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Political Iconography in Contemporary Art

Çağdaş Sanatta Politik İkonografi



Vildan Işık¹ 

¹ Düzce University, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Department of Fundamental Art Sciences, Düzce, Türkiye

Abstract

In a contemporary society characterised by fragmentation and complexity, political iconography has re-emerged as a potent tool for challenging authority and exploring themes of identity and dissent. This study examines the ways in which artists such as *Banksy*, *Barbara Kruger*, *Ai Weiwei*, and *Shepard Fairey* employ iconography not merely as a vehicle for conveying imagery but also as a transformative language of resistance. These artists use physical and digital spaces to amplify sociopolitical tensions, embedding complex messages within symbols. This approach encourages audiences to confront the underlying power structures and collective identities. While political iconography is often associated with the concepts of power, authority, rebellion, and propaganda, theoretical approaches to iconography frequently focus on its structural principles rather than its role within political ideologies, state control, or activist art. This study aims to address this lacuna by examining how visual symbols function within the frameworks of oppression and resistance, thereby revealing their role as instruments of ideological negotiation. By employing a targeted approach that combines case studies and visual analysis of four artists with distinct approaches, this research demonstrates that visual symbols are not merely aesthetic; rather, they serve as influential agents within the collective consciousness. The findings indicate that this evolving visual lexicon not only reflects contemporary issues but also serves as a catalyst for public engagement, thereby blurring the boundaries between observer and participant. By analysing the strategic use of symbols in visual activism, this study contributes to an understanding of iconography as an essential element of modern resistance and examines the potential of non-verbal critique in the digital age.

Öz

Parçalanma ve karmaşıklık ile karakterize edilen çağdaş toplumda, politik ikonografi, otoriteye meydan okumak ve kimlik ile direniş temalarını ele almak için güçlü bir araç olarak yeniden ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu çalışma; *Banksy*, *Barbara Kruger*, *Ai Weiwei* ve *Shepard Fairey* gibi sanatçıların ikonografiyi yalnızca imgeleri aktarmanın bir aracı olarak değil dönüştürücü bir direniş dili olarak nasıl kullandıklarını incelemektedir. Söz konusu sanatçılar, fiziksel ve dijital mekânları kullanarak sosyopolitik gerilimleri görünür kılmakta ve semboller aracılığıyla karmaşık mesajlar üretmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, izleyicileri güç yapıları ve kolektif kimliklerle yüzleşmeye teşvik etmektedir. Politik ikonografi genellikle güç, otorite, isyan ve propaganda kavramlarıyla bağlantılı olsa da ikonografiye yönelik teorik yaklaşımlar çoğunlukla onun politik ideolojiler, devlet kontrolü veya aktivist sanat içindeki işlevi yerine, yapısal ilkelerine odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, görsel sembollerin baskı ve direniş bağlamlarında nasıl işlediğini inceleyerek onların ideolojik müzakere araçları olarak rollerini ortaya koymayı ve böylece literatürdeki boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma; farklı yaklaşımlar benimseyen dört farklı sanatçının eserleri üzerine yapılan örnek inceleme ve analizler yoluyla görsel sembollerin yalnızca estetik nesneler olmadığını aksine kolektif bilinç içinde etkili araçlar olarak işlev gördüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, bu değişen görsel söz dağarcığının yalnızca güncel meseleleri yansıtmakla kalmayıp aynı zamanda kamusal katılımı teşvik eden bir katalizör işlevi gördüğünü göstermektedir.



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Corresponding author | Sorumlu Yazar: Vildan Işık vildani@duzce.edu.tr



Keywords Ai Weiwei • Banksy • Barbara Kruger • Political iconography • Shepard Fairey**Anahtar Kelimeler** Ai Weiwei • Banksy • Barbara Kruger • Politik ikonografi • Shepard Fairey

Introduction

Political iconography, an interdisciplinary field of study, examines the use of visual symbols and images to convey political messages, support ideological formations, and influence societal values. This field of study, rooted in the historical analysis of icons, extends beyond the representation of religious or national figures to encompass a wide array of cultural imagery prevalent in public spaces and political realms. By analysing these visual artefacts, political iconography demonstrates how societies construct, interpret, and reshape political realities. The analysis of the visual symbols reveals the power dynamics that are embedded in such imagery. These symbols often serve to legitimise authority, assert cultural identity, or challenge established norms. The concept of power, authority, rebellion, and propaganda are frequently associated with political iconography.¹ However, theoretical approaches to iconography often focus more on its structural principles rather than its functions within political ideologies, state control, or activist art.²

In the context of contemporary art, political iconography has transcended the boundaries of traditional aesthetic conventions, evolving into a complex and nuanced language that addresses a range of multifaceted socio-political issues. Digital technologies have driven this evolution, amplifying the reach and reinterpretation of iconographic elements, which actively resonate across various cultural contexts with unprecedented speed. Artists working within this framework employ political iconography not merely as a visual motif but as an intentional intervention that critiques, subverts, and reconfigures dominant ideologies. Contemporary art's use of iconography effectively illuminates and challenges the power structures, identity constructs and acts of resistance embedded in society, offering new perspectives on political tensions at both global and local levels.³

The conjunction of art and activism through iconography is exemplified by a number of influential contemporary artists, including *Banksy* (d. 1973?)⁴, *Barbara Kruger* (b. 1945), *Ai Weiwei* (b. 1957), and *Shepard Fairey* (b. 1970). These artists employ a variety of symbols, including subversive imagery, provocative slogans, and culturally significant icons, to construct compelling visual narratives that challenge societal norms and power structures. Such works not only articulate dissent but also engage viewers on a visceral level, evoking emotional and intellectual responses that can foster collective reflection and dialogue. This strategic deployment of iconography in the public sphere permits these artists to extend the frontiers of conventional artistic expression, facilitating the dissemination of their messages to a more extensive and diverse audience beyond the conventional confines of art institutions.

Additionally, the widespread adoption of digital platforms and social media has broadened the reach and immediacy of political iconography, allowing symbols to quickly evolve into viral expressions that shape

¹Álvaro Ibero, "Iconography as System: The Structural Principles of Representation in Visual Culture," *Art History & Criticism* Vol. 19, No. 1 (2023): 112-115.

²Debjani Ganguly and Mandy Thomas, "Cultural Politics and Iconography: An Introduction," *Humanities Research* Vol. XI, No. 1 (2004): 1-7.

³Brian Reffin Smith, "Retracing Political Dimensions: Strategies in Contemporary New Media Art," *Leonardo* 54, no. 5 (2021): 580-82, doi: 10.1162/leon_r_02126.

⁴Sotheby's, "Banksy by the Numbers," 10 September 2018, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/banksy-by-the-numbers?locale=en>, describes Banksy as "believed to have been born in 1974," while another webpage states that he was "born in Bristol in 1973"; see Sotheby's, "Banksy's Dystopian View of The House of Commons Breaks Auction Record for the Artist," 14 September 2019, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/banksy-devolved-parliament-comes-to-london?locale=en>.



public perception in real time. In an era characterised by the ascendance of visual culture, iconographic art represents a powerful conduit for the articulating political and social critique. Artworks, in particular, have become cultural symbols that embody urgent issues and stimulate discourse that transcends linguistic and geographic boundaries.⁵ The capacity for visual shorthand allows iconography to convey complex socio-political ideas in a concise manner, making it an effective medium for public engagement in an era of information overload.

This article explores the iconographic strategies of prominent contemporary artists who use symbols to address power, justice, and identity. By examining their work in digital and physical contexts, it uncovers the intellectual depth of their visual language, revealing political iconography as both a stylistic tool and a vehicle for socio-political commentary and activism. This study illustrates how these artists distil complex issues into accessible imagery with global resonance, demonstrating the enduring power of art to provoke critical reflection and raise public awareness.

1. Case Studies: Iconographic Interventions by Contemporary Artists⁶

This section presents detailed case studies of artists who strategically employ iconography to convey compelling political messages. These cases demonstrate how symbols and imagery transcend mere aesthetics, functioning as useful instruments for critiquing authority, reshaping public discourse, and highlighting salient social issues. Artists such as Banksy, Barbara Kruger, Ai Weiwei, and Shepard Fairey employ iconography as a potent and universally accessible language, engaging audiences across cultural and social boundaries.

