⁵ Hlavajova, Maria. "Foreword." in *Collective Struggles of Refugees*, p 9, Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2013.

simply promoting visibility and supporting the claim that the performance of freedom of expression and expressions of human beingness becomes a claim to human rights.

Throughout this thesis, I will be discussing visual art works and media that engage with the refugee issue to gain insight into the visual politics and current frameworks used in representation. Visual politics can be defined, in this case, as the notion of how “television, film, photographs, new media sources and artworks decisively influence how we perceive and deal with political phenomena as diverse as war, terrorism, refugees and financial crises.”

⁶ With that said, this thesis will not be an analysis on the *effectiveness* of these images in raising awareness of the humanitarian crises, but instead will focus on the production and ethical responsibility of artists and visual media producers in contributing to the visual narratives of refugees and asylum seekers. Using the concept of visual politics, I will aim to address the exact nature, framework, and impact of visual power in order to explore the various ways and avenues of how images increasingly mediate people’s engagement with the material, social, and political world. Concurrently, several contemporary artist’s works address the paradoxical and poignant position of refugees in limbo, located within the interstices of the legal framework regulating immigration. This inspired me to explore how these images are able to perform as political agents and how these aesthetic narratives counter previous ones by means of promoting a dialogue between refugees and society. The growth of artistic and cultural practices are used as strategies for creating visibility and advocating against the structural denial of these refugees’ human existence support the role of art and culture in political struggles. Drawing on artist and refugee collaborations, visual art works, together with pertinent literary sources, I will investigate how the activities of the We Are Here refugee collective, as well as relevant agents, can create a platform to overcome nationally constructed identities and national restrictions by means of self-presentation of refugees. Furthermore, I will investigate the extent to which contemporary art and media can operate as a means of questioning and challenging various frameworks and existing modes of representation concerning the refugee crisis and the representations of refugees, as well as the extent to which it can intervene and act subversively.

⁶ Bleiker, Roland. “Visual Politics.” *Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences*, The University of Queensland, 5 Apr. 2016, hass.uq.edu.au/project/visual-politics.

While these practices usually strive to produce counter-narratives to dehumanizing discourses of refugees and dominant, negative tropes,⁷ how do these practices convey the perspectives of individuals from refugee backgrounds in an ethically responsible way through representation? For example, some visual media producers, such as photo journalists, and artists may have a false sense of neutrality when approaching their work, as well as lack understanding of the power dynamics at play in the inherent political representation of the refugee. This lack of necessary frameworks in their respective practices can lead to the perpetuation of narratives of ‘othering’, disempowerment, and speechless-ness.⁸ Another aim of this paper is to open up a space for discussing how the media and artists alike approach issues of representation when collaborating with people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, and to outline some frameworks and methodologies that may assist in constructing visual narratives of refugees in consideration of the ethics of representation that I have outlined in chapter 3.

These ethical representations of refugees and asylum seekers in collaborative arts-based projects, including when used in the context of participatory research, can be exemplified in the following examples: The “Paper Monument for the Paperless,” (see Fig 12-13), a collaboration between the We Are Here refugee collective and Dutch artist Domenique Himmelsbach de Vries, which utilized the means of street art and poirtaiture in printmaking to give a face to the undocumented “paperless” refugees in the Netherlands. In another case study, I will focus on the series “Half Square Meter of Freedom” (see Fig 5-6) photographed by Dutch artist Jan Theun van Rees, which portrays amateur drawings discovered in a detention center for refugees in limbo. These drawings, or graffiti, are framed in a way that they are viewed as representational narratives, but the anonymity of the creators and the space within which they were created, problematizes the lack of self-presentation of the given socio-political context, providing a more nuanced examination for artists to consider in their depictions of refugee stories. In my third case study, I will examine the photo series by Syrian artist Omar Imam, entitled “Live, Love, Refugee.” (see Fig 6-10). In this series, the artist uses irony and a conceptual artistic approach to give agency to Syrian refugees through a series of intimate interviews and photos entirely composed by the subjects. Although created in the

⁷ Feldman, A., 1994. On cultural anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King. *American Ethnologist*, 21(2), 404-418.

⁸ Malkki, L.H. (1996), ‘Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization’, *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3): 377-404.

politically and emotionally charged setting of a refugee camp, this series frames the subject in a personal and rehumanized manner, contributing a more meaningful and diversified representation of their narrative to the public domain. In this way, the project intended to represent a holistic version of the life of the refugees by representing their story in their words and their own visual framing. Although I will refer to other images and collaborative projects throughout this text, I will use these three as my primary examples in elucidating and problematizing the ethics of representation and rehumanization through shifts in the agency of narrative and examine how their work represents the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands. In addition, I will use these particular case studies to provide a general framework within contemporary art discourse in better understanding the mechanisms which are operating behind the visual representations of refugees.

Chapter 1 | *Literature Review*

1.1 *Narrative framing of refugees as the 'Other'*

In the present chapter, I will review my literary sources in providing the context on the topics surrounding the narrative framing and visual politics of the representation of refugees. Since the rise of the refugee crisis, the media has used photos of refugees to inspire public sympathy to trigger action and empathy. In recent times, the meanings constructed around the image of refugees in the media have increasingly become that of helplessness, loss, death, and suffering. By exploring the continuities “in the narrative framing and emotional address of [these] photos, [one can begin to identify] the ethically and politically charged decisions by [...] the media to publish and distribute such images.”⁹ Since refugees are often in a position that prevents them from presenting narratives that are of consequence institutionally and politically, the impact that these dominant, visual representations of refugees can have on audiences results in a general perception of the refugee as an ‘Other’ that lacks agency in the context of the Western nation state.

In Prem Kumar Rajaram’s article on “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee,” he asserts that this kind of rhetoric and representations of refugees generated by the media “consigns refugees to their bodies, to a mute and faceless physical mass.”¹⁰ This kind of representation leads to the objectification of the refugee experience, and, according to Malkki, represents “the refugee as speechless.”¹¹ This further “abstracts individual experiences of displacement from the political, social and historical context while putting in their stead a depoliticized and universalized figuration of the refugee as mute victim.”¹² As cultural theorist and filmmaker Isobel Blomfield asserts, these representations of anonymous masses are pervasive in reducing refugee experiences and narratives “to sensationalized and

⁹ Fehrenbach, Heide; Rodogno, Davide. “‘A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective.” Vol. 97, no. 900, 2015, p 1121.

¹⁰ Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, pp. 247–264

¹¹ Malkki, L.H. (1996), ‘Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization’, *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3): p 377.

¹² Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, pp. 247–264.

visceral visualisations,¹³ [and that] such images function to indirectly shape [...] our perceptions of how we see and think.”¹⁴ Consequently, through this lack of agency of refugees in the formation of their visual narratives, these representations generated by the media further promotes this visual ‘othering.’ This, in turn, displaces the narrative of the asylum seeker. Without agency or a voice given to those depicted, such pictorial representations of refugees erase individuality and are “consigned to ‘visuality’ and stuck in static signification of particular meanings”¹⁵ that influence public understanding and reinforce stereotypes of the asylum seeker. This practice identifies “refugees not in terms of their individual humanity but as a group whose boundaries and [agency] are removed from historical context, reduced to norms and terms relevant to a state-centric perspective.”¹⁶ In regards to this, anthropologist Appadurai, a major theorist in globalization studies, considers this “subjugated ‘othering’ [as a reinforcement of] the state-centric imagination.”¹⁷ In cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha's book, *The Location of Culture*, this idea behind the creation of the ‘other’ emphasizes the subject’s loss of its “power to signify, negate, [or] to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse.”¹⁸ The literature underlines the lack of holistic visual representations of refugees and, in turn, reinforces the narrative framing and visual politics of ‘othering’ in the representation of refugees.

1.2 *Deconstructing representations through counter-narratives*

The text *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* by Jacques Rancière brings together the topics of politics and art to show the critical potential of this relationship. I will use this text to problematize the responsibility of media and art in how they create a space for appearance when working within the realm of visual politics. This examines the critical potential of art in this capacity by emphasizing two key concepts in his work: the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. In demonstrating the operations of these concepts, Rancière elaborates new directions and frameworks of these concepts to “re-assert art’s capacity to resist forms of

¹³ Feldman, A., 1994. On cultural anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King. *American Ethnologist*, 21(2), in Blomfield, op cit, pp 322-338.

¹⁴ Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39:3, pp 322-338.

¹⁵ Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, p 253.

¹⁶ Ibid, p 251

¹⁷ Appadurai, A. (1993) ‘The Heart of Whiteness’, *Callaloo* 16(4): pp 796-807.

¹⁸ Bhabha, Homi K., (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, p 31.

economic, political, and ideological domination.”¹⁹ I will utilize this method in analyzing the contemporary trends in both art and politics, thus connecting the world of the aesthetic narrative and the language of rights, which will be implored in depth in chapter 3 covering the ethics of representation. This demonstrates how art can affect thought by envisioning the invisible and challenging what we accept as real in the construction of visual narratives, including the events surrounding the refugee crisis and the ethical turn in the aesthetics and politics of representation.

In terms of contemporary art discourse addressing the concept of nationalism and how national identity can be maintained through the curation of images and text, I will refer to the collection of essays in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. This text presents visual art curator Elisabeth Sussman in describing the nation as an “unstable and partial form of containment and identification for any contextual history of form and image”²⁰ in rethinking the nation as an international site. As I will discuss in chapter 4, refugee collectives often utilize various media and platforms for modes of representation that aim to deconstruct dominant representations through counter-narratives by means of self-presentation. This acts as a flexible means of communication to engage these issues of agency and misrepresentation, which newspapers and books often have not or will not publish based on stereotypes of perception or political agendas. In a review of literature on this topic, I will utilize a multifaceted publication entitled *Collective Struggle of Refugees. Lost. In Between*.²¹ edited by Jonas Staal in collaboration with We Are Here. This source utilizes the authority of experience with its collection of interviews of refugees and their recounting of their experiences, as well examples of artistic practices involving socially engaged projects and collaborations with refugees.

In expanding upon this idea of counter-narratives, I will also utilize the book *Urgency of Theory*,²² which provides responses that address intercultural negotiations and alternative understandings of the processes of artistic creation. In order to address my research question

¹⁹ Rancière, Jacques. “The Paradoxes of Political Art.” *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2010.

²⁰ Sussman, Elisabeth. “The Pragmatics of Internationalism.” Part Four: Curatorship and International Exhibitions Curator’s Work. Ed. Jean Fisher. *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. London: Kala, 1994. 166. Print.

²¹ Staal, Jonas Ed. New World Academy Reader # 2 *Collective Struggle of Refugees. Lost. In Between*. Edited by Jonas Staal in collaboration with We Are Here. Utrecht BAK, Basis voor actuele kunst, 2013.

²² Ribeiro, Antonio Pinto, editor. *The Urgency of Theory*. Carcanet, 2007.

regarding rehumanization and the formation of narratives, in this text I will refer to cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who addresses the issue of nationally constructed narratives and its implications on the subject. To support these ideas, I will continue with Bhabha by weaving in his book *Nation and Narration*, which confronts the realities of the concept of nationhood²³ thereby supporting my use of the notion of nation state/ national identity as a frame to better understand the rehumanization and identity of refugees through the functions of art and media. In Bhabha's words: "Amidst these exorbitant images of the nation-space in its transnational dimension there are those who have not yet found their nation."²⁴ Acting within this 'transnational dimension,' the driving forces of change, regarding the notions of rehumanization and construction of visual narratives, take place within the frame of representation. In other words, these visual representations or artworks and their "aesthetic, cultural and epistemological frame [...] mould our critical language."²⁵ To quote Bhabha, it is in this interlocutory voice of change and cultural expression that is:

at the heart of the aesthetic experience [...] which is the basis of human creativity and political democracy. [Interlocution] is the recognition of communication - talk, conversation, discourse, dialogue - as it comes to constitute the 'human right to narrate' which is essential in building diverse, non-consensual communities.²⁶

In this dialogue the "human right to narrate"²⁷ is amplified by the rhetoric of artistic practices fueled by the self-presentation of refugees. This literature highlights my expected claim that the performance of freedom of expression and expressions of human beingness, becomes a claim to human rights, as well as affirms the implications for the selection of certain visual representations, in addition to their potential to create visibility and agency.