By employing innovative techniques in the utilisation of cultural symbols, historical references and striking visuals, these artists facilitate engagement with complex narratives that challenge conventional wisdom, inspire reflection and foster dialogue. Banksy employs a subversive approach to reinterpret familiar symbols in his street art, prompting critical reflection on social justice, militarism, and consumerism. His oeuvre frequently interrogates prevailing social norms and elucidates pertinent social issues.⁶ Similarly, Barbara Kruger's iconic style - characterised by bold typography and direct language over black and white imagery - draws attention to issues of consumerism, identity and power dynamics. Through her thought-provoking phrases, Kruger critiques societal structures and confronts audiences with questions of authority, surveillance and the commodification of culture.⁷ The incorporation of cultural heritage elements by Ai Weiwei serves to critique state power and censorship, compelling audiences to reflect on the fragility of freedom and tradition. In a recent observation, Ai Weiwei drew parallels between the prevalence of censorship in the West and the control tactics he had witnessed during Mao Zedong's era in China. This serves to illustrate the continued prevalence of global challenges to freedom of expression.⁸ The visually accessible, propaganda-inspired works of Shepard Fairey employ bold, familiar aesthetics with the intention of inspiring collective identity and action. Fairey places considerable emphasis on the capacity of art to facilitate social

⁵Bolette B. Blaagaard, "Picturing the Politics: Embodied Visuality of Protest Imagery," in *Visual Political Communication*, ed. Anastasia Veneti, Daniel Jackson, and Darren G. Lilleker (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 248, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3_13.

⁶Anny Shaw, "The Power of Banksy's Art and Activism," *Sotheby's*, 30 April 2021, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/the-power-of-banksys-art-and-activism>.

⁷Masako Kamimura, "Barbara Kruger: Art of Representation [Review of *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture*]," *Woman's Art Journal* 8, no. 1 (1987), 40, doi: 10.2307/1358339.

⁸Piers Mucklejohn, "Ai Weiwei Says Censorship in West Has Become 'Exactly the Same' as in Mao Zedong's China," *The Independent*, 4 February 2024. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/ai-weiwei-censorship-west-china-mao-zedong-b2490163.html>.

change, employing recognisable propaganda styles to engage audiences with political issues.⁹

Collectively, these artists transform the function of iconography from a visual tool into a form of resistance and expression that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby creating a space for active public engagement. By engaging in this dynamic dialogue, the artists facilitate a process of reflection and critical thinking, encouraging audiences to consider the underlying issues and to expect new possibilities within the context of contemporary society.

1.1. Banksy: Subversive Street Art as Political Symbolism

Banksy is a central figure in the discourse of political iconography within contemporary art, where his use of anonymity serves not only as a personal choice but also as a political act designed to challenge and subvert traditional power structures around authorship and fame. This approach shifts the focus from the individual to the broader social critique embedded in his work, a defining aspect of his artistic practice.¹⁰ His art transcends the boundaries of street art and is situated within the framework of field art, public art and experimental art, which Alain Badiou associates with ‘behavioural art’—an art form concerned with resistance and activism.¹¹

Banksy’s artwork employs a range of familiar symbols, including police officers, children, animals, political figures, and protest imagery such as barbed wire, surveillance cameras, and riot shields, as potent instruments for interrogating authority and critiquing prevailing ideologies.¹² Through these symbols, Banksy constructs a visual language that conveys complex social messages that resonate widely and provoke deeper reflection.¹³ His activist tendencies are not superficial, but rather an integral aspect of his work, pushing the boundaries of art’s social role by challenging institutional boundaries. This activism leads to what might be described as an identification of reality and creation in his work, emphasising his place as a behavioural artist - one who consciously seeks to explore and redefine the constitutional relationships between art and society. As such, Banksy challenges the perception of street art as mere graffiti, inviting recognition of his practice as a contemporary form of activism that localises political critique, linguistically embeds meaning, and grounds his creative acts within public discourse.¹⁴

In *Kissing Coppers* (2004), for example, Banksy depicts two British police officers in an intimate embrace, challenging heteronormative and authoritarian expectations through a bold reinterpretation of uniformed figures of control. Similarly, *The Flower Thrower* (2003) subverts the image of a protester by replacing a weapon with a bouquet of flowers, reimagining the act of resistance as one of peace rather than violence.¹⁵ Through this inversion, Banksy presents a philosophical argument: protest need not rely on aggression to provoke change, presenting instead a vision of dissent driven by empathy and constructive transformation.

In April 2014, Banksy created two pieces, *Mobile Lovers* and *Spybooth*, which serve to exemplify his utilisation of political iconography as a means of critiquing the contemporary societal structures and authority that inform them. In *Mobile Lovers*, a couple is depicted embracing while absorbed in their mobile

⁹Andrea Newell, *Shepard Fairey and Street Art as Political Propaganda* (Master’s Thesis, California State University, Northridge, 2016), 33, <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/rx913t30w>.

¹⁰Salman Al Farisi, “Banksy: The Paradox of Fame and Anonymity,” *Calxylian*, 15 November 2023, <https://calxylian.com/banksy-the-paradox-of-fame-and-anonymity/>.

¹¹Jang-gyu Cho, “A Study on Resistance of the Characteristics of Activist Art in Banksy Art,” *Journal of European Culture & Art Studies* 14, no. 1 (March 2023): 127-145, <https://www.earticle.net/Article/A426697>.

¹²Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Random House Group Limited, Century, 2005).

¹³Susan Hansen, “Banksy’s Spybooth: Heritage Protection for Street Art?” *Nuart Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018): 31-35.

¹⁴Jang-gyu Cho, “A Study on Resistance of the Characteristics of Activist Art in Banksy Art.”

¹⁵Sotheby’s, “Latest Banksy Artwork ‘Love is in the Bin’ Created Live at Auction,” *Sotheby’s*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/latest-banksy-artwork-love-is-in-the-bin-created-live-at-auction?locale=en>.

phones, symbolising the role of technology in creating social disconnection. By focusing on mobile phones, Banksy employs a familiar icon to underscore the issues of isolation and digital distraction, indicating how technology, designed to facilitate connection, can instead function as a barrier. Spybooth, situated in close proximity to the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham, features figures that bear resemblance to spies eavesdropping on a telephone box, thereby alluding to concerns pertaining to state surveillance and the erosion of privacy. The proximity of this mural to a surveillance institution enables Banksy to critique governmental intrusion into personal lives, employing spy imagery as a potent symbol of hidden authority. Both works employ readily comprehensible symbols, namely mobile phones and spies, to convey social commentary and prompt reflection on the impact of technology and surveillance on modern life.¹⁶

In his response to the European refugee crisis, Banksy's 2015 mural in the Calais refugee and migrant camp near the English Channel depicts Steve Jobs, the late Apple co-founder and son of a Syrian immigrant, as a contemporary emblem of the potential that migrants contribute to society (**F. 1**). The mural presents a sophisticated examination of political iconography, integrating contemporary concerns with historical and cultural symbols to foster empathy and challenge prevailing biases. By portraying one of the most successful entrepreneurs as a refugee, Banksy challenges prevailing stereotypes and offers a new perspective on the visual discourse on migration. The mural presents a compelling juxtaposition between the widely recognised symbol of innovation and prosperity and the stark reality of displacement, compelling viewers to confront the often-overlooked humanity and potential within migrant communities. This visual narrative offers a critique of anti-immigrant sentiment, prompting reflection on why societies often overlook the valuable contributions of immigrants while fixating on divisive stereotypes.¹⁷

Furthermore, the mural's resonance is enhanced by Banksy's reference to *The Raft of the Medusa* by French Romantic painter Théodore Géricault, which resonates with themes of survival, despair, and resilience (**F. 2**). Géricault's portrayal of shipwreck survivors, depicted amid neglect and systemic inequality, reflects the resilience and perseverance of humanity in the face of adversity. This theme resonates with the experiences of refugees and migrants in Calais, who similarly demonstrate resilience and perseverance despite adversity. Banksy's incorporation of this historical allusion as iconography serves to reinforce the mural's message, situating the contemporary refugee crisis within a broader historical context of marginalisation and survival. The poignant assertion, "Nobody deserves to live this way!", serves as a powerful conclusion to the piece, underscoring the urgent need for a reimagined and more compassionate approach to migration, one that is firmly rooted in a shared recognition of human dignity and resilience.¹⁸

¹⁶Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Random House Group Limited, Century, 2005).

¹⁷Antonella Patteri, "Art of Dis-bordering: The Politics of Migration Murals in Europe," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 39, no. 2 (2022): 329-49, doi: 10.1080/08865655.2022.2108107.

¹⁸Patteri, "Art of Dis-bordering: The Politics of Migration Murals in Europe,"



Figure 1: In 2015, the artist Banksy created an artwork in the Calais 'Jungle' camp in northern France, depicting Steve Jobs, the child of a Syrian migrant, carrying a sack and an old model computer. This artwork draws attention to the frequently overlooked narratives of refugees, which are often marginalised in mainstream discourse

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-35075703>



Figure 2: Banksy, *The Raft of the Medusa* (after by Théodore Géricault), Calais, France, 2015. The mural depicts refugees attempting to signal a passing luxury vessel <https://banksy.co.uk/out.html>

Banksy's 2018 mural in New York (**F. 3**), situated in close proximity to Soho and created in collaboration with graffiti artist Borf, serves to exemplify his utilisation of political iconography as a means of drawing attention to salient social issues. The mural's primary focus is on the case of Zehra Doğan, a Kurdish journalist and artist who was imprisoned in Turkey in 2017.¹⁹ Doğan was sentenced to a period of incarceration amounting to nearly three years, following her conviction on charges of "spreading terrorist propaganda" in relation to the sharing of her painting on social media. The artwork depicted Nusaybin, a Kurdish district that had sustained significant damage during the conflict, with the Turkish flag superimposed over the

¹⁹Andrew R. Chow, "A New Work by Banksy in Downtown Manhattan Protests the Imprisonment of Zehra Dogan." *The New York Times*, 15 March 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/arts/design/banksy-mural-new-york-zehra-dogan.html>.

buildings, thereby symbolising the government's presence in the region.²⁰ Doğan created the painting to reflect the devastation and military occupation of her hometown. However, the authorities interpreted it as propaganda supporting illegal groups. Banksy created the mural in solidarity with Doğan, inspired by her story and letters from prison. The mural depicts Doğan behind a series of tally marks representing prison bars, with one mark ingeniously depicted as a pencil, symbolizing her silenced artistic voice. At night, a projector illuminated the mural, displaying both Doğan's original artwork and the photograph that led to her arrest.²¹ This underscored the harshness of her punishment. In his own words, Banksy presents the mural as a critique of censorship and repression, stating, "I've painted things that deserve prison far more than this," thereby indicating his belief that Doğan's imprisonment was unjust. In this work, Banksy employs visual symbolism as a means of advocacy, utilising art as a vehicle for challenging authority, defending freedom of expression and prompting reflection on the role of artists as agents of resistance.²²



Figure 3: Banksy 2018 New York mural, created in solidarity with the imprisoned Kurdish artist Zehra Doğan, depicts her behind tally marks as prison bars, with one mark transformed into a pencil - symbolising her voice as an artist silenced by censorship <https://banksy.co.uk/out.html>. **a)** A view of the installation **b)** Details of the work.

Banksy's *Devolved Parliament* (2019) is proving to be a defining work of political iconography in contemporary art. In this painting, the British Parliament is reimagined with chimpanzees in place of its members, presenting a bold critique of governance and the perceived degradation of political ethics.²³ By depicting these political figures as primates, Banksy highlights the primal instincts and absurdities that underlie modern politics, asserting that democratic processes are tainted by basic human impulses.²⁴ The imagery, while straightforward, invites deeper reflection, offering an ironic yet powerful perspective on authority and the political stage.

Through this satirical transformation, *Devolved Parliament* not only addresses Banksy's discontent with conventional political institutions but also urges viewers to question the effectiveness and moral integrity of the systems that govern society. As noted by Rebecca Bury, the painting captures a sentiment of disillusionment that resonates widely, reflecting a shared scepticism towards established power structures.²⁵ Its

²⁰The information in this paragraph is derived from [Deutsche Welle, "Haberde ve Resimde inat Etmenin Öyküsü: Zehra Doğan," last modified 22 February 2019, <https://www.dw.com/tr/haberde-ve-resimde-inat-etmenin-%C3%B6yk%C3%BCs%C3%BC-zehra-do%C4%9Fan/a-47680763>]; [Bianet, "Gazeteci Doğan'a Resimden Hapis Cezası," last modified 25 March 2017, <https://bianet.org/haber/gazeteci-dogan-a-resim-den-hapis-cezasi-184239>]; and [T24, "Gazeteci Zehra Doğan Neden Tutuklu?" last modified 23 March 2017, https://t24.com.tr/haber/gazeteci-zehra-dogan-neden-tutuklu,374997#google_vignette]. Following a retrial, on May 9, 2024, the Mardin 2nd High Criminal Court ruled for Zehra Doğan's acquittal. See: *MLSA Turkey*, 9 May 2024, <https://www.mlsaturkey.com/tr/gazeteci-zehra-dogan-2-yil-hapis-yattigi-davanin-yeniden-yargilamasinda-beraat-etti>.)

²¹Cascone, Sarah. "Banksy Returns to New York With a Powerful Tribute to Jailed Turkish Artist Zehra Doğan." *Artnet News*, 16 March, 2018. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/banksy-returns-new-york-bowery-wall-1246226>.

²²Chow, "A New Work by Banksy in Downtown Manhattan Protests the Imprisonment of Zehra Doğan."

²³Essie King, "Banksy's *Devolved Parliament*," *My Art Broker*, 3 May 2024, <https://www.myartbroker.com/artist-banksy/articles/banksy-devolved-parliament>.

²⁴Mihail Evans, "On Banksy, Hogarth and Democracy," *Aesthetic Investigations* 5, no. 2 (2022), doi: 10.58519/aesthinv.v5i2.12091.

²⁵Rebecca Bury, "Banksy's 'Devolved Parliament': A Satirical Masterpiece," *Lougher Contemporary*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.loughercontemporar.com/blogs/editorial/banksys-devolved-parliament-a-satirical-masterpiece>.

record-breaking sale demonstrates both its cultural significance and its enduring appeal within Banksy's oeuvre.²⁶

In the context of the pandemic of 2020, Banksy unveiled the artwork entitled *Game Changer* at Southampton General Hospital, England. The piece portrays a young child setting aside traditional superhero toys to play with a nurse figurine, symbolising a redefined view of heroism focused on selfless service and sacrifice.²⁷ By portraying healthcare workers as exemplars of heroism, Banksy proffers a novel interpretation of courage and selflessness, resonating profoundly amid the crisis as their roles transcended conventional notions of bravery.²⁸ The piece, which was auctioned for £16.8 million with proceeds going to benefit NHS charities, demonstrates Banksy's commitment to not only portraying societal issues but also engaging with them in tangible ways.²⁹ The use of iconography in *Game Changer* reconstructs social values by elevating the mundane to the heroic, challenging viewers to recognise heroism in unexpected contexts; by reinterpreting traditional symbols and positioning healthcare workers as new icons of heroism, Banksy not only challenges conventional narratives but also expands society's understanding of courage, embodying both symbolic and material support for these frontline workers and inviting viewers to re-evaluate traditional symbols and recognise heroism in everyday acts of service.

Another recent and thought-provoking work, *Valentine's Day Mascara* (2023), addresses the issue of domestic violence by depicting a bruised 1950s-style housewife disposing of a male figure in a real freezer embedded in the wall. The combination of the mural and the physical object serves to highlight the often-hidden nature of domestic struggles, compelling the viewer to confront the realities of abuse.³⁰ In this instance, Banksy employs iconography not only to draw attention to social issues but also to create an immersive experience, where the boundaries between art and reality are blurred, compelling viewers to engage with uncomfortable truths in a profound manner.³¹

In August 2024, Banksy broadened the scope of his political critique with a series of animal-themed works displayed across London. *The Goat* and *The Elephants* present nuanced metaphors for scapegoating and unspoken social issues.³² *The Goat*, a mural near Kew Bridge, Richmond, features a precariously perched goat, symbolising fragile societal structures³³, while *The Elephants* depicts elephants peering out of blocked windows, addressing the concept of the elephant in the room as a tangible entity within the urban landscape.³⁴ Through the use of animal iconography, Banksy illuminates human behaviour and transforms

²⁶"Banksy's Dystopian View of The House of Commons Breaks Auction Record for the Artist," *Sotheby's*, 14 September 2019, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/banksy-devolved-parliament-comes-to-london>.