²³ Bhabha, Homi K., editor. *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis (Londyn), 1990.

²⁴ Bhabha, Homi K. "Introduction: narrating the nation." Bhabha, Homi K., editor. *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha, Routledge, Taylor & Francis (Londyn), 1990, p 7.

²⁵ Tawadros, Gilane. "The Case of The Missing Body." Part Three: Beyond Diversity and Difference. Ed. Jean Fisher. *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. London: Kala, 1994, p 111. Print.

²⁶ Bhabha, Homi K. "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism." *The Urgency of Theory*. Ed. António Pinto Ribeiro. Manchester: Carcanet, 2007, p 3. Print.

²⁷ Ibid, p 3

Chapter 2 | *Methodology*

In my research, I propose various methods in order to analyze the potential of artistic practices as a means to further develop contemporary forms and techniques of political visibility and social mobilization in a contemporary global world, with a focus on refugee collectives and artists based in the Netherlands. One approach in my methodology utilizes cultural critic Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the 'human right to narrate' in order to analyze ethics and aesthetics and, more specifically, the connection between the world of the aesthetic narrative and the language of rights. This theoretical approach examines the political agency and social relationality of art. Another method involves looking at individual and collaborative artistic works among refugees and artists in order to analyze the relationship between the artist and subject, and subject and audience, as well as analyze the simultaneous communication of artistic expression and discourse. I will also examine the process of how these cultural forms are created and distributed by media platforms and the ways in which these forms resonate in everyday life, on the individual, national, and global level.

Following from this, my research question is: "How can the activities of refugee collectives and artist-refugee collaborations overcome dominant visual narratives and nationally constructed identities by means of self-presentation of refugees?" This question's answer will help define how images can function as a means to disrupt narratives or stigmatized images, as well as identify and further develop the various frameworks and existing modes of representation of refugees within contemporary art discourse. In order to research this issue, I will answer two sub-questions: "What is the connection between the world of the aesthetic narrative and the language of rights?" This question is aimed at understanding the visual dehumanization of refugees and the potential of artistic practices as a means to develop new forms and techniques of political visibility and social mobilization in a contemporary global world. The second sub-question is: "What are cultural institutions' and artists' responsibilities in producing counter-narratives that service refugees' perspectives and voices?" This will focus on elucidating the ethics of representation in regards to the selected media examples and artist-refugee case studies by revealing how representations are mediated and using literary sources to exemplify and support some of the ethical difficulties when depicting

refugees and their experiences. By examining how current visual representations of refugees and asylum seekers are used to reduce the constructions of their narrative to a silent,²⁸ ‘other.’²⁹ In order to answer my research question, I will be using the notion of nation state/national identity as a frame to analyze rehumanization and identity in regards to refugees through the functions of art and media for analyzing the selected case studies.

For the visual and rhetorical analysis of this thesis, I selected images from the Netherlands' national media stories to perform a comparison to the visual narrative to the coupling national rhetoric in regards to refugees and asylum seekers, which will be covered in chapter three. I also selected case studies of artist-refugee collaborations that specifically aim to produce a counter-narrative to these media examples. In this section, covering chapter 4 and leading into chapter 5, my research will focus on narratives derived from both the media and artist-refugee collaborations, as well as the literature available on representing refugees through art to theorize these visual and rhetorical analyses. Through this method, I will be discussing the agendas and implications for the selection of certain visual representations, in addition to their potential to create visibility and agency. This approach aims to delve into the ethics of representation and support my research regarding the connection between the world of the aesthetic narrative and the language of rights. The following case studies will identify some of the gaps in the context of this practice, as well as illustrate the experiences of refugee collectives and artists who represent the lives and realities of refugees from a more ethical angle. With that purpose in mind, I considered the reflections and motives of the artist-collaborators about their process and how they approach these collaborations with refugees and asylum seekers who often live within the same community but whose status has yet to be determined. This exchange between refugees in limbo and professional cultural producers facilitated through these collaborations will assist me in addressing the social function of the image. These particular experiences, opinions, and interactions between artists and refugees that occur within the context of a shared environment are all critical in providing subjective knowledge relating to the ethics of representation. Through this method, this research also takes a reflective stance to problematize these collaborations and to reveal

²⁸ Malkki, L.H. (1996), ‘Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization’, *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3): p 377.

²⁹ Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, pp. 247–264.

some critical points to consider more ethically in regards to artistic endeavors in the representation of refugee experiences. This reflexivity of researchers and artists requires "engaging with ones' positioning in relation to choices and self-conscious actions in creating representations, as well as questioning how representations are mediated by our relationship with the topic and the context in which they are created."³⁰ In regards to this, the scholar Kim Etherington proposes a different research paradigm that utilizes reflexivity to overcome the implications of power dynamics implicit in research endeavors:

Reflexivity challenges us to be more fully conscious of our own ideology, culture, and politics and those of our participants and our audience; this adds validity and rigor by providing information about the contexts in which data are located and enables us to recognize and address the moral and ethical issues and power relations involved.³¹

Thus, these critical reflections should be considered as a collective perspective based on individual experiences, while further using the points discussed throughout the remainder of this thesis to open up discussions on the topic in other contexts. While this thesis acknowledges and identifies that there are diverse forms of artistic representations depicting refugee experiences, it does not claim here to generalize this methodology or discussion to all forms of media or art forms in this context. However, there are commonalities in terms of ethical considerations across artistic domains, and some of the examples and key points that this paper will discuss may be useful, in a broader sense, for artists and other cultural workers to consider when applying these ideas when using participatory arts-based methods, as well as to the specificities of their own practice and space. Furthermore, the key considerations outlined in this thesis can contribute to ensuring that scholars and artists "can be more sensitive to, and fulfill their ethical obligations towards, the agency and self-expression of refugees through artistic endeavors, as rich sources of contemporary knowledge."³²

The present research will be structured as follows: I will begin by presenting the literary sources on the topic of how refugees are visually and rhetorically represented in media and

³⁰ Gray, B., 2008. "Putting emotion and reflexivity to work in researching migration." *Sociology*, 42(5), 935-952, in Blomfield, op cit, p 11.

³¹ Etherington, K., 2006. Reflexivity: Using our 'selves' in narrative research. In S. Traher (Ed.), *Narrative Research on Learning: comparative and international perspective*, Oxford: Symposium Books, p 89.

³² Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39:3, p 327.

art, proving a theoretical paradigm from which to begin my argument. Following this, I will provide a detailed definition of the ethics of representation and how this method will be applied to the relevant case studies. I will then introduce the media and case studies divided into two chapters: the first (chapter 4) will deal with the visual representation of refugees and asylum seekers throughout media platforms within the context of The Netherlands and how they are used to serve political agendas as well as generate agency for refugee collectives, introducing in greater detail the specific case of the *Wij Zijn Hier* (ENG: We Are Here) collective of refugee and asylum seekers. The second (chapter 5) discusses case studies related to artist-refugee collaborations and the inherent implications in terms of the ethics of representation and rehumanization through the shift in the agency of narrative. Furthermore, this research is not only aimed at discussing the ethics of representation of the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands, it also provides a general framework within contemporary art discourse in better understanding the mechanisms which are operating behind the visual representations of refugees. As “alternative knowledges and forms of inclusion seemingly only exist when they are recognised by Western standards of cultural production,”³³ an additional core objective of this research is to encourage a shift in the perception and practice of Western-centric driven narratives, historically embedded in academia, towards a rethinking of the nation as an international site.

³³ Frank, Chandra. “POLICY BRIEFING: Towards a Decolonial Curatorial Practice.” *Discover Society*, Issue 21, Policy and Politics. 3 June 2015, Accessed at discoversociety.org/2015/06/03/policy-briefing-towards-a-decolonial-curatorial-practice/.

Chapter 3 | *Ethics of Representation*

3.1 *Power Dynamics: the relationship between the artist and subject*

This chapter will reflect on the ethical considerations for image driven media and artists involved in representing and performing collaborative projects with refugees and asylum seekers, by examining their position in relation to the subject and how together they question and challenge various frameworks and existing models of representation. For artists and cultural institutions, a critical challenge they face lies in the consideration of the ethics of representation in relation to the representations of refugees, where their artistic agenda may unintentionally fall into the power dynamics of ‘othering.’ This can be recognized in the implicit juxtaposition of the legal status of the artist to that of an undocumented immigrant. In order to avoid simplifying the lived experience of the refugees they are working with or displacing their voices, this requires the deconstruction of the artist and subject dynamic, offering agency and a voice to those depicted. In the process of presenting a multifaceted and empowering narrative instead of focusing exclusively on the sensationalized theme of loss and suffering, this challenges dominant stereotypes and narratives. Narratives that do not offer agency to subjects of refugee and asylum backgrounds, leads to a filtering of the voice of the displaced and a means to speak for themselves, resulting in the “de-politicized and de-historicized image of refugees.”³⁴ By presenting counter-narratives in light of dominant tropes, these artist-refugee collaborations promote a more holistic representation of refugees’ individuality, along with their own stories and circumstances. In examining these representational practices and visual politics in the narration of refugee experiences, the motivations and agendas of artists who choose to represent refugees in their work are equally important to understand, to determine an adherence to the ethics of representation in upholding refugee agency through art. The responsibility of the artist, in this case, is the ability to respond through these mutual exchanges and creative processes. This analysis, which will be further explored throughout chapter 5, aims to underline the key ethical challenges and strategies that artists may encounter when navigating the power dynamics of

³⁴Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Introduction.” *Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee. Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, p 247.

them as the citizen artist and the lack of agency of the subjects they work with in developing collaborative social arts projects with refugees.

3.2 *Rehumanization*

In regards to the ethical considerations for the representational practices and inherent visual politics of creating and displaying visual representations of refugees and their lived experiences in art and the media, it is important to consider the notion of *rehumanization*. Rehumanization can be defined as “the nonviolent process of establishing a sense of empathy and mutual identification [...] by regarding the opponent as fully human even while resisting an unjust agenda; [thus] recovering our natural sense of identity with one another in the process.”³⁵ By providing agency (by way of artists/ cultural institutions) or taking agency (autonomy gained by means of refugee collective initiatives), this empowerment gained through cultural activities can be realized as having the potential for rehumanizing the visual narrative of refugees. This turns passive subjects into active participants in the telling of their narrative through their own words through dialogical aesthetics, as well as various means of expressions through collaborative arts projects and media initiatives. Rehumanization, in this context, dispels the visual dehumanization of refugees by overcoming existing tropes through the empowerment of the refugees by fulfilling their right to agency in constructing their visual narrative. This notion emphasizes the connection between the world of the aesthetic narrative and the language of rights and suggests the potential of artistic practices as a means to further develop contemporary forms and techniques of political visibility and social mobilization in a contemporary global world.

In addressing the overarching research question regarding rehumanization and the formation of narratives, cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha addresses the issue of nationally constructed narratives and its implications on the subject:

It is the *unreliability* of the narratives of history and memory that forces upon us the ethical responsibility of doubt and critical inquiry. It is global doubt that compels the poet to take a stand as an ethical and aesthetic witness, *in the present tense, at the present time* – I am, I am, I am. [...] The repetition of the simplest of all expressions of

³⁵ Metta Center. “Rehumanization.” *Metta Center*, 29 Aug. 2014. Accessed at: mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/rehumanization-2/

human beingness, 'I am', becomes both a claim of human rights, and an embodiment of the responsibilities and obligations of global citizenship.³⁶

This reassertion of humanity is further supported by Bhabha in his book *Nation and Narration*, in how it confronts the realities surrounding the concept of nationhood,³⁷ thereby supporting my use of the notion of nation state/ national identity as a frame to better understand the rehumanization and identity of refugees through the functions of art and media. In relation to the following cases studies, the Amsterdam-based refugee collective Wij Zijn Hier (ENG: We Are Here) created a media platform to bring to the forefront the life of the migrant asylum seeker, giving them a voice in the public discourse and letting the world know the reality among them. In this act of taking agency and rehumanizing their presence through visual narrative, the creative force of these activists not only articulates their history of struggle and resistance to oppressive conditions, it also redefines the space of the nation as belonging to them. These underlines how the forces of change regarding the notions of rehumanization and construction of visual narratives take place within the frame of representation, an idea which will be further explored through relevant case studies of the visual media's representation of refugees in chapter 4, as well as through case studies of artist and refugee collaborations in chapter 5.