²⁷"Banksy's *Game Changer* Sells for £16,758,000 / \$23,176,314 / €19,422,522," *Christie's*, 23 March 2021, <https://www.christies.com/about-us/press-archive/details?PressReleaseID=9987>.

²⁸"Un Banksy vendu plus de 19 millions d'euros, une Somme qui sera reversée au service de santé britannique," *Le Monde*, 23 March 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2021/03/23/un-banksy-vendu-plus-de-19-millions-d-euros-au-profit-du-service-de-sante-britannique_6074178_3246.html.

²⁹"Banksy's *Game Changer* Sells for £16,758,000 / \$23,176,314 / €19,422,522," *Christie's*.

³⁰Vivienne Chow, "Banksy's Startling Valentine's Day Mural Exposes Domestic Violence as a Dark Reality Ignored on the Most Romantic Day of the Year," *Artnet News*, 14 February 2023, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/banksy-valentines-day-mural-2255312>.

³¹"Banksy Confirms 'Valentine's Day Mascara' Mural," *Reuters*, Yahoo News, 14 February 2023, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/banksy-confirms-valentines-day-mascara-182953322.html>.

³²Julia Binswanger, "Banksy Unveils Two New Animal Murals in Two Days," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 7 August 2024, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/banksy-unveils-two-new-animal-murals-in-two-days-180984840/>.

³³Caroline Davies, "Banksy Confirms New Goat Mural in South-West London is His Creation," *The Guardian*, 5 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/aug/05/banksy-confirms-new-goat-mural-in-south-west-london-is-his-creation>.

³⁴"Banksy Reveals a Second New London Artwork in 24 Hours," *The Telegraph*, 6 August 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/06/banksy-second-london-artwork-elephants-goat-kew-chelsea/>.

abstract social issues into accessible, universally resonant symbols.³⁵ These works represent a continuation of Banksy's practice of challenging social structures through evocative imagery.³⁶

Banksy's oeuvre serves as a testament to the enduring power of political iconography in contemporary art. By situating his works in public spaces, Banksy facilitates the democratisation of art, transforming streets into arenas for discourse and critique. His pieces are not merely static images; rather, they are dynamic interventions that engage the viewer directly with the pressing social and political issues of the time.³⁷ In a world that is increasingly disillusioned with traditional authority, Banksy's art provides a form of visual resistance that reflects and catalyses societal reflection, offering a counter-narrative to bureaucratic control.³⁸ His utilisation of iconography is not merely an aesthetic exercise; rather, it provides a philosophical framework through which audiences can engage in critical reflection on issues of power, identity and, justice.³⁹

Banksy's art raises a fundamental question about the role of political iconography in today's world. Can art, with its nuanced yet powerful approach, act as a catalyst for real change? Through his anonymous yet powerful imagery, Banksy demonstrates how political symbols can go beyond merely reflecting societal issues, raising awareness and motivating action where conventional discourse may fall short. His creations demonstrate that, with intention and clarity, art can be one of the most effective tools for challenging established norms and imagining a fairer society.

1.2. Barbara Kruger: Text-Based Art as Political Iconography

Kruger is a seminal figure in the domain of text-based art, employing language as a potent instrument for investigating a plethora of cultural, political, and social matters. In an era characterised by visual overload, her works fuse text with striking images to critique consumerism, gender roles and power dynamics. This positioning of her art as a form of political iconography that transcends mere aesthetics is particularly noteworthy. Her art addresses themes of femininity, consumer culture and authority and, thus actively contributes to social awareness. By juxtaposing familiar images associated with consumerism with thought-provoking slogans, Kruger encourages reflection on the ideological forces that shape perspectives. Furthermore, she prompts engagement with the content in a way that is active rather than passive.⁴⁰ In adapting her oeuvre for the internet age, the artist has employed digital platforms such as TikTok, reflecting both the technological advancements of the digital era and enduring societal issues.⁴¹ Her bold typography, provocative slogans, and monochromatic palette accented by red embody a challenge to dominant ideologies in contemporary life, prompting viewers to question the narratives that shape their perceptions. Kruger's *Untitled* series exemplifies this approach, combining red frames, white text, and black-and-white photography with compelling slogans set in *Futura Bold Oblique*, a font commonly used in advertising for its clarity. The red frames evoke the allure of femininity while simultaneously critiquing the tenets of consumer

³⁵"Banksy Surprises London with Three Animal Paintings in as Many Days," *France24*, 8 August 2024. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240808-banksy-wows-london-with-three-animal-artworks>.

³⁶Jo Lawson-Tancred, "Two New Banksy Artworks Appear in London, But What Do They Mean?," *Artnet*, 6 August 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/two-new-banksy-artworks-appear-in-london-2520982>.

³⁷Anny Shaw, "The Power of Banksy's Art and Activism".

³⁸George Fragopoulos, "On Claiming Responsibility: Banksy's Art as Counter-Narrative to the Bureaucratisation of the Imagination," in *Terror in Global Narrative*, ed. George Fragopoulos and Lisa Naydan (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 105-24, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-40654-1_7.

³⁹Kristian Jeff Cortez Agustin and Wendy Wing Lam Chan, "Understanding Social Critique in Graffiti Art from a (Non-)Western Perspective: Chinese Students Comparing Banksy and Zato through Photo-Elicitation," *Visual Studies* 37, no. 4 (2022): 378-93, doi: 10.1080/1472586X.2022.2046497.

⁴⁰Dilek Çulha, "Barbara Kruger'in Tasarımlarını Göstergelerarasılığın Yeniden Üretim Yöntemleriyle Okumak," *IBAD Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, Özel Sayı (2019): 38-52, doi:10.21733/ibad.603536.

⁴¹Jo Lawson-Tancred, "Barbara Kruger Updates Her Iconic Text-Based Works for the TikTok Era," *Artnet*, 1 February 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/barbara-kruger-updates-her-work-for-tiktok-2426128>.

culture. Furthermore, her employment of photographic material derived from fashion periodicals calls into question the notion of artistic originality through the utilisation of reproduction techniques.⁴²

Kruger's text-based approach to iconography is informed by her background as a graphic designer, where she developed an understanding of the capacity of visual hierarchy and language to capture attention and convey complex ideas. She uses the aesthetic of advertising, a recognisable visual language associated with persuasion and manipulation, as a means of challenging expectations and repurpose it as a tool for social critique. Her work often juxtaposes personal pronouns (e.g. 'I', 'you', 'we') with phrases that highlight societal tensions, forcing viewers to engage in uncomfortable self-reflection about their role within these systems. This approach enables Kruger's art to facilitate an interactive exchange, compelling viewers to engage in a critical examination of the assumptions and power structures that are woven into everyday language.⁴³

Originally created to support the Women's March on April 9, 1989, in the United States, *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* was later revisited in 2019, continuing its powerful message on bodily autonomy and resistance. The piece portrays a woman's face divided into contrasting positive and negative halves, thereby capturing the polarised views on bodily autonomy and the ongoing tension between women's rights and patriarchal control. By juxtaposing the positive with the female and the negative with the male, Kruger underscores the enduring conflict over the control of women's bodies. She characterises this power dynamic as decentralised and anonymous, proposing that it functions within a network of social relations rather than from a centralised authority.⁴⁴ Since its inception, this influential artwork has been adapted across various formats, including silkscreens, subway posters, billboards, and a 2021 video installation in Warsaw for International Women's Day. In these adaptations, Kruger employs bold, thought-provoking language in lieu of traditional symbols, thereby encouraging viewers to engage in contemplation of the ideological struggle surrounding bodily autonomy. The slogan "Your Body is a Battleground" has become a prominent symbol within the feminist movement, representing both individual and collective resistance. It has evolved into a powerful rallying cry for feminist activism, securing its place as an enduring icon within the movement. From the exhibition *Artists on Women's Rights, "Who Will Write the History of Tears?"* shows how this slogan transcends its original context, highlighting its continuing relevance as the struggle for bodily autonomy continues around the world.⁴⁵

In *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)*, created between 1987 and 2019, the artist reconfigures Descartes' well-known phrase, "I think, therefore I am," into a powerful critique of consumer identity. By shifting the focus from thought to consumption, the work invites viewers to question how deeply consumerism defines our sense of self, challenging us to reconsider the extent to which our identities are shaped by what we buy rather than what we believe. The slogan encapsulates this idea: a woman's value is often linked to her capacity to consume. This implies that not only are goods commodified, but also self-worth and identity. The design is framed with a bold red border and centred around a hand holding the slogan, thereby implying that everything, including the identity, is for sale. The red frame, which symbolises allure within consumer culture, is both an aesthetic choice and a critique of commodification. It serves to highlight how the marketplace permeates all areas, including the domain of art. The use of black, white, and red serves to intensify the urgency of the message, adopting the style of advertising to reveal how capitalism shapes perceptions of self and societal value, particularly for women, who are often defined by consumption within

⁴²Çulha, "Barbara Kruger'in Tasarımlarını Göstergelerarasılığın Yeniden Üretim Yöntemleriyle Okumak," 44.

⁴³Ulya Soley, "Barbara Kruger's Practice on Power, Capitalism, Identity, and Gender," *Pera Museum Blog*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.peramuseum.org/blog/barbara-kruger%E2%80%99s-practice-on-power-capitalism-identity-and-gender/1582>.

⁴⁴Çulha, "Barbara Kruger'in Tasarımlarını Göstergelerarasılığın Yeniden Üretim Yöntemleriyle Okumak," 46.

⁴⁵"Who Will Write the History of Tears. Artists on Women's Rights," *Artishock*, 19 December 2021, <https://artishockrevista.com/2021/12/19/who-will-write-the-history-of-tears-artists-on-womens-rights/>.

this system. By combining familiar advertising elements with her potent slogan, Kruger prompts viewers to reflect critically on the relationship between identity and consumerism, inviting them to question how deeply material goods define self-worth. Her work represents a significant contribution to the discourse on capitalism's impact on identity, underscoring how consumer culture influences self-perception and societal values.⁴⁶

In 2017, Kruger created a mesmerising floor work at the LACMA⁴⁷, *Untitled (Forever)*. The installation was filled with bold statements such as *Whose Justice?* and *Who owns what?*, which were designed to encourage reflection on themes of property, power and justice. This work encourages reflection on the themes of ownership, authority and justice and serves as an exemplar of her engagement with political iconography. By transforming the physical space, Kruger effectively eliminated the separation between the artwork and the observer, thus encouraging viewers to actively participate in its critical scrutiny. This shift towards installation-based work is consistent with her broader critique of capitalism, which paradoxically co-opted her style for advertising.⁴⁸ Her text-based approach, designed to capture attention in short, impactful statements, anticipates the fast-paced, multigenerational engagement characteristic of modern media. Kruger's adaptations in public installations continue to secure her role in political iconography, attracting new audiences and engaging them in powerful, physical spaces. In her major exhibition at MoMA, titled *"Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You,"* Kruger further explored her engagement with these themes, meticulously examining the intricate dynamics of selfhood, social identity, and the far-reaching effects of consumerist ideologies in 2022.⁴⁹ In 2024, the exhibition, held in 2024 at the South Serpentine Gallery in London, explored themes of power, belief, and reality through a dynamic blend of bold text, provocative imagery, and immersive sensory elements (F. 4). These included explicit language, nudity, strobe effects, and sudden loud noises. The installation prompts a critical reflection on the ways in which authority and media shape perception and identity by engaging with these striking components.⁵⁰

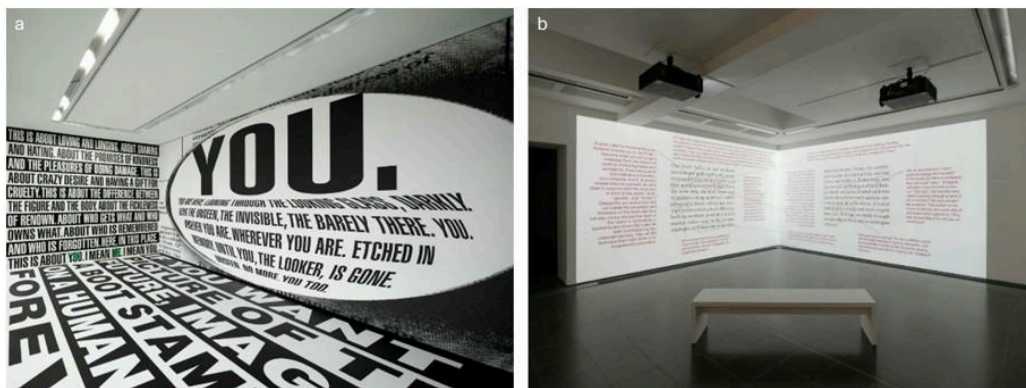


Figure 4: (a, b) Views of Barbara Kruger's installation *"Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You"* (2024), exhibited at the South Serpentine Gallery, London, England

<https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/barbara-kruger-thinking-of-you-i-mean-me-i-mean-you/>

Untitled (Who buys the con?) (2022) (F. 5), presents a nuanced and astute examination of the art market, exemplifying the artist's oeuvre. This piece uses digital technology strategically within Miami's financial

⁴⁶Çulha, "Barbara Kruger'in Tasarımlarını Göstergelerarasılığın Yeniden Üretim Yöntemleriyle Okumak," 48.

⁴⁷Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

⁴⁸Debra Brehmer, "A Barbara Kruger Retrospective Mixes Capitalism and Its Critique." *Hyperallergic*, 6 January 2022. <https://hyperallergic.com/704105/a-barbara-kruger-retrospective-mixes-capitalism-and-its-critique>.

⁴⁹"Barbara Kruger: Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You, 16 July 2022-2 January 2023," MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5394>.

⁵⁰"Barbara Kruger: Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You., 1 February - 17 March 2024," *Serpentine South Gallery*, accessed 7 November, 2024, <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/barbara-kruger-thinking-of-you-i-mean-me-i-mean-you/>.

district, with the objective to examine the commercialisation of art. By posing the thought-provoking question, “Who buys the con?,” Kruger challenges the paradoxical position of art buyers and collectors, who paradoxically support the commodification of art that challenges the capitalist structures from which they benefit. This work serves to reinforce her analysis of the art world’s complicity within these frameworks, emphasising the inherent contradiction of selling subversive art within a system that perpetuates the very injustices it critiques. This theme echoes Kruger’s previous installations, such as *Untitled (Questions)* (2020)⁵¹, which was shown throughout Los Angeles during Frieze Week and similarly challenged societal values and consumer culture.⁵²

In *The Milk of Dreams* (F. 6), presented at the 2022 Venice Biennale, Kruger employs the language and aesthetics of advertising as a means of provoking reflection on the subjects of consumerism, gender, and authority. In doing so, she offers a critique of the commodification of art. The installation, comprising a three-channel video component, has been designed to adapt to the specific spatial configuration of the Corderie building, situated at the far end. Kruger’s use of stark, ironically detached phrases—such as “please mourn” and “please care”—challenges viewers to establish an emotional and physical bond with the work, aligning it with the symbolic language of political iconography. By employing an impersonal and assertive tone, she intensifies her critique of commodification, prompting reflection on the corporeal and social dimensions of power.⁵³



Figure 5: Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Who Buys the Con?)*, 2022, Large-scale mural, vinyl and adhesive, NeueHouse, Los Angeles, USA. The work creates a critical iconography through language rather than traditional iconic imagery, drawing the viewer’s attention to societal illusions <https://www.neuehouse.com/neuejournal/a-mural-by-barbara-kruger/>

⁵¹“Untitled (Questions) by Barbara Kruger.” *Goethe-Institut*, n.d., <https://www.goethe.de/prj/abi/en/sto/art/ubk.html>.

⁵²“Barbara Kruger Has Some Big ‘Questions’ Popping Up Around L.A. During the Frieze Week.” *Artfix Daily*, 13 February 2020, https://www.artfixdaily.com/news_feed/2020/02/13/7873-barbara-kruger-has-some-big-questions-popping-up-around-la-during.

⁵³“Untitled (Beginning/Middle/End) at Venice Biennale,” *La Biennale di Venezia*, 2022. .