3.3 Problematizing responsibility in the space of appearance

In problematizing responsibility in the space of appearance, my analysis converges with previous literature. In line with this research, this thesis can determine that all regimes of visibility, in the realm of media and art, can be informed by implicit symbolic strategies of dehumanization. According to political theorist Chantal Mouffe in her text *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, the political dimension in terms of regimes of visibility concerns:

the symbolic ordering of social relations, what Claude Lefort calls 'the *mise en scène*', 'the *mise en forme*' of human coexistence and this is where lies its aesthetic dimension. The real issue concerns the possible forms of critical art [and] the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony.

³⁶ Bhabha, Homi K. "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism." *The Urgency of Theory*. Ed. António Pinto Ribeiro. Manchester: Carcanet, 2007. p 18. Print.

³⁷ Bhabha, Homi K., editor. *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis (Londyn), 1990.

Once we accept that identities are [...] always the result of processes of identification, that they are discursively constructed, the question that arises is the type of identity that critical artistic practices should aim at fostering.³⁸

In interpreting this text, according to Ziarek, “art’s relation to society [is in its performative force, in how it] redispenses the social relations.”³⁹ These can encompass strategies of politicization or aestheticization, in which “the refugee appears in Western spaces of publicity as a deeply ambivalent figure: a body-in-need, a powerless child, a racial *other*”⁴⁰ or sentimental figure. These can be viewed through the various platforms of media and art, which is important to note since refugees are structurally unable to have a voice and claim agency in Western publicity due to their lack of civic status. However, in revealing these frameworks, we can become more conscious of the power that various media platforms have over our perception, revealing the “biases contained in mainstream representations of subaltern identities, [sharpening] our perception of images [of] characters whose identity is fleeting and enigmatic.”⁴¹ In recognizing these frameworks in the media or in a photographic exhibition or artwork, the viewer sees a set of signs formed according to an artist's or producer's intention. By recognizing the signs, this can reveal a specific reading of the situation staged by the author. The space of the digital platform, museum or gallery, or community place can act as a form of contextual framing of common space, as well as act as a mode of visibility and a space of political and social communication. Within these frames, these representations are offered to the same in different ways, “accommodating all forms of information and debate on public issues that challenged mainstream forms and information and discussion.”⁴² This is not a simple matter of offering space, but of the framework of distributions of space and how they construct perception. Such strategies are intended to reframe the aesthetic regime of art as an arrangement of actions that designate a way of changing existing modes of visual representations and “building a new relationship between

³⁸ Mouffe, Chantal. “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces .” *Art & Research : Chantal Mouffe*, Arts & Research, 2007, www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html.

³⁹ Ziarek, Krzysztof. “Beyond the Object: Art as a Forcefield.” *The Force of Art*. Stanford University Press, 2004, p 20.

⁴⁰ Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. “Rethinking Humanity and Responsibility in the Refugee ‘Crisis’: A Visual Typology of News Media.” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, p 26.

⁴¹ Rancière, Jacques. “The Paradoxes of Political Art.” *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2010, p 134.

⁴² Rancière, Jacques. “The Paradoxes of Political Art.” *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2010, p 139.

reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.”⁴³ As artists aim to change the frames the ways in which we perceive subjects, it simultaneously creates new modes of individuality and as well as new connections between those modes, thus creating new forms of perception. The aesthetics and politics of representation consists above all in the framing of a ‘we,’ “a subject and collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts.”⁴⁴ As I will demonstrate in chapters 4 and 5, this notion reframes the world as a space of a shared and personal experience through which new modes of constructing visual narratives may be developed. However, though art may designate their practices and framing of their representations using this frame of ‘we’ to invite refugees and asylum seekers to engage in their practice with various proposals of agency, it is important to note that the refugees’ own agentive capacity may not be asserted, as noted due to their lack of agency. In offering a space of representation, it is important for artists and media producers to give rise to and embrace the notion of plurality in their practices and proposals for agency. Otherwise, their agendas may fail to grant refugees and asylum seekers the opportunity to be seen and heard as equal in the space of appearance.

For future conceptual work on refugee representations, consciousness of these frameworks could support ethical practices while addressing various forms of exclusionary bias. To this end, I propose scholar Roger Silverstone’s notion of “responsibility for the conditions of the other.”⁴⁵ This approach emphasizes the relational and narrative character of this form of responsibility, rather than a self-oriented focus of the artist, referring to the “human capacity to establish communities of belonging through the sharing of stories.”⁴⁶ This establishes a space to facilitate narratives that enable individuals and collectives to experience visibility and agency. Through the reframing of practices, these systems promote visibility and open up the space of appearance, thus opening up “the boundaries around ‘who speaks’ in the space of appearance [to] be claimed by a plurality of voices that claim social and political recognition.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Rancière, Jacques. “The Paradoxes of Political Art.” *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2010, p 141.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 141

⁴⁵ Silverstone, R. (2006) *Media and Morality: on the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁴⁶ Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. “Rethinking Humanity and Responsibility in the Refugee ‘Crisis’: A Visual Typology of News Media.” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, p 28.

⁴⁷ Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. “Rethinking Humanity and Responsibility in the Refugee ‘Crisis’: A Visual Typology of News Media.” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, p 28.

Chapter 4 | *Visual Media Representation of Refugees*

4.1 *Representational Practices and Visual Politics*

This chapter examines the contemporary issues of the representation of refugees in the media, paying special regard to the visual image and the rhetoric supporting these visual narratives and images and also the manner in how they frame political discussions on the topic. Media representations are crucial in understanding the construction of visual narratives and knowledge production of refugees and asylum seekers, especially in an era of the widespread distribution of images across national boundaries. In this way, the media (television, the press, the Internet, etc.), as space of political and social communication, has “a profound significance for the way in which the world is understood by its citizens.”⁴⁸ The result has generated a radically new image consciousness, posing fundamentally new political and ethical challenges for artists and visual media producers. In this chapter, I will reveal the various frameworks at work in the production of this imagery, in order to elucidate how this influences visual narratives through political and artistic thought and action. This research is compiled of case studies of various Dutch media platforms in the context of the Netherlands, as well as the practices of refugee driven media practices, providing a basis to further investigate what influence these agencies can have on the social perceptions and prejudices within society. This comparison aims to further examine representational practices and visual politics, while acknowledging the interests or agenda of the agency that aim to use visual images in the construction of the public’s concept of “the refugee.”

First off, it is important to acknowledge the crucial role of the images we regularly see in the media, where the visual image tells the story and in how we construct narratives. According to photojournalist Terence Wright, in examining the representation of refugees in the media, “it is becoming increasingly important not only to analyze the ability of visual images to create new discourses but also necessary to examine the social and [political forces at play.]”

⁴⁹ These forces influence the power of the visual image in the media representation of migration, emphasizing the “agenda setting effects of [these] media and visual images on

⁴⁸ Silverstone, R. (2006) *Media and Morality: on the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁴⁹ Wright, Terrance, 2002. Moving images: The media representation of refugees. *Visual Studies*, 17(1), 53.

national and international policy.”⁵⁰ Although there are copious amounts of photographic portrayals of refugees that have circulated the media, these visual representations of refugees do not offer a holistic representation. In a content analysis of newspaper front pages, students from the University of Queensland demonstrated that refugees and asylum seekers, in the context of Australian media, have been primarily:

represented as medium or large groups and through a focus on boats. [They argued] that this visual framing, and in particular the relative absence of images that depict individual asylum seekers with recognizable facial features, associates refugees not with a humanitarian challenge, but with threats to sovereignty and security.⁵¹

According to media culture scholar Allen Feldman, this type of reduction of the refugee to “generalities of bodies—dead, wounded, starving, diseased, and homeless—are pressed against the television screen as massed articles.”⁵² This visual generalization makes it difficult for the viewer to realize and “understand that there are individual politics and histories behind the pictures of teeming masses of bodies.”⁵³ It also fails to acknowledge the interests or agenda of the agency of the refugees themselves, due to “power relations that restrict the identity of displaced people [...] to preconceived notions of the character of displacement.”⁵⁴ This example, in addition to the other various case studies introduced in this chapter, aim to “understand the process through which contemporary power is performed as contemporary art”⁵⁵ through forms of visual representation. This challenges our understanding of the static image, in addition to the frameworks and existing modes of representation within the media regarding conceptions and agency of the visual narratives of refugees.

4.2 Historical and political context of the refugee in media

According to propaganda artist Jonas Staal, “aiming to overcome the imbalances between the

⁵⁰ Fehrenbach, H. and Rodogno, D., (2016). “A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child”: Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective. p 1123.

⁵¹ Bleiker, Roland; Campbell, David; Hutchison, Emma; Nicholson, Xzarina. (2013) *The visual dehumanisation of refugees*, Australian Journal of Political Science, 48:4, p 398.

⁵² Feldman, A., 1994. On cultural anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King. *American Ethnologist*, 21(2), pp 404–418.

⁵³ Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, p 252

⁵⁴ Ibid, p 256

⁵⁵ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 31.

stated and stateless does not change the fact that such historical and contemporary inequalities are present in the process.”⁵⁶ Because refugees are politicized, any visual representation or art work of these groups of people cannot be neutral and instead this practice is inherently political. Media representations are key in the manner in which they frame political discussions on this topic and how political issues are unavoidably and inherently mediated through images. By investigating the historical and political discussions on the topic, we are better able to understand the manner in which they frame the visual images of refugees represented in the functions of art and media.

Globally, there are “at least 65 million displaced persons, including 21 million refugees and 3 million asylum seekers. Europe is not bearing the main brunt of the refugee crisis, but [nonetheless the] continent is in the center of a political and social storm from the roughly 1,255,600 people who applied for asylum in the European Union (EU) in 2015.”⁵⁷ These displaced persons fleeing violence and/ or persecution beyond their state's borders find their place of refuge dictated by inhospitable border politics. Nation-states constitute “the means of preserving the rule of exclusion or insisting upon its necessity.”⁵⁸ In scholar Saskia Sassen’s words, it is the “drama of people in motion in Europe that shows with great clarity the intimate connections between the formation of independent nation-states and the creation of the refugee, the displaced person, the asylum seeker.”⁵⁹

The “role and agency of art within stateless political struggles”⁶⁰ is apparent in the activities of the refugee collective *Wij Zijn Hier* (Eng: We Are Here). *We Are Here* was “the first large-scale organization of refugees in the Netherlands to protest the structural denial of its members’ rights to citizenship”⁶¹ and has since accumulated “over 200 members [that have] come largely from war-torn African and Middle-Eastern countries, and are stuck in what human rights groups say is an ‘asylum gap,’ legally barred from integrating into Dutch life

⁵⁶ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 29.

⁵⁷ Hansen, Randall; Randeria, Shalini. “Tensions of refugee politics in Europe.” *Science*. 02 Sep 2016. Vol. 353, Issue 6303, pp. 994-995.

⁵⁸ Gibson, Sarah. “Border Politics and Hospitable Spaces in Stephen Frear’s *Dirty Pretty Things*.” 2006. *Third Text*, 20:6, p. 694.

⁵⁹ Sassen, Saskia. “Guests and Aliens.” *New Press*, New York, 1999, p xiii.

⁶⁰ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 28.

⁶¹ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction” in *New World Academy Reader # 2 Collective Struggle of Refugees. Lost. In Between.*, p 15. Edited by Jonas Staal in collaboration with *We Are Here*. Utrecht BAK, Basis voor actuele kunst, 2013.

via jobs⁶² or study. Dutch authorities have rejected their requests for asylum, yet they are unable to return home due to the war-torn status of their countries of origin. However, some face expulsion despite the probability of persecution upon their return, in contravention of international law. In 2004, Human Rights Watch, a global human rights organization, addressed the Dutch immigration minister stating its opposition to the “denial of residence eligibility and social assistance to the failed asylum seekers.”⁶³ In this open letter, the Human Rights Watch expressed its concern that, “some of the people subject to the planned deportations may be at risk of return to a country or a part of a country where their lives or freedom would be threatened. [...] It has been widely recognized that returns to [certain] countries at present could place people at risk for their lives and safety.”⁶⁴ Currently, The Human Rights Watch cites that in the Netherlands, “despite UN criticism, government assistance to rejected asylum seekers who cannot be removed remains limited in duration and scope.”⁶⁵

In a personal interview conducted within one of the buildings squatted by We Are Here in Amsterdam, Jo Van Der Spek, the Director of the Migrant to Migrant Foundation, voiced similar concerns. The Migrant to Migrant Foundation, based in Amsterdam, facilitates an environment for exchange between and with migrants, producing community media, events, projects and campaigns amongst a broad multicultural local and international network. Director Van Der Spek spoke specifically of his cooperation with refugees and migrants, such as the collective We Are Here. Through his experience, he cites two reasons for migration: misery and hope. According to Van Der Spek, the perception of migrants in the Netherlands is that they are poor and their situations can be alleviated through charity. However, he states that this “charity puts off political action, keeping rejected asylum seekers powerless and impotent and leaving them still with no human rights.”⁶⁶

⁶² Tilotta, Sarah. "Worse than Wilders? Refugees Fear Status Quo." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 14 Mar. 2017. Accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/14/europe/netherlands-refugees-wilders-we-are-here/>

⁶³ Marsden, Chris. "Fire Kills at Least 11 at Amsterdam Airport Detention Centre." *International Committee of the Fourth International*, 28 Oct. 2005. Accessed at <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2005/10/amst-o28.html>

⁶⁴ Denber, Rachel. "Netherlands: Safety of Failed Asylum Seekers at Risk. Letter to the Dutch Immigration Minister." Letter to Mrs. Drs. M.C.F. Verdonk, Minister of Alien Affairs and Integration. 13 Feb. 2004. MS. The Netherlands, The Hague.

⁶⁵ "Netherlands." *Human Rights Watch*. Human Rights Watch, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/netherlands>

⁶⁶ Van Der Spek, Jo. Personal Interview (co-interviewed van der Speck with Brandon Jourdan). 09 May 2017.

Artists “have created their own alternative models of political organization [and in the case of stateless refugees], have resulted in artistic practices that aim to recognize statelessness as a power in and of itself.”⁶⁷ In October 2005, a fire broke out in an immigration detention center at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. Infamously remembered as the Schiphol Fire, 11 detainees were killed due to negligent conditions. Among the majority of inmates included undocumented immigrants and rejected asylum seekers awaiting deportation. Although criticized, in the decade that has followed, the oppressive conditions of strict Dutch immigration policies faced by asylum seekers has not significantly improved. As a result, failed asylum seekers are neither entitled to social housing nor allowed to work, and many are often forced to live on the street. In 2012, a refugee collective known as *Wij Zijn Hier* or *We Are Here* was organized to make visible the inhumane situation in which they live and to advocate for the human rights of refugees in limbo in the Netherlands. The name of the group, *We Are Here*, was introduced in 2006 at the commemoration of the Schiphol Fire by victim and survivor, Papa Sakho. He stated, “We are here, to make a life again, together as one. Today we can say we are here to make a normal life, all together.”⁶⁸ This protest initiative is designed to draw attention to the shortcomings of the current system, (see Fig. 1) while at the same time facilitating opportunities for refugees in limbo to emancipate. In a time where the refugee crisis has regularly been an object of the media’s and artists’ gaze, in order to share their own stories and effectively spread their call for recognition and human rights, *We Are Here* has set up an independent media platform to facilitate their protest. This media platform, known as the *We Are Here Media Team*, creates a space for self-representation through independent videos, photography, and journalism. Harnessing this independent media has given them a voice in the public discourse about the refugee and migrant crisis, providing a new vocabulary that counters the imagery of refugees spread through mass media. This self-organization of refugees has produced a social movement that has strengthened awareness of their situation and increased diplomatic pressure on the Dutch government. This paper investigates how the activities of the *We Are Here* media platform can overcome nationally constructed identities and national restrictions by means of self-presentation of refugees in limbo.

⁶⁷ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 37.

⁶⁸ Sakho, Papa. “Commemoration of the Schiphol Fire.” 2006. Accessed at <http://wijzijnhier.org/tijdlijn/we-are-here-is-four-september-4th-2016/>

Out of We Are Here's support from volunteers, the We Are Here Academy was initiated in 2014. It is an "educational initiative offering university-level courses for undocumented individuals."⁶⁹ The courses taught at the Academy are designed to provide skills and training to students to offer a voice to the silenced and facilitate their protest. The curriculum covers asylum law, Dutch politics, history of protest movements, dance in demonstrations, and vocal training. With the organization of the We Are Here media team, the Academy has offered a range of media studies covering presentation and representation. These courses teach students "journalistic skills, so they can represent themselves in media [through their own stories and message], instead of being dependent on mainstream media and journalists."⁷⁰ As independent journalists, photographers and writers, the We Are Here media platform not only increases the visibility of refugees in limbo, it is simultaneously working on the present and future of refugees in limbo, who are unable to receive a residence permit but also can't get evicted. The content of their media focuses primarily on personal stories that do not earn the attention of mainstream media outlets. In that context, people may view their situation through a filtered lens. Through this platform, refugees are able to process their own dilemmas and reflections on the world in photographs, videos, and journalistic stories so that they can both have a voice themselves in the public discourse about the refugee and migrant crisis.

The media team of We Are Here strategically promotes their agenda of social rights through the establishment of control over the perception of asylum seekers which is exhibited through the visualization of the problems they encounter in the Netherlands. This practice attempts to deconstruct the systemic issues of social hierarchy, further exemplifies the shift in authorship and audience. This can have "important revisionary implications for the nation states."⁷¹ In comparison to the Dutch media landscape and social media presence of Dutch politicians, the identities of refugees and asylum seekers have been constructed in the discourses and practices of nationalism. The Netherland's current leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), Geert Wilders, for example, is a far-right politician who has become well-known for his

⁶⁹ "Academy." *We Are Here Academy - Here to Support*. Here to Support, 2017. Accessed at <http://heretosupport.nl/we-are-here-academy-3/>

⁷⁰ "Academy." *We Are Here Academy - Here to Support*. Here to Support, 2017. Accessed at <http://heretosupport.nl/we-are-here-academy-3/>

⁷¹ Bhabha, Homi K. "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism." *The Urgency of Theory*. Ed. António Pinto Ribeiro. Manchester: Carcanet, 2007, p 10. Print.

anti-immigrant stances.⁷² The rhetorical and visual framing associates refugees with threats to sovereignty and security. The recurring use of dehumanising visual patterns promoted by the agendas of these political campaigns, in this way, reinforce a politics of fear, which Bhabha describes as “the fear of an alien-nation of minorities, refugees, migrants, emerging as a relatively autonomous public sphere within the nation’s habitus.”⁷³ With this, Jonas Staal argues that “Wilders has “changed the vocabulary and identity of Dutch politics [...] leading to a dominant political narrative of a new ‘Nationalist International.’”⁷⁴ The current government has received criticism from the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ECRI), which has raised its concern over increased hostility towards refugees and asylum-seekers⁷⁵ in the country. “The figure of the refugee or asylum seeker here becomes a site for the limits of hospitality and welcoming”⁷⁶ followed by the host nation’s loaded rhetoric:

We accept the foreigner, the other, the foreign body *up to a certain point*, and so not without restrictions. [...] We offer hospitality only on the condition that the other follow our rules, our way of life, even our language, our culture, our political system, and so on.⁷⁷

The promotion of this nationalist rhetoric via the media has taken the form of condescending speech and representation of these groups, thus furthering these dehumanising visual patterns to reinforce a ‘politics of fear’. Hence, this visual and rhetorical framing, in particular, the circulation of sensational media and the relative absence of images that depict individual asylum seekers with discernible facial or other distinct features, does not necessarily associate refugees with a humanitarian challenge, but with threats to sovereignty and security. With the lack of recognition from the government the refugees of the We Are Here collective frequently “experience movement and removal by the police and the authorities in response

⁷² Wilders, Geert. “VIDEO: Choose For Freedom.” 21 April 2017. Facebook post. Accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/geertwilders/videos/356506864747587/>

⁷³ Bhabha, Homi K. "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism." *The Urgency of Theory*. Ed. António Pinto Ribeiro. Manchester: Carcanet, 2007, p 3. Print.

⁷⁴ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 15.

⁷⁵ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. *ECRI REPORT ON THE NETHERLANDS (fourth Monitoring Cycle)*: n. pag. *Council of Europe*. Council of Europe, CRI(2013)39, 15 Oct. 2013. Accessed at <https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Netherlands/NLD-CbC-IV-2013-039-ENG.pdf>

⁷⁶ Gibson, Sarah. "Border Politics and Hospitable Spaces in Stephen Frear’s Dirty Pretty Things." 2006. *Third Text*, 20:6, p 696.

⁷⁷ Borradori, Giovanna. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2003, p 128.

to contentions with the mayor of Amsterdam”⁷⁸ with squatting evolving into a form of political protest. Examples of these practices, which are prominent throughout Europe, including the repeated use of “recategorizing the term refugee as illegal immigrants, squatters, and even using these terms in place of a name of an interviewee.”⁷⁹ In a recount of the refugee struggle in journeying to Europe, the language remains the same:

Why is it always illegal migration we hear about in the news? Isn't the composition of all nations a status quo of continuous transformations? There are always people coming in and going out. [...] Disease, social pressures, and natural disasters ensure that these transformations persist.⁸⁰

Recently, the ECRI has issued a report citing the “various instances in which the [Netherlands] media has contributed to creating negative stereotypes.”⁸¹ From this, the ECRI recommended that “Dutch authorities engage in a debate with the media [...] to ensure that reporting does not contribute to creating an atmosphere of hostility and rejection towards members of any minority groups.”⁸² This multicultural oppression has commonly led to legal ramifications for failed asylum seekers and resulted in the dehumanization of refugees in limbo.

In response to this, the We Are Here media platform aims to build the connection between the people and the government by producing a visual narrative and supporting rhetoric in order to make their situation visible and to say ‘they exist.’ Through this process, this refugee collective articulates their intention that, while they cannot exercise certain rights as a stateless individual, they can express themselves through self-generated media presence. In addition, they are able to collaborate on initiatives with artists to generate visibility and promote social mobilization, supplying a form of agency in their current state of limbo. The

⁷⁸ Adesida, J.A. “We Are Here ‘Wij Zijn Hier’ PLIGHT OF MIGRANTS IN NETHERLANDS.” Youtube. 9ja.tv. 15 Apr. 2015. Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1Xi-nHFell>

⁷⁹ “Detainees Killed in Dutch Blaze.” *BBC News*. BBC, 27 Oct. 2005. Web. 03 June 2017. Accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4380694.stm>

⁸⁰ Wanjama, Chinira M. “The Journeys of Ugandan Activist Bino Byansi Byakuleka.” *Today I'm a Refugee. I Never Wanted to Be a Refugee*. 2015: p 9. Print. Accessed at <http://www.dw.com/en/venice-biennale-africans-discover-how-germany-treats-its-refugees/a-18437428>

⁸¹ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. *ECRI REPORT ON THE NETHERLANDS (fourth Monitoring Cycle)* (2013): p.39. Council of Europe. Council of Europe, CRI(2013)39, 15 Oct. 2013. Accessed at <https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Netherlands/NLD-CbC-IV-2013-039-ENG.pdf>

⁸² *Ibid*, p 38

shared motivation behind these projects aimed to challenge the visual politics of asylum seekers through the participants' engagement in a collaborative process to offer an alternative way of interpreting their narrative in order to complicate and contradict the dominant media's own constructions of their visual narrative. This initiative also facilitates collaborations between refugees in limbo and professional cultural producers, which will be addressed the next chapter examining artist and refugee collaborations.

In April 1994, the first symposium of the Institute of International Visual Art engaged an ongoing investigation examining the issue of how "the term 'international' fits into definitions of contemporary practice."⁸³ One of the participants, curator Elisabeth Sussman, addressed the concept of nationalism and how national identity can be maintained through the curation of images and text. She describes the nation as an "unstable and partial form of containment and identification for any contextual history of form and image"⁸⁴ in rethinking the nation as an international site. According to Sussman, this shift in perception and practice is a response to shifts in "authorship and audience."⁸⁵ In relevance to my research, the media team of We Are Here strategically promotes their agenda of social rights through the establishment of control over the perception of asylum seekers which is exhibited through the visualization of the problems they encounter in the Netherlands. This practice attempts to deconstruct the systemic issues of social hierarchy further exemplifies the shift in authorship and audience. This can have "important revisionary implications for the nation states."⁸⁶ In comparison to the Dutch media landscape and social media presence of Dutch politicians, the identities of refugees and asylum seekers have been constructed in the discourses and practices of nationalism. According to art historian and anthropologist Wilfried van Damme, human groups:

[...] have long compared their appearance, products, customs, and beliefs with those of others - those people living across the river, on the other side of the mountains, or said to inhabit strange and different lands. In such intergroup comparisons,

⁸³ Jantjes, Gavin. "Preface." Ed. Jean Fisher. *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. London: Kala, 1994. viii. Print.