Figure 6: Barbara Kruger's installation, *The Milk of Dreams* (2022), displayed at the Venice Biennale, employs a striking combination of bold commands and commercial visuals to prompt viewers to reflect on themes of consumption, identity, and authority. This work exemplifies Kruger's distinctive approach to politically engaged imagery <https://www.rsi.ch/cultura/arte/il-latte-dei-sogni--1791808.html>

From her earliest works to her most recent installations, Kruger's text-based art has consistently challenged societal norms and exposed the power dynamics embedded in modern life. Her signature approach combines familiar visuals from consumer culture with incisive narratives about the portrayal of women in society. By repositioning images from the fashion industry within a new context, she introduces a contemporary commentary. Her compositions juxtapose static visual elements, including imagery, typography and colour, with ironically dynamic semantic layers. By employing parody and pastiche, Kruger offers a critique of and deconstruction of capitalist aesthetics, inviting viewers to actively engage with and reconsider the visual language that shapes their perceptions. In her work, words are elevated beyond their conventional function, becoming symbols of resistance and agents of critical consciousness. This reinforces the role of language in contemporary art as a means of challenging and redefining the social order.

1.3. Ai Weiwei: Cultural Symbols in Activist Art

As an activist artist, Ai Weiwei employs the use of political iconography to draw attention to salient issues, including those of human rights, freedom of speech, and instances of state oppression. By incorporating traditional Chinese symbols into a contemporary and thought-provoking context, his art critiques power structures in both Eastern and Western contexts, challenging official narratives and extending the boundaries of artistic freedom. As both an artist and a dissident, Ai addresses social injustices within China and sheds light on global crises, particularly the refugee crisis, through installations and cinematic expressions that transform numerical data into human-centred narratives, thereby enhancing the visibility of marginalised experiences. His work addresses the ethical challenges inherent in representing marginalised voices, amplifying perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked. Beyond mere provocation, his art calls for tangible action, urging audiences and leaders alike to confront social injustices and solidifying his role as a politically engaged, globally influential artist.⁵⁴

One of Ai's earliest and most iconic works, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), exemplifies his use of cultural symbols to challenge historical veneration and state-imposed values. In this work, Ai is depicted dropping a 2,000-year-old urn, which subsequently shatters at his feet. The act of destruction provoked a strong reaction from the audience, as the urn represents not only Chinese heritage but, also the

⁵⁴Abby Peterson, "Ai Weiwei and JR: Political Artists and Activist Artists and the Plight of Refugees," *Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge* 4, no. 2 (2019): 183-202, doi: 10.26409/2019JMK4.2.12.

government's promotion of a selective, idealised history that omits periods of unrest and oppression. By smashing the urn, Ai challenges the notion that historical artefacts should be preserved solely as symbols of national pride. Instead, he posits that culture must evolve and confront the realities of its past. The shattered urn serves as a metaphor for Ai's broader critique of state-imposed tradition, suggesting that reverence for the past should not be at the expense of truth or freedom.⁵⁵

The 2009 installation, titled *"Remembering,"* is a tribute to the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. It draws particular attention to the children who lost their lives because of the poor construction of their schools. Covering the facade of Munich's Haus der Kunst, the installation features 9,000 backpacks meticulously arranged to form the silhouette of a mourning mother. This powerful display invokes themes of loss and remembrance, turning everyday objects into a poignant symbol of grief and collective memory (F. 7). "She enjoyed seven joyful years in this world."⁵⁶ This message, both direct and impactful, reflects the deep anguish of parents mourning their children and sharply criticises the Chinese government for its silence and avoidance of accountability despite such a human tragedy. In this piece, Ai⁵⁷ demonstrates his ability to transform a simple object into a powerful symbol, thereby highlighting the consequences of institutional neglect. By employing symbols that resonate with collective sorrow and a call for accountability, he pays homage to the lives lost and underscores the crucial function of art in social critique and activism.⁵⁸



Figure 7: In 2009, Ai Weiwei transformed the front wall of Munich's Haus der Kunst into a sprawling 100 x 10-meter memorial, titled *Remembering*, to honour the young lives lost in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/audio/2018/feb/15/ai-weiwei-on-project-political-voice-sichuan-earthquake-the-start-podcast>

⁵⁵Barry Natusch and Beryl Hawkins, "Mapping Nichols' Modes in Documentary Film: Helvetica and Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry," *The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013: Official Conference Proceedings* (2013): 12.

⁵⁶她在这个世界上高高兴兴地活了七年 (translated as she enjoyed seven joyful years in this world).

⁵⁷Ai Weiwei initiated a project in China to record the names of children who lost their lives in the Sichuan earthquake. This initiative provoked a strong reaction from the authorities. In early August, he undertook a visit to Sichuan with the intention of providing testimony in a court of law on behalf of Tan Zuoren, who was facing prosecution for the creation of a database of individuals who had been affected by the earthquake. Upon his arrival at the hotel, he was promptly accosted by police officers, who proceeded to assault him. This resulted in a cerebral haemorrhage. Before his exhibition, Ai underwent brain surgery at the Munich University Hospital. "艾未未艺术展慕尼黑揭幕" [Ai Weiwei Art Exhibition Opens in Munich]. *New Tang Dynasty Television*. Last modified 13 October 2009. <https://www.ntdtv.com/gb/2009/10/13/a360782.html>.

⁵⁸Peterson, "Ai Weiwei and JR: Political Artists and Activist Artists and the Plight of Refugees," 193.

⁵⁹"Exhibition The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds 12 October 2010-2 May 2011," *Tate Modern*, .

In his installation *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) at Tate Modern⁵⁹, he employs a powerful form of political iconography to probe the intersections of cultural identity, collective consciousness, and ideological critique. Created by hundreds of artisans in Jingdezhen, this monumental piece, featuring 100 million intricately hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds, symbolises China's vast industrial prowess and rich artisanal heritage. However, the work's deeper significance can be found in the symbolic tension between individuality and conformity. The visual effect of the seeds is that of a homogeneous mass, which reflects the suppression of individual identity under a collectivist ideology. Historically, sunflower seeds in China have been imbued with political symbolism. During the Cultural Revolution, for instance, they were used as a visual representation of Mao Zedong's authority, with citizens viewing themselves as sunflowers turned towards the "sun" of Mao. By reappropriating this imagery, Ai critiques both the Communist ideology and the Confucian glorification of collectivism, emphasising how individual identity and labour are subsumed into the collective entity. In this work, he calls on viewers to engage with the complex dynamics of identity, power and conformity in a physical and intellectual manner. This creates a space for reflection on the tension between self-expression and enforced uniformity in contemporary Chinese society, where these issues are particularly pertinent.⁶⁰

In 2010, through this artistic endeavour, Ai explored the reclamation of identity, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the enduring consequences of historical loss, drawing inspiration from the zodiac animal sculptures that were once part of Beijing's Old Summer Palace. The Chinese zodiac heads were crafted by European Jesuit missionaries in the 18th century and subsequently seized during the 1860 looting of the palace by British and French forces. They symbolise both a cultural treasure and a painful legacy of foreign intervention. The recreation by Ai is not merely an act of homage; it offers a sophisticated critique of the West's historical appropriation of Chinese artefacts and a reflective examination of China's current endeavours to reclaim and redefine its cultural heritage. By engaging with the concepts of authenticity, ownership and cultural memory, the work prompts viewers to reflect on the role of artefacts within broader geopolitical narratives. In his reimagining, Ai addresses both Western and Chinese authorities, urging them to acknowledge their roles in cultural manipulation and to reconsider the ways in which history is shaped and presented. The series functions as a conduit for a dialogue between the past and the present, between the East and the West, prompting a critical examination of national identity and the intricate nuances surrounding cultural heritage.⁶¹

Forever Bicycles reimagines the bicycle—a symbol of mobility and daily life in China—through intricate formations of hundreds or thousands of stainless steel bikes. Debuting at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum in 2009, it has appeared globally, including Taipei (2011), Washington (2012), Toronto (2013, with 3,144 bikes), Berlin (2014, with 1,179), Venice (2014), London (2015), Melbourne (2015–2016), Austin (2017), Buenos Aires (2017–2018), Sao Paulo (2018), and Abu Dhabi (2020). Using Shanghai-made Forever bikes stripped of pedals and chains, the non-functional structures critique mass production, conformity, and restricted freedoms. This towering installation blends art and activism, symbolising collectivism, individuality, and authoritarianism's impact. Ai transforms a familiar object into a political statement, sparking dialogue on power, social constraints, and state influence over identity, showcasing his skill in turning everyday items into platforms for socio-

⁵⁹Yanhua Zhou, "The Power of Quantity in Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds," *The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2015: Official Conference Proceedings*, Southwest University, China, 2015, retrieved 1 September, 2024, https://papers.iafor.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/acah2015/ACAH2015_08074.pdf.