⁸⁴ Sussman, Elisabeth. "The Pragmatics of Internationalism." Part Four: Curatorship and International Exhibitions Curator's Work. Ed. Jean Fisher. *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. London: Kala, 1994. 166. Print.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p 161

⁸⁶ Bhabha, Homi K. "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism." *The Urgency of Theory*. Ed. António Pinto Ribeiro. Manchester: Carcanet, 2007, p 10. Print.

commonalities might first be taken for granted, while differences are stressed, and the farther away other people live, the more different and less human they are usually made out to be.⁸⁷

This notion of interrelatedness references historical exchanges across cultural boundaries. However, it may seem that the “essence of a good nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.”⁸⁸ This supposes that Western nationals “would rather forget the uncomfortable and disturbing elements of [their] present lives and immerse [themselves] instead in nostalgic, reconstructed versions of the past.”⁸⁹ In response to these circumstances, activist group We Are Here, who lacks the acknowledgement of basic human rights, often utilizes various media for modes of representation as a flexible means of communication to engage these issues which newspapers and books often have not or will not publish based on stereotypes of perception or political agendas.

4.3 *Problematizing the systems of refugee visibility*

The first insight, that victimhood, empathy, threat, and social mobilization are by no means homogeneous categories of visibility, however, in regards to the portrayal and framing of refugees and asylum seekers, they are grounded in the underlying similarities that have emerged across these visual systems of refugee visibility that I have mentioned in this chapter. Representations and narratives of victimhood and empathy, for example, (see Fig 1-2) aim to connect with the audience by sharing the moral claim that the vulnerable ‘other’ requires a (in this case ‘Western’) intervention. How these images of victimhood and empathy differentiate, between faceless masses and individual images of suffering, is the way in which they portray the *other's* (refugees or asylum seekers’) body based on the system of powers at play. In the article *Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective* by Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, they explore how this “narrative framing and emotional address of photos depicting dead or suffering children (see

⁸⁷ Van Damme, Wilfried. "Intercultural Comparison and Art." Introduction. *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*. Ed. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008. p 293. Print.

⁸⁸ Renan, Ernest. “What is a nation?” Translated and annotated by Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration* edited by Homi K. Bhabha, Routledge, Taylor & Francis (Londyn), pp 8-22.

⁸⁹ Tawadros, Gilane. “The Case of The Missing Body.” Part Three: Beyond Diversity and Difference. Ed. Jean Fisher. *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. London: Kala, 1994. p 108. Print.

Fig 2) [...] in the ethically and politically charged decisions by [...] the media to publish and distribute such images.”⁹⁰ This form of visual and narrative strategies structure the viewer’s response in a way that distances the viewer through proximity but encourages emotional identification through empathy. Harkening back to Prem Kumar Rajaram’s article on “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee,” in reference to this particular portrayal and *use* of the refugees’ body through imagery, he asserts that these kind of representations and rhetoric generated by the media “consigns refugees to their bodies, to a mute and faceless physical mass.”⁹¹ This kind of representation leads to the objectification of refugee experience, and, according to Malkki, represents “the refugee as speechless.”⁹² This further “abstracts individual experiences of displacement from the political, social and historical context while putting in their stead a depoliticized and universalized figuration of the refugee as mute victim.”⁹³ This considers the position of the image producer or publisher, what is the image aiming to communicate in terms of political or social action, and who and what institutions are benefiting from this desired action. This distinction between an image of a mass of bodies and an image of a distinguishable individual is in the emotional distance or proximity in relation to the spectator. Therefore, in both cases, their emphasis on the body-in-need demonstrates the dispositional typologies of these visual narratives in varying degrees of empathy that are operating within the frameworks of this system of visibility.

The visualities of threat, in a parallel move, operates within the space of the socio-political method of the ‘politics of fear,’⁹⁴ as noted in reference to Wilders, that strategically uses refugee imagery to introduce antagonism in their visual representations of vulnerability. Even though this method uses the basis of structural similarities in regards to them sharing visualities that frame the subject as the ‘other,’ their visual narratives differ considerably. The distinction between a mass of refugees and asylum seekers in a receptive or negative way is “not only a matter of vilifying or humanising the imagery of refugees but also, importantly, a

⁹⁰ Fehrenbach, Heide; Rodogno, Davide. “‘A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective.” Vol. 97, no. 900, 2015, p 1121.

⁹¹ Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, pp. 247–264

⁹² Malkki, L.H. (1996), ‘Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization’, *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3): p 377.

⁹³ Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, pp. 247–264.

⁹⁴ Bhabha, Homi K. "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism." *The Urgency of Theory*. Ed. António Pinto Ribeiro. Manchester: Carcanet, 2007, p 3. Print.

matter of ethical commitment; commitment to a responsibility of security, which is about protecting ‘ourselves’ from ‘them’, in the former, versus a responsibility of hospitality, which recognizes the political and moral obligation to protect ‘them’, in the latter.”⁹⁵ These varying strategies redraw the frame within which these subjects are determined through visual narratives. Politics, in this way, work to “reframe the subjects by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and invisible, and between the audible and inaudible, new distributions of space, [and] in short, new bodily capacities.”⁹⁶

The second insight of this analysis examines the polarity of visual narratives, examining agency in the tension of images and words. For instance, in the visualities of social media, instead of the suffering body nor the foreign, migrant ‘other’ that mobilizes the social and moral engagement of refugees, it is ‘our’ own representations of them, in drawings, collages or retouched photographs, which perform as the vehicles for ‘our’ agency. This is exemplified by Wilders use of Facebook to post video⁹⁷ (moving image) paired with nationalistic rhetoric to promote his political campaign. Social media and its implications on agency and visibility of refugees has been critiqued by the way in which users assume agency over the subject. This critique is on account of the way in which users utilize social media platforms to emphasize the sensational aspects of the subject in viral images of refugees for the purpose of stimulating an enthralling interest from their audience, usually in the form of self-promotion of oneself, their ideology, or political affiliation. An example of this critique can be seen in the art of artist Jave Yoshimoto (see Fig 3-4), whose art references the aesthetics of ‘frenetic photojournalism’ (emphasizing the agency of the image producer). In his series of work for the show *Tempestuous Microcosm*,⁹⁸ he challenges viewers to consider the ways in which scenes of humanitarian crises are often consumed as entertainment. Although the images circulated by various media platforms are adherent of the traditional visualities associated with the body-in-need, it is different in the way it “appropriates such

⁹⁵ Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. “Rethinking Humanity and Responsibility in the Refugee ‘Crisis’: A Visual Typology of News Media.” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, p 27.

⁹⁶ Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2010, p 140.

⁹⁷ Wilders, Geert. “VIDEO: Choose For Freedom.” 21 April 2017. Facebook post. Accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/geertwilders/videos/356506864747587/>

⁹⁸ “Tempestuous Microcosm.” *The Union For Contemporary Art*, The Union For Contemporary Art, 2019, www.u-ca.org/exhibition/tempestuous-microcosm.

imageries in a new, playful aesthetic and subordinates it ethically to a discourse of self-expression. Its aim is digital connectivity with others like ‘us’ instead of connectivity with the refugee either as a victim or as a threat.”⁹⁹ These contemporary portrayals of distant suffering underlines the emotional distance and proximity of the distributor of this imagery. This post-humanitarian visibility emphasizes the digitally-driven systems of media and facilitates a self-centred form of agency. By complicating the space of media representation of the refugee crisis, this typology further problematizes the systems of refugee visibility and the ethics of representation, by examining what ways of knowing are produced through these visual narratives.

As cultural theorist and filmmaker Isobel Blomfield asserts, these representations of anonymous masses are pervasive in reducing refugee experiences and narratives “to sensationalized and visceral visualisations,¹⁰⁰ [and that] such images function to indirectly shape [...] our perceptions of how we see and think.”¹⁰¹ Consequently, through this lack of agency of refugees in the formation of their visual narratives, these representations generated by the media further promotes this visual ‘othering.’ This, in turn, displaces the narrative of the asylum seeker. Without agency or a voice given to those depicted, such pictorial representations of refugees erase individuality and are “consigned to ‘visuality’ and stuck in static signification of particular meanings”¹⁰² that influence public understanding and reinforce stereotypes of the asylum seeker. This practice identifies “refugees not in terms of their individual humanity but as a group whose boundaries and [agency] are removed from historical context, reduced to norms and terms relevant to a state-centric perspective.”¹⁰³ In regards to this, Appadurai considers this “subjugated ‘othering’ [as a reinforcement of] the state-centric imagination.”¹⁰⁴ In Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, this idea behind the creation of the ‘other’ emphasizes the subject’s loss of its “power to signify, negate, [or] to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse.”¹⁰⁵ The literature underlines the

⁹⁹ Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. “Rethinking Humanity and Responsibility in the Refugee ‘Crisis’: A Visual Typology of News Media.” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, p. 27.

¹⁰⁰ Feldman, A., 1994. On cultural anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King. *American Ethnologist*, 21(2), in Blomfield, op cit, pp 322-338.

¹⁰¹ Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39:3, pp 322-338.

¹⁰² Rajaram, Prem Kumar. “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, p 253.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p 251

¹⁰⁴ Appadurai, A. (1993) ‘The Heart of Whiteness’, *Callaloo* 16(4): pp 796-807.

¹⁰⁵ Bhabha, Homi K., (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, p 31.

lack visibility and of holistic visual representations of refugee, which, in turn, reinforces the narrative framing and visual politics of ‘othering’ in the representation of refugees.

As we encounter images of refugees, the relationship that *we*, the spectator, are invited to practice, as well as *our* (artists/ spectators) subsequent engagement with these images can be demonstrated through a range of performances of civic agency that the systems and frameworks of refugee visibility articulate for us on an individual, social, or national level. Harkening back to my research question, how can these modes of visibility serve to overcome dominant visual narratives and nationally constructed identities by means of self-presentation of refugees? In conclusion, this diverse range of proposals manages to redeem the notion of responsibility from a practice of ‘othering’ to a practice that humanises refugees and recognizes their cause.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Bhabha, Homi K., (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, p 1.

Chapter 5 | *Artistic Collaborations and Political Participation*

Politics [consist] of tedious and banal daily governance, best narrated by an increasingly sensational mass media. We, as artists, were supposed to elevate ourselves beyond such temporary current affairs. We were to dedicate ourselves to the ambiguities and anxieties of the human condition. The idea of changing the world was left to demagogues and idealists, whereas our task to reflect on it.

Jonas Staal, *Becoming a Propaganda Artist*¹⁰⁷

5.1 *Aesthetic Interventions*

The media, artists, and cultural producers frequently claim to portray the 'human' story in the prevalent visual narratives of conflict, displacement, exile, and resettlement through visual imagery and artistic expressions that aim to dispute negative perceptions of people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. These artists demonstrate the capacity to provide influential and noteworthy platforms for political dissent as their practices may serve to produce counter-narratives to these depersonalizing discourses. Yet, how do these practices convey the perspectives of individuals from refugee backgrounds? The exchange within the joint collaborations of artists and refugees serves as the platform to define how cultural production can function as a means to disrupt narratives, and will address the overarching research question on how can the activities of refugee collectives and artist-refugee collaborations can overcome nationally constructed identities and national restrictions by means of self- presentation of refugees in limbo. In this chapter, I will examine visual art that engages with the refugee crisis as a basis to identify and problematize the various frameworks and existing modes of representation of refugees within contemporary art discourse.

The We Are Here collective and media platform, in addition to other groups of asylum seekers, have inspired the basis for various collaborations with professional cultural producers, which will be discussed in this chapter. In reference to artist Jonas Staal, who has collaborated with the We Are Here refugee collective, he postulates that refugees working “with the artistic community, [are able to] explore new models of political representation [and thus] develop new forms and techniques of political visibility and social mobilization.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 13.

¹⁰⁸ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” in *New World Academy Reader # 2 Collective Struggle of Refugees. Lost. In Between.*, p 17. Editor Jonas Staal in collaboration with We Are Here. Utrecht BAK, Basis voor actuele kunst, 2013.

This not only emphasizes “the potential of artistic and cultural practices to create visibility and agency, [but also demonstrates] critical alliances between progressive politics and the field of art.”¹⁰⁹

5.2 Case Studies

One such example includes the “Paper Monument for the Paperless,” (see Figures 1-2). This was a collaboration between the We Are Here refugee collective and Dutch artist Dominique Himmelsbach de Vries, including 19 other artists. This project aimed to give a face to the undocumented “paperless” (lacking legal documents verifying citizenship) refugees in the Netherlands. Working as a socially engaged street art project, it consisted of carved and printed woodcut portraits of refugees trapped in limbo, capturing what the artists believed to be the fullness of their humanity while simultaneously promoting more visibility and attention towards undocumented refugees, who are “forced to live as illegal outsiders.”¹¹⁰ This unconventional monument literally gives a face to undocumented refugees seeks to restore the refugee’s identity by picturing the people whose situation has been overlooked by society and ignored by the government. According to de Vries, the “undocumented migrants are seen as invaders, they are locked up in prisons and their individuality is stripped away. [The *Papers for the Paperless*] monument is an attempt to raise awareness about their plight in the Netherlands.”¹¹¹ By printing in large quantities and harnessing the potential of public space, anyone can contribute to the project by pasting this newspaper poster set in public spaces of Dutch cities, stimulating direct contact and participation of the public. In a summary of the project’s intentions addressed on the website of the artist, the artistic approach of this project aims to:

mobilize the street as its medium to critically explore freedom of movement and its curtailment. To activate its presence in public space, the project relies heavily on the engagement of citizens. They are stimulated to spread the posters through the city streets of Europe and beyond. The performative body therefore plays a crucial role in this work. The (illegal) distribution and pasting of the posters places the body in a

¹⁰⁹ Ibid p 18

¹¹⁰ “A Paper Monument for the Paperless.” (2017) Dominique Himmelsbach de Vries; We Are Here. Text by Charlie Clemoes, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.himmelsbach.nl/?portfolio=a-paper-monument-for-the-paperless>

¹¹¹ Ibid

vulnerable and at the same time activist position. It performs acts that are punishable, hoping to bring about social change and standing together with socially excluded communities. In this sense, it is a performance of civil disobedience.¹¹²

Projects like this attempt to reconfigure the basis of defining and assessing inclusion. Rather than these participants being seen as only as a source for creative fodder, the refugees of the We Are Here collective and artists aim to critique the various frameworks and existing modes of representation of refugees within contemporary art discourse. This particular project builds a bridge between the everyday realities of Dutch residents and outsiders, facilitating a relationship with the undocumented. It is a form of expression that generates dialogue with the public and the We Are Here platform. Though the refugees of the We Are Here collective hold an almost rightless position in the Netherlands, these forms of expression, through protest and art, utilize the cultural rights they do have, thus overcoming national restrictions and countering nationally constructed identities with various forms of visibility.

In a separate case study in 2014, Dutch photographer Jan Theun van Rees captured the issue of the self-representation of refugees with his photographic series taken on an abandoned prison boat. The former detention center in Zaanstad, the Netherlands had been utilized for the imprisonment of rejected asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants awaiting deportation. Van Rees explained:

Besides the oppressive architecture, I was struck by what I saw in [the] cells. Above the mattresses in the bunk hung bulletin boards of drawings. They were mostly self-images, where successive occupants of those cells had been working on. This "image stream" [...] was the presence of all those people.¹¹³

This series, entitled *Half Square Meter of Freedom* (see Fig. 5-6), seemed to embody the tension of words and images that follow the representation of these vulnerable groups. With the ongoing issue of dehumanization, the only remnants of them were these panels of drawings. During the years that followed, van Rees' repeated exhibition of these photos led him to question the motives and potential of the series:

¹¹² "A Paper Monument for the Paperless." (2017) Dominique Himmelsbach de Vries; We Are Here. Text by Charlie Clemoes, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.himmelsbach.nl/?portfolio=a-paper-monument-for-the-paperless>

¹¹³ Theun van Rees, Jan. Personal interview, 04 April 2017.

I was always asking myself if more people, which those photos are about, experienced any benefit from my efforts. I also saw increasingly how the media talk about refugees and the problem that a solution should be sought, but hardly with those people. This made me decide to do something practical. So I was led to support We Are Here.¹¹⁴

The exhibition of this photo series demonstrates his reflection on the issues of presentation faced by refugees in limbo and We Are Here. This ultimately manifested itself into a political statement commenting on the human rights issues facing refugees who can not receive status in the Netherlands. Van Rees' support of the refugee collective and expertise in photography helped to create We Are Here's media platform, offering training to its members through the We Are Here Academy. Trainers like van Rees, provide educational and social support as well as advocacy assistance to asylum seekers, often whilst their claims for protection are being processed by the Dutch Government's Department of Immigration, most of whom have been waiting for a number of years.

Collaborative artistic works among refugees and artists can further assist in my methodology in analyzing the dynamics of the relationship between the artist and subject, and subject and audience, by having the subjects relate their visual narratives in an intimate way to the audience through the lens of the artist. In the current practice of artist and refugee collaborations, "people with refugee lived experiences may have their own preconceptions of what is important to emphasize when asked to tell their story."¹¹⁵ In the photo series (see Fig. 6-10) "Live, Love, Refugee.", Amsterdam-based, Syrian photographer Omar Imam disrupts the dominant representation of Syrian refugees by using irony and a conceptual artistic approach to respond to the urgent situation in Syria:

By replacing numbers, reports, and statistics with hallucinations, fears, and dreams. In refugee camps across Lebanon, Omar collaborates with individuals through a process of catharsis, one he believes to be deeply healing. He asks them to recreate their dreams: dreams of escape, dreams of emasculation, and dreams of love and terror.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Theun van Rees, Jan. Personal interview. 04 April 2017.

¹¹⁵ Imam, Omar. "Live, Love, Refugee." *Omar Imam*, Accessed at www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee

¹¹⁶ Ibid

The resulting surrealistic imagery of their portraits compares in stark contrast to the images faceless masses previously described by Feldman¹¹⁷ in chapter 4. In turn, these photographs, which were composed by the refugees themselves, "challenge projections of victimization, offering entry into the expressive interior from which our humanity stems."¹¹⁸ By positioning both the visual narrative and the words of the refugees together, Imam aimed to reflect a broader understanding of his subject's stories and imaginations, incrementally creating a more holistic representation of individuals who also happen to be refugees. The current state of conflict in their home country, as well as the prolonged process of living in refugee camps while awaiting status determination, revealed the trauma but also mundane experiences of their lives, manifesting into conversations on their experiences, which were the basis of these photos. Reflecting on this, artist Imam, stated, "Through this project, I was able to rediscover my story through their stories. I'm a Syrian refugee myself, and we are making one team."¹¹⁹ (see Fig. 7) In this particular collaboration, the artwork serves to not only reconstruct the visual narrative of the refugee, it also performs as an agent of change through "connective thinking and practices, which explores the role of imagination and different modes of thought in transformative process"¹²⁰ of these stories translated into photographs. In reflecting on this series in the debate "Can photography change the image on refugees?"¹²¹ at the Humanity House (The Hague, NL), Imam stressed the responsibility of photographers to supply to context of the image and discussed how to create relationships of engagement through an image by shifting the power-balance in favor of the subject by allowing them to control their own image.¹²² Using his own work as the basis for this debate, Imam argued that he uses his images to break narratives of the visual rhetoric of faceless masses and victimization, by making the image accessible to his subject and by *servicing their story first*.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Feldman, A., 1994. On cultural anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King. *American Ethnologist*, 21(2), 404-418.

¹¹⁸ Imam, Omar. "Live, Love, Refugee." *Omar Imam*, Accessed at www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ "Connective Aesthetics and Agents of Change." *Social Sculpture Research Unit*, Oxford Brookes University, Accessed at www.social-sculpture.org/.

¹²¹ Imam, Omar, et al., "Can Photography Change the Image on Refugees?" Humanity House: In the Picture. *Studio Aleppo debate: Can photography change the image on refugees?*, 22 Sept. 2017, The Hague, Netherlands.

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Ibid

5.3 *Problematizing frameworks and modes of representation of refugees*

Although there are no necessary outlines or outcomes for artists to ethically portraying the narratives of refugees. However, in terms of the methodology outlined in chapter 2 and chapter 3, there are a few key principles that arise in the case studies explored above, in addition to reflecting on the scholarly literature, presented in chapters 1 through 3, that I feel make an important contribution on this topic. Through the various frameworks and modes of representation of refugees presented in this thesis, artists, scholars, and other cultural workers or producers are able to draw upon these examples to better determine more appropriate methods for ethical representation.

The first key method I will emphasize is collaboration. Particularly in proposing or developing collaborative arts projects that involve the participation of refugees, it is important for artists to consider how their perceptions are informed by their own training and previous works and recognizing how these may raise challenges when entering a given site that is characterized by its own unique social forces and personalities. This is why it is important for artists, curators, institutions, and photojournalists to understand the social processes at play when visually representing refugees. Although artists, curators, institutions, and photojournalists may all have different desired outcomes and agendas, by collaborating with refugees and asylum seekers, this engaged way art-making aims to provide a de-centred approach in its language and processes. This type of collaboration should proceed in a way that makes sense and matters to the participants involved, and “where artists understand the broader political and societal preconceptions surrounding the issue of forced migration, to develop a more nuanced art that prioritises individuals’ histories, cultures and backgrounds, as advised by the organisation RISE.”¹²⁴ This organization (RISE), “is a refugee and asylum seeker organisation based in Australia that is run and governed by refugees, asylum seekers, and ex-detainees.”¹²⁵ In an article posted in 2015, the organization addresses and identifies various ways in which artists approach them “in order to find participants for their next project. The artist often claims to want to show ‘the human side of the story’ through a false sense of neutrality [and with a] limited understanding of their own bias, privilege, and

¹²⁴ Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39:3, 322-338

¹²⁵ RISE (Refugees, Survivors and Ex-detainees), 2015.

frameworks.”¹²⁶ In their list of examples,¹²⁷ they aim to critique the various frameworks and existing modes of representation of refugees within contemporary art discourse. This understanding is important in deconstructing narratives, as mentioned in chapter 1, in order to refrain from producing generalized visual “depictions of people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds as the ‘other’ and as mute victims, which ultimately conceal the idiosyncrasies and nuances of refugee experiences.”¹²⁸

Knowing the difference between presentation and representation is necessary in providing accurate representations that rehumanize and offer agency to refugees is an important responsibility of the contemporary artists, curators, photo journalists, and scholars that are representing their story in some way. These cultural and knowledge producers cannot assume that their practices are expressed in an ethical and self-determining process. Whether it be through depictions, curation of images, or social practice art, it is vital that the people being represented are offered a voice in the telling of their story. Throughout this thesis there are multiple examples given of artist-refugee social practice art, refugee artists, and refugee collectives that each offer an intimate perspective into the cultures and experiences in a time of great social change. These cultural exchanges and contemporary presentations require what cultural theorist Mark Watson refers to as *centring*. He describes centring in art and culture to entail “articulating ‘complementary’ values and priorities among multiple [in this case refugees] in different global contexts.”¹²⁹ According to scholar Gerald McMaster, the contemporary curator and contemporary artist working with a disadvantaged population must “commit to a practice in a space that is highly [...] critical, and indifferent [...]; articulating cultural identity, while overcoming frameworks and stereotypes”¹³⁰ that have been

¹²⁶ Canas, Tania. RISE (Refugees, Survivors and Ex-detainees), 2015. *10 Things You Need To Consider If You Are An Artist – Not Of The Refugee And Asylum Seeker Community – Looking To Work With Our Community*. Accessed at

<http://riserefugee.org/10-things-you-need-to-consider-if-you-are-an-artist-not-of-the-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-community-looking-to-work-with-our-community/>

¹²⁷ Canas, Tania. RISE (Refugees, Survivors and Ex-detainees), 2015. *10 Things You Need To Consider If You Are An Artist – Not Of The Refugee And Asylum Seeker Community – Looking To Work With Our Community*. Accessed at <http://riserefugee.org/10-things-you-need-to-consider-if-you-are-an-artist-not-of-the-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-community-looking-to-work-with-our-community/>

¹²⁸ Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39:3, 322-338

¹²⁹ Watson, Mark. “‘Centring the Indigenous’: Postcommodity’s Transindigenous Relational Art.” *Third Text*, 29 (3) 2015, pp 141-154.