⁶¹Information derived from: ["Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," Ai Weiwei Studio, <https://www.aiweiwei.com/zodiac>], and ["Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), August 20, 2011–February 12, 2012, <https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/ai-weiwei-circle-animalszodiac-heads>.]

political reflection.⁶²

Ai Weiwei's extensive work on the refugee crisis relentlessly confronts displacement, suffering, and societal indifference through politically charged installations and documentary films, challenging global audiences. His *Lesbos Life Jacket Installation* began in 2015 with thousands of orange life jackets discarded by refugees on Lesbos after crossing the perilous Aegean Sea. Later, Ai draped these jackets over Berlin's Konzerthaus columns, turning the neoclassical facade into a symbolic monument that evoked refugees' dangerous journeys and lives lost at sea. The vivid jackets against the classical architecture highlighted migration's human cost and Europe's response, urging reflection on refugees' plight.⁶³ Ai further explored fragility and grief by reenacting the tragic image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child found dead on a Turkish shore in 2015. Lying face-down on a Greek beach, Ai mirrored Kurdi's pose to evoke deep sorrow and provoke emotional responses to the ongoing crisis. This controversial act stirred debate—while aiming to compel reflection, some critics argued it risked exploiting personal tragedy for art. Despite ethical questions, Ai's work remains a stark call to face the refugee crisis's harsh realities.⁶⁴

In the same vein, in 2016, Ai's *Safe Passage* installation at Berlin's Konzerthaus—timed with the Berlinale film festival—expanded his focus on the refugee crisis. He covered the building's columns with hundreds of life jackets collected from refugees who had risked the Mediterranean journey to reach Europe. Prominently displayed, this installation highlighted the devastating toll of forced migration and the vulnerability of displaced people. These life jackets, retrieved from the Greek island of Lesbos, served both as a memorial to those who lost their lives and as a stark reminder of the ongoing humanitarian crisis on Europe's borders.⁶⁵

In 2017, Ai Weiwei intensified his critique with *Law of the Journey*, a large-scale installation at the National Gallery in Prague (**F. 8**). This featured a 70-m inflatable boat filled with 258 faceless black figures, symbolising the dehumanised masses displaced by global conflicts and forced into perilous journeys. The work's vast size and lack of individual detail underscored the migrant crisis's scale and the tendency to reduce refugees to statistics, urging viewers to see the human lives behind the numbers. In the same year, at Athens' NJ Goulandris Museum, Ai paired small photographs from Lesbos with a marble sculpture of inner tubes, a lifeline for refugees. This contrast of ancient Greek art with modern survival symbols highlighted Greece's dual role as a historical bridge and a current migration frontline, prompting reflection on migration's timelessness. His 2017 documentary, *Human Flow*, further captured the refugee crisis's global scope, tracing journeys from Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, and sub-Saharan Africa. Using drone footage, aerial views of camps, and personal moments—like Ai sharing tea with refugees—the film turns overwhelming data into intimate stories of resilience and loss. Aimed at both the public and policymakers, it challenges humanitarian priorities and forces viewers to confront their roles in this pressing crisis. Together, these works reflect Ai's commitment to exposing the refugee experience, holding society accountable for often ignoring one of today's greatest humanitarian challenges.⁶⁶

⁶²"Ai Weiwei, Forever Bicycles: Thousands of bicycles transformed into sculptures," last updated 20 September 2024, *Public Delivery*, accessed 12 November 2024, <https://publicdelivery.org/ai-weiwei-forever-bicycles/>.

⁶³Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "Ai Weiwei Covers Berlin Concert Hall with 14,000 Refugee Life Jackets," *CNN Style*, 14 February 2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/ai-weiwei-berlin-life-jackets/index.html>.

⁶⁴Monica Tan, "Ai Weiwei Poses as Drowned Syrian Infant Refugee in 'Haunting' Photo," *The Guardian*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/01/ai-weiwei-poses-as-drowned-syrian-infant-refugee-in-haunting-photo>.

⁶⁵Von Carsten Probst, "Kunstaktion von Ai Weiwei in Berlin: Schwimmwesten von Flüchtlingen," *Deutschlandfunk*, 15 February 2016, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/kunstaktion-von-ai-weiwei-in-berlin-schwimmwesten-von-100.html>.

⁶⁶Peterson, "Ai Weiwei and JR: Political Artists and Activist Artists and the Plight of Refugees," 193-196.



Figure 8: Views of the large-scale installation by Ai Weiwei, *The Law of the Journey*, 2017. Photos © courtesy of the National Gallery in Prague (<https://www.ignant.com/2017/03/21/ai-weiweis-colossal-new-refugee-boat-installation/>). **a)** *Refugees Boat*: A 230-foot-long black boat carrying 258 faceless figures, symbolising the plight of refugees. **b)** *Snake Ceiling*: A commemoration of the thousands of young lives tragically lost in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

In the context of the pandemic in 2020, Ai created *Masks*⁶⁷, a series of face masks designed and sold with the intention of raising funds for humanitarian efforts⁶⁸ (F. 9). Each mask displayed images of symbols and patterns drawn from Chinese iconography, transforming a survival tool into a political statement.⁶⁹ These masks, serving both protective and symbolic functions, reflect Ai's ongoing engagement with global crises and his use of cultural symbols to promote awareness and aid.⁷⁰ By repurposing a ubiquitous object from the pandemic, Ai demonstrates how cultural symbols can address urgent, real-world concerns, integrating activism with immediate social needs.⁷¹

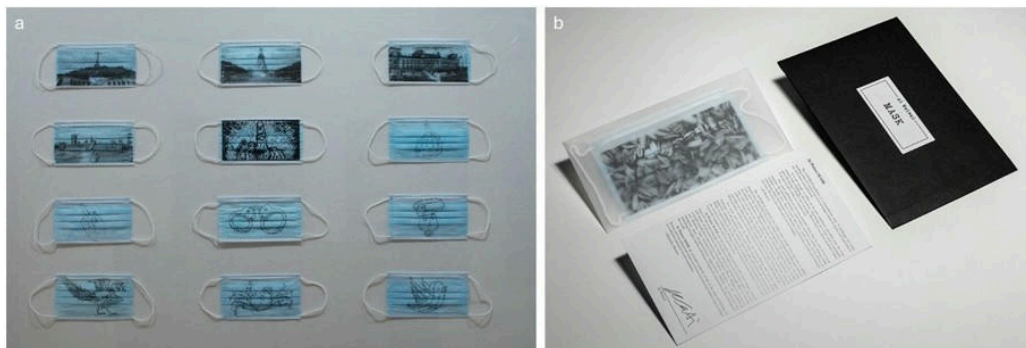


Figure 9: Created during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ai Wei Wei's *Mask* series features symbolic images that advocate for human rights and freedom of expression. Through striking visuals on each mask - such as symbols of protest and surveillance - Ai reimagines protective clothing as a medium for activism, combining health and humanitarian support while drawing attention to the struggles of vulnerable communities worldwide. **a)** 12 works from the 20-piece series (<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/mask-ai-weiwei/>). **b)** *Sunflower Seeds* from Ai Weiwei's *Mask* series <https://theartling.com/en/artzine/ai-weiweis-mask-fund-raiser-art-project-covid-19/>

⁶⁷In partnership with eBay for Charity, this project directed proceeds to organisations such as Refugees International and Médecins Sans Frontières to support pandemic relief efforts. Eric Schwartz, "Ai Weiwei MASK," *Refugees International*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/ai-weiwei-mask/>.

⁶⁸Kenneth Roth, "Ai Weiwei's Mass Activism Partnership with Human Rights Watch: COVID-19 Art Project to Benefit Humanitarian Action," *Human Rights Watch*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/28/ai-weiweis-mass-activism-partnership-human-rights-watch>.

⁶⁹Melissa Chiu, "On Ai Weiwei," *Social Research* 83, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 175-177, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44283405>.