¹³⁰ McMaster, Gerald. *The New Tribe. Critical Perspectives and Practices in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*. Amsterdam: Acedemisch Proefschrift, University of Amsterdam, 1999. Ch 4., pp 102-103.

historically and systematically imposed upon refugees. In providing a refugee-centric perspective and narrative, museums and galleries will preserve the cultural integrity of contemporary refugee artists and maintain the identities of refugees through their imagery.

Another key method in the problematization of the frameworks on modes of representations of refugees in generating visual narratives of refugees, considers the ethical implications of visual narratives to ensure that representations align with the individual or group's vision for their own story. In other words, addressing agency. For instance, a collaborative project may have participatory elements, but may not provide enough or any agency to the group, which would denote a limiting and tokenistic narrative in practice. By examining what frameworks are imposed on participation and what power dynamics are present in this framework, the artist or researcher will be able to determine what and whose narrative they are reinforcing. A negative example of this would be the contemporary installation *Human Flow* by Chinese artist and activist Ai Wei Wei. In this series of work, which includes various installations and a documentary, I will focus primarily on Ai Wei Wei's photo wall installations, which are made up of iPhone photographs (see Fig. 11), which were exhibited in the Humanity House in The Hague (NL). The photos used in the installation were taken during the filming of Ai Wei Wei's documentary *Human Flow*, which aimed to portray the contemporary global scale of human displacement.¹³¹ The initial problematic of Ai Wei Wei's work is that, being an internationally recognizable artist, his fame eclipses his art. In addition to this, as this installation follows the personal journey of Ai Wei Wei, his presence detracts from the agency of the subjects within the photos, which are juxtaposed against selfies of Ai Wei Wei and the traumatic, nonconsensual, live-documented experiences of the refugees. Harkening back to chapter 3 (section 3.1), the artist in this case unintentionally falls into the power dynamics of 'othering' by using visual elements that fall into oversaturated tropes of suffering and lack of agency, instead of taking a more agency-focused approach in the representations of the asylum seekers involved in the project. Thus, these frameworks of representation used by Ai Wei Wei in the *Human Flow* photo installation significantly limited these refugees' agency in the composition of this visual narrative, which emphasizes the importance for artists to critically interrogate their intentions while remaining "conscious of

¹³¹ Connellan, Shannon. "Ai Weiwei Makes a Bold Statement about the Refugee Crisis with Giant Inflatable Boat." *Mashable*, Mashable, 13 Mar. 2018, mashable.com/2018/03/13/ai-weiwei-biennale-of-sydney/.

the ways in which dominant narratives of refugees as suffering can conceal personal identity.”¹³² In contrast, the aforementioned case study of the photo series *Live. Love. Refugee.* by artist Omar Imam demonstrated the creation of a more empowering and holistic narrative of refugees. In this project, Imam implemented a process by which the portrayal of refugees includes aspects of daily life beyond refugee status, particularly the imaginative, as well as mundane interests, which are not necessarily the experiences of trauma stories that normally dominate the landscape of refugee narratives as explained in chapter 4. As Imam took a disempowered position in setting aside dominant narrations of current media surrounding portrait photography of refugees, he instead engaged the participants using “inquiry-based methods, collaborative dialogues, and hands-on activities [(preparing the composition of the photograph). This provided] an ideal framework for process-based and collaborative conceptual practices”¹³³ behind the photo shoot. According to artist and scholar Grant Kester in his book “Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art,” the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange allows for this photo series to “transcend existing divisions and identifications. [...] It is reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, [dominant] discourse, and the perceived inevitability of [...] conflict.”¹³⁴ In summary, this method contributes to a more holistic representation of individuals who also happen to be refugees by respecting their agency and priorities when telling their story. This “shift from trauma stories to narratives that focus on memory, everyday lives, strengths, and hopes for the future, can challenge limited understandings of the complexities of individual biographies”¹³⁵ in the space of contemporary art and global media.

My third and final problematization of the representational frameworks in generating visual narratives of refugees is the consideration of these visual representations to be inherently political. Due to the legal and heavily politicized statuses of the refugee, stateless refugee, asylum seeker, and of refugees in limbo, the creative processes involved in working with

¹³² Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, Journal of Intercultural Studies, 39:3, 322-338

¹³³ Helguera, Pablo. “Introduction.” *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Jorge Pinto Books, 2011. p xi.

¹³⁴ Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. University of California Press, 2014. p 8.

¹³⁵ Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, Journal of Intercultural Studies, 39:3, 322-338

these groups are considered a political act. In this sense, artists and visual media producers go beyond simply having the agency to reflect on the world, but also having the ability to change it based on refining what audiences eventually see in the visual and rhetorical representations of subjects they are representing. The priority to let the refugees drive the creative process in this stage is critical in ensuring that pictorial image and visual narrative conveys a more authentic account of these collective narratives and fulfills the initial purpose of challenging the dominant tropes of contemporary art discourse and visual media.

Conclusion | *Servicing the Story First*

The We Are Here refugee collective, as well as the media and artist-collaborative projects, tell us more about ourselves, the purveyors and observers of images, than about the refugee subjects whose suffering we depict. This defines the parameters of the debate about the aesthetics and politics of the representation of refugees and serves to demonstrate how images can function as a means to disrupt narratives or stigmatized images, as well as identify and further develop the various frameworks and existing modes of representation of refugees within contemporary art discourse. While shaped by political and aesthetic structures, the imagery and visual narratives of these agents remain informed by the identities, social positioning, and political status of the subjects they represent. This study explores the historical and contemporary issues around representational practices and visual politics of creating and displaying refugee subject matter in art and media. At the conclusion of this thesis, we have demonstrated and problematized key factors that make up the frameworks of representation and visual narratives that are dominant in contributing to nationally constructed identities of refugees. Namely, the ethics of representation, visual representations in the media, and artistic collaborations and political participation.

In ethics of representation (chapter 3), we identified three different considerations in the ethics of representation in the relationship between refugees (subjects) and the media or artists that represent them. These considerations included: power dynamics, rehumanization, and problematizing responsibility in the space of appearance. These posited the two agents' positions in relation to the subject in order to question and challenge various frameworks and existing models of representation. In both cases, the power dynamics of 'othering' in regards to dominant stereotypes and narratives perpetuated by artists and the media was further explored and supported by the literary sources including Kumar's text on *Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee*¹³⁶ (2002) and Malkki's text 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization'¹³⁷ (1996). From these representational

¹³⁶ Rajaram, Prem Kumar. "Introduction." *Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee. Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2002, p 247.

¹³⁷ Malkki, L.H. (1996), 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3): 377-404.

practices and visual politics in the narration of refugee experiences, this moved us to my second point on considerations in the ethics of representation, which is the notion of *rehumanization*, defined as “the nonviolent process of establishing a sense of empathy and mutual identification [...] by regarding the opponent as fully human even while resisting an unjust agenda; [thus] recovering our natural sense of identity with one another in the process.”¹³⁸ Rehumanization, in this context, aims to dispel the visual dehumanization of refugees by overcoming existing tropes of refugees. By fulfilling their right to agency in constructing their visual narrative, this emphasizes the connection between the world of the aesthetic narrative and the language of rights. From here, I proposed the potential of the media and artistic practices as a means to further develop new forms and techniques of political visibility and social mobilization. To gain insight into how these models attempt to construct visual narratives, we examined the notion of rehumanization in the *Urgency of Theory* by Bhabha to address my research question regarding the formation of narratives and how the activities of refugee collectives overcome dominant visual narratives and nationally constructed identities by means of self-presentation: “At the heart of the aesthetic experience lies [...] the basis of human creativity and political democracy - as it comes to constitute the ‘human right to narrate.’”¹³⁹ This supported my expected claim that the performance of freedom of expression and expressions of human beingness, becomes a claim to human rights. This reassertion of humanity is further supported by Bhabha in his book *Nation and Narration*, which confronts the realities of the concept of nationhood,¹⁴⁰ thereby supporting my use of the notion of nation state and national identity as a frame to better understand the rehumanization and identity of refugees through the functions of art and media. Finally, my third and final point in chapter 3 over the ethics of representation, I covered problematizing responsibility in the space of appearance from which my analysis converges with previous literature. Using Chantal Mouffe’s text *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, we can determine that the political dimension in terms of regimes of visibility can be informed by implicit symbolic strategies of dehumanization and examine the “ways in which artistic

¹³⁸ Metta Center. “Rehumanization.” *Metta Center*, 29 Aug. 2014. Accessed at mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/rehumanization-2/

¹³⁹ Bhabha, Homi K. "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism." *The Urgency of Theory*. Ed. António Pinto Ribeiro. Manchester: Carcanet, 2007. p 18. Print.

¹⁴⁰ Bhabha, Homi K., editor. *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis (Londyn), 1990.

practices can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony.”¹⁴¹ From here we articulated these strategies of politicization and aestheticization through various platforms that media and art, in which “the refugee appears in Western spaces of publicity as a deeply ambivalent figure [and] racial *other*.”¹⁴² In revealing these frameworks, we can become more conscious of the power that dominant visual narratives have over our perception, revealing the “biases contained in mainstream representations of subaltern identities,”¹⁴³ understood from Rancière’s text *The Paradoxes of Political Art*. In conclusion, this allows for media and art producers to establish a space to facilitate narratives that enable individuals and collectives to experience visibility and agency, thus opening up “the boundaries around ‘who speaks’ in the space of appearance [to] be claimed by a plurality of voices that claim social and political recognition.”¹⁴⁴

The second key factor of the frameworks of representation and visual narratives is visual media representation (chapter 4). In this section we examined the contemporary issues of the representation of refugees in the media, in particular, the visual image and the rhetoric supporting these visual narratives and the manner in which they frame political discussions on the topic. In reviewing the representational practices and visual politics of the media in reproducing images of asylum seekers, photojournalist Terence Wright explains the importance of, “analyz[ing] the ability of visual images to create new discourses but also necessary to examine the social and [political forces at play.]”¹⁴⁵ These forces influence the power of the visual image in the media representation of migration, emphasizing the “agenda setting effects of [these] media and visual images on national and international policy.”¹⁴⁶ This challenges our understanding of the static image, in addition to the frameworks and existing modes of representation within the media regarding conceptions and agency of the visual narratives of refugees. In further examination of the historical and political context of

¹⁴¹ Mouffe, Chantal. “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces .” *Art & Research : Chantal Mouffe*, Arts & Research, 2007, www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html.

¹⁴² Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. “Rethinking Humanity and Responsibility in the Refugee ‘Crisis’: A Visual Typology of News Media.” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, p 26.

¹⁴³ Rancière, Jacques. “The Paradoxes of Political Art.” *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2010, p 134.

¹⁴⁴ Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. “Rethinking Humanity and Responsibility in the Refugee ‘Crisis’: A Visual Typology of News Media.” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, p 28.

¹⁴⁵ Wright, Terrance, 2002. Moving images: The media representation of refugees. *Visual Studies*, 17(1), 53.

¹⁴⁶ Fehrenbach, Heide; Rodogno, Davide. “‘A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective.” Vol. 97, no. 900, 2015, p 1123.

the refugee in media, we further understood how refugees are politicized, revealing that any visual representation or art work is inherently political. By investigating the historical and political discussions on the topic, we better understand the manner in which they frame the visual images of refugees represented in the functions of art and media. In review of my research question, the “role and agency of art within stateless political struggles”¹⁴⁷ is apparent in the activities of refugee collectives in the case studies of *Wij Zijn Hier/ We Are Here* who have, with artists, “created their own alternative models of political organization [and in the case of stateless refugees], have resulted in artistic practices that aim to recognize statelessness as a power in and of itself.”¹⁴⁸ This brings us to Sussman, who addressed the concept of nationalism and how national identity can be maintained through the curation of images and text, describing the nation as an “unstable and partial form of containment and identification for any contextual history of form and image.”¹⁴⁹ This provided a basis for which to problematize the systems of refugee visibility in media and art, by examining what ways of knowing are produced through these visual narratives, supported by cultural theorist and filmmaker Isobel Blomfield who asserts these representations “images function to indirectly shape [...] our perceptions of how we see and think.”¹⁵⁰ As we encounter images of refugees, the relationship that *we*, the spectator, are invited to practice, as well as *our* (artists/spectators) subsequent engagement with these images can be demonstrated through a range of performances of civic agency that the systems and frameworks of refugee visibility articulate for us on an individual, social, or national level. Harkening back to my research question, how can these modes of visibility serve to overcome dominant visual narratives and nationally constructed identities by means of self-presentation of refugees? In conclusion, this diverse range of proposals manages to redeem the notion of responsibility from a practice of ‘othering’ to a practice that humanises refugees and recognizes their cause.¹⁵¹

The third and final key factor of the frameworks of representation and visual narratives of this thesis, is the artistic collaborations and political participation that make up my case

¹⁴⁷ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 28.

¹⁴⁸ Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. 2019, p 37.

¹⁴⁹ Sussman, Elisabeth. “The Pragmatics of Internationalism.” Part Four: Curatorship and International Exhibitions Curator’s Work. Ed. Jean Fisher. *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. London: Kala, 1994. 166. Print.

¹⁵⁰ Blomfield, Isobel; Lenette, Caroline. (2018) *Artistic Representations of Refugees: What Is the Role of the Artist?*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39:3, pp 322-338.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p 1

studies. These artistic interventions demonstrate how the media, artists, and cultural producers claim to portray the 'human' story of refugees through narratives of trauma, displacement, and resettlement, using their practices to produce counter-narratives to these depersonalizing discourses. The exchange that takes place within the joint collaborations of artists and refugees serves as the platform to define how cultural production can function as a means to disrupt narratives, addressing the overarching research question of how the activities of refugee collectives and artist-refugee collaborations can overcome nationally constructed identities and national restrictions by means of self-presentation of refugees in limbo. Through the three main case studies presented in this thesis (*Paper Monument for the Paperless*, (see Fig. 12-13) by We Are Here and Dominique Himmelsbach; *Half Square Meter of Freedom* (see Fig. 5-6) by Jan Theun van Rees; *Live, Love, Refugee*. (see Fig. 6-10) by Omar Imam) this chapter examined how refugees working with the artistic community, are able to “explore new models of political representation [and thus] develop new forms and techniques of political visibility and social mobilization.”¹⁵² In problematizing these frameworks and modes of representation of refugees, I critiqued various methods for ethical representation including collaboration, emphasizing the ethical implications of visual narratives, and understanding that their work with these groups is inherently political in challenging the dominant tropes within contemporary art discourse and visual media.

Throughout this thesis, it is demonstrated how the applications of the ethics of representation enable refugees to be seen as equal participatory partners in these collaborations, taking a forefront in shaping how their memories are framed and repositioned. Artistic practices should, accordingly, guide towards the dismantling of dominant paradigms that privilege specific ways of knowing, seeing, and producing over others. Dominant representations of refugees in mainstream media and art that reproduce images of ongoing victimization and marginalization makes the topic for my thesis all the more urgent. That a proposal for new, self-reflexive modes of constructing visual narratives and presenting the refugee issue are needed, which will challenge the political discourse that contributes to the refugee condition, and will expose not necessarily the social conditions of refugees, but rather *us* the Western spectator.

¹⁵² Staal, Jonas. “Introduction.” in *New World Academy Reader # 2 Collective Struggle of Refugees. Lost. In Between.*, p 17. Editor Jonas Staal in collaboration with We Are Here. Utrecht BAK, Basis voor actuele kunst 2013.

Based on theoretical research and the relevant case studies in the Netherlands on art and media, I can assert that the activities of refugee collectives and artist-refugee collaborations can overcome nationally constructed identities and dominant visual narratives presented in the media by exploring new modes of political representation and developing new forms and techniques of political visibility and social mobilization means of self-presentation. This argument is supported by the proposal of three essential frameworks: ethics of representation, visual representations of refugees in media, and artistic collaborations and political participation, all of which I have summarized in this conclusion. These frameworks demonstrate how different visual structuring and agencies (power of representation) produce different visual narratives in media and art. This exemplified how images function as a means to disrupt narratives or stigmatized images, as well as identify and further develop the various frameworks and existing modes of representation of refugees within contemporary art discourse.

My studies show that politics and art exist in continuous interaction. The various frameworks and structures create the conditions to adequately represent the refugee experience and, in doing so, can promote social and political mobilization and action against the varying conditions of constructing visual narratives. These structures also create the conditions for different forms of visual media and art, which, in turn, contribute to visualizing and communicating the aesthetics and politics of the representation of refugees. Aesthetics and politics, in this way, represent concepts and practices through which we can understand the construction of visual narratives and nationally constructed identities, and, most importantly, through which we can embrace plurality in aiming to create new ones in *servicing the story first*.

Figures



Figure 1. “Homeless on the street in the cold and rain after the eviction of camp Osdorp, autumn.”¹⁵³ Photo by Wij Zijn Hier, 2012.



Figure 2. Photo¹⁵⁴ that went viral in the media picturing a “3-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on a Turkish beach near Bodrum in early September 2015.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Image and text accessed at <http://wijzijnhier.org/who-we-are/>

¹⁵⁴ Image retrieved from: lavaligiadellartista.com/2016/02/18/ai-weiwei-imita-aylan-kurdi-sulla-spiaggia/.

¹⁵⁵ Fehrenbach, Heide; Rodogno, Davide. “A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective.” Vol. 97, no. 900, 2015, pp. 1121–1155.



Figure 3. Jave Yoshimoto, “Voluntourist.” Laser engraved/ cut wood relief, 2019.¹⁵⁶



Figure 4. Jave Yoshimoto, “Incandescent Metatonia.” Gouache on paper, 26x40in, 2016.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Image retrieved from: <https://www.u-ca.org/exhibition/tempestuous-microcosm>

¹⁵⁷ Image retrieved from: <https://www.javeyoshimoto.com/refugees>

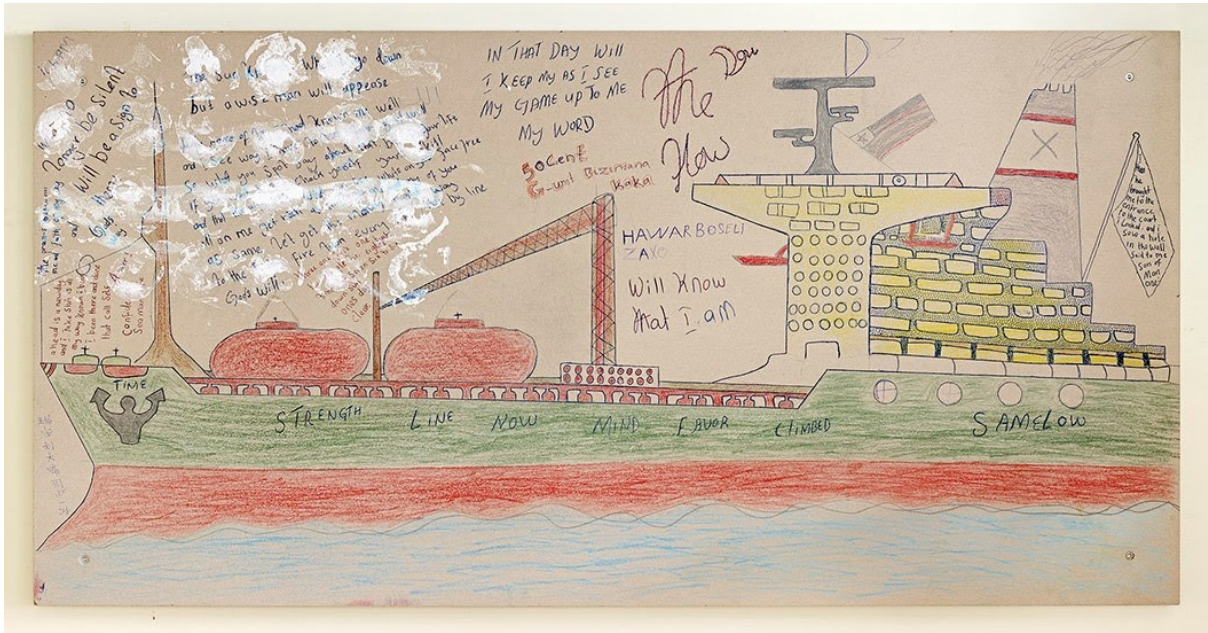


Figure 5. Photographed by Jan Theun van Rees, *Half Square Meter Freedom*, pigment inks on Hahnemuhle Baryta Silkfinish: stuck on Poli Styrene, 55 x 110cm, 2014 (original artist(s) unknown)¹⁵⁸



Figure 6. Photographed by Jan Theun van Rees, *Half Square Meter Freedom* photo series, 2014¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Image courtesy of Jan Theun van Rees.

¹⁵⁹ Image courtesy of Jan Theun van Rees.



Figure 6. “My wife is blind...I tell her the stories of her favorite TV series, and sometimes change the script...to create a better atmosphere for her.” (2015) Photo by Omar Imam. *Live, Love, Refugee* series.¹⁶⁰



Figure 7. “I wish to become a dragon and burn the scarves and everything in that tent.” (2015) Photo by Omar Imam. *Live, Love, Refugee* series.

Note by artist: “Kawthar was 16 years old when she got married. I couldn’t shoot her on her wedding day but 2 months later we could make the photo session after she got divorced.”

Kawthar (pictured): “My husband was a 32 years refugee from Home the same city I am from, he lives in the next camp. I never liked him, but I wanted to help my mother, we are five girls and my father left us at the beginning of the war. I was so afraid the first night, I didn’t let him touch me, so he started beating me, then his sisters tied me with my scarves and ripped my dress. I was yelling and resisting [...]”¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Image with excerpt retrieved from: <http://www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee>

¹⁶¹ Image with excerpt retrieved from: <http://www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee>



Figure 8. “For a moment I felt like we are talking to a cars technician, not a doctor, we are refugees but still human.” (2015) Photo by Omar Imam. *Live, Love, Refugee* series.

Faten (pictured right): “I don’t want to go back to Syria, that land will make me remember a lot. I just want a new land.” *Faten* adds, “at the day of the surgery the surgeon told my husband: ‘I can’t go ahead with the surgery on your back because I can’t find the screwdrivers.’ For a moment I felt like we were talking to a car mechanic. We are refugees but still human. It’s the doctor’s responsibility to be equipped with the right instruments. [...] Now I dream of being a physiotherapist, to help my husband and the other injured, and to have all the screwdrivers around me.”¹⁶²



Figure 9. “In Lebanon, I found myself in narrow places. I start feeling anxious now when I am in an open space.” (2015) Photo by Omar Imam. *Live, Love, Refugee* series.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Image with excerpt retrieved from: <http://www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee>

¹⁶³ Image with excerpt retrieved from: <http://www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee>



Figure 10. Photograph of artist (bottom row, second from right) with participants from Live. Love. Refugee. (2015) Photo by Omar Imam. *Live, Love, Refugee* series.¹⁶⁴



Figure 11. *Human Flow*, Ai Wei Wei, 2018. Installation of iPhone photographs taken from Ai Wei Wei' documentary (*Human Flow*) on the current global scale of human displacement.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Image with excerpt retrieved from: <http://www.omarimam.com/live-love-refugee>

¹⁶⁵ Image and text by Shannon Connellan, Accessed at: <https://mashable.com/2018/03/13/ai-weiwei-biennale-of-sydney/>



Figure 12. “Guerrilla pasting opposite Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam,” *A Paper Monument for the Paperless*, 2017.¹⁶⁶



Figure 13. “A Paper Monument for the Paperless.” Pictured: Dominique Himmelsbach de Vries (left); Member of We Are Here (right). March 2017.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Image retrieved from: <https://www.himmelsbach.nl/?portfolio=a-paper-monument-for-the-paperless>

¹⁶⁷ Image retrieved from: <https://www.himmelsbach.nl/?portfolio=a-paper-monument-for-the-paperless>

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