⁷⁰Free Speech Series from the Collection Ai Weiwei MASK, MoMA, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/421252>.

⁷¹"Ai Weiwei turns his most iconic artworks into face masks for charity," *CNN*, May 28, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/arts/2020/05/28/ai-weiwei-charity-face-masks-lon-orig-na.cnn>.

In 2023, at London's Design Museum, Ai unveiled *Making Sense*, an exhibition that explored themes of mortality, memory, and society's perception of loss and imperfection through installations such as *Still Life* and *Spouts*, which featured thousands of historical artefacts.⁷² A noteworthy installation comprised thousands of LEGO bricks reimagining French artist Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, symbolising resilience and the enduring impact of humanity through meticulous craftsmanship.⁷³ This arrangement of artefacts, reminiscent of traditional burial customs, invites viewers to reflect on collective grief and the transitory nature of life. As Mark Hudson observes, Ai skilfully creates "timeless beauty from historical objects", underscoring his exploration of the human experience of suffering through cultural symbols.⁷⁴ By revisiting death and remembrance through traditional iconography, Ai forces audiences to confront the effects of state violence and societal indifference on individual lives, evoking the magnitude of human loss in both past and present disasters.

More recently, Ai's *La Commedia Umana* (F. 10) was installed in Italy in 2022, in the form of a monumental chandelier constructed from thousands of skeletal glass elements, designed to evoke the inevitability of death and the continuity of human suffering across cultures and time.⁷⁵ In partnership with the Berengo Studio in Murano, this remarkable piece stands as the world's largest suspended sculpture made from Murano glass.⁷⁶ Set in a city with a history of both opulence and decay, the installation underscores the fragility of human achievement and the inevitability of mortality, serving as a *memento mori*⁷⁷ that reminds viewers of the transience of life and the ever-present presence of death.⁷⁸ This work continues Ai's exploration of existential themes through cultural symbols, establishing a visually compelling dialogue between the personal and the political that resonates with universal human concerns.⁷⁹

Ai's work highlights the role of cultural symbols in activist art, showing how artefacts, symbols, and images are transformed into expressions of resistance. His creations encourage reflection on the relationship between history and power, underscoring how cultural symbols are often co-opted to serve nationalist ideologies.⁸⁰ Through deconstruction and reinterpretation, he reclaims these symbols as tools of dissent, transforming traditional iconography into declarations of freedom, individuality, and justice.⁸¹ Three guiding concepts are central to Ai's work: fostering the growth of civil society as a blueprint for the future, upholding freedom of expression, and incorporating technology to enhance these pursuits.⁸² This approach transcends borders, positioning his art as a global emblem of human rights and a critique of authoritarianism.

⁷²"Ai Weiwei: Making Sense 7 April-30 July 2023," *Design Museum*, <https://designmuseum.org/exhibitions/ai-weiwei-making-sense>.

⁷³Margherita Cole, "Ai Weiwei Recreated Monet's 'Water Lilies' Out of 650,000 LEGO Bricks," *My Modern Met*, 23 March 2023, <https://mymodernmet.com/ai-weiwei-water-lilies-making-sense-design-museum-london/>.

⁷⁴Mark Hudson, "Ai Weiwei, Design Museum Review: The Master Provocateur Creates Timeless Beauty from Historical Objects," *The Independent*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/ai-weiwei-design-museum-making-sense-b2314431.html>.

⁷⁵"Ai Weiwei-La Commedia Umana/Memento mori," *Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore*, 4 August 2022, <https://www.abbaziasangiorgio.it/2022/08/04/ai-weiwei-la-commedia-umana-memento-mori/>.

⁷⁶"La Commedia Umana-Memento Mori," *Berengo Studio*, 11 August 2022, <https://berengo.com/news/la-commedia-umana-memento-mori/>.

⁷⁷The phrase "memento mori" is a Latin term that can be translated in two ways: "remember death" and "remember your mortality."

⁷⁸Eva Peydró, "Ai Weiwei's The Human Comedy: Memento Mori in Venice," *El Hype*, 11 August 2022, <https://elhype.com/en/ai-weiweis-the-human-comedy-memento-mori-in-venice/>.

⁷⁹Peydró, "Ai Weiwei's The Human Comedy: Memento Mori in Venice."

⁸⁰Dane Prins, "Ai Weiwei's Art: A Political Journey of Denunciation and Transformation," *By Arcadia*, 15 January 2023, <https://www.byarcadia.org/post/ai-weiwei-s-art-a-political-journey-of-denunciation-and-transformation>.

⁸¹Adam Hencz, "Beyond Boundaries: The Powerful Art and Activism of Ai Weiwei," *Artland Magazine*, <https://magazine.artland.com/ai-weiwei-art/>.

⁸²Yang-su Kim, "Ai Weiwei's Fairytale and China's Civil Movement - In Relation to Joseph Beuys," *Chinese Cultural Studies*, no. 64 (2024): 1-26, doi: 10.18212/cccs.2024.64.001.

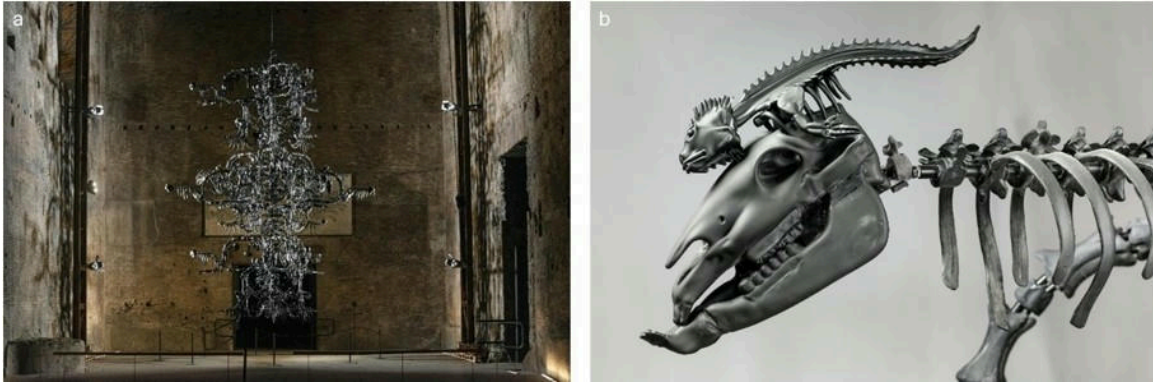


Figure 10: Ai Weiwei, *La Commedia Umana*, 2022 <https://berengo.com/news/la-commedia-umana-by-ai-weiwei>. **a)** Installed in the historic Baths of Diocletian in Rome, Italy, this monumental work, created from over 2,000 pieces of Murano glass, is a powerful tribute to the lives lost. Composed of black glass bones and organs, the sculpture reflects the themes of mortality and resilience, becoming a vivid symbol of collective loss, from pandemic to human conflict. Created over three years in collaboration with Berengo Studio, Ai Weiwei uses glass to reflect the fragility and strength of life, urging viewers to consider a future that values humanity beyond mere survival.⁸³ **b)** Detail of the *La Commedia Umana*, Photo by Francesco Allegretto

1.4. Shepard Fairey: Propaganda Aesthetics in Political Iconography

Shepard Fairey is a seminal figure in the contemporary art world, celebrated for his use of propaganda aesthetics as a medium for political iconography. Fairey's art is rooted in the visual language of propaganda, drawing on the bold, high-contrast imagery and powerful slogans characteristic of political posters, particularly those of 20th-century movements.⁸⁴ By embracing the aesthetics of propaganda, he draws viewers into a bold and sometimes challenging dialogue, encouraging them to consider the dynamics of authority, issues of social justice and structures of power.⁸⁵ His works go beyond the mere reproduction of historical propaganda; they reinterpret it, opening up space for a critical examination and questioning of the forces that define modern society.⁸⁶

His first and perhaps most iconic series, *Obey Giant* (1989), started as a straightforward sticker campaign and later evolved into a worldwide phenomenon (**F.11**). The image, which features the word OBEY next to the face of André the Giant, explores themes of control, authority and social conformity in a style reminiscent of the bold, high-contrast imagery of propaganda.⁸⁷ While its meaning remains open to interpretation, the use of bold lines and high contrast echoes the visual language of propaganda and invites reflection on the nature of obedience and control.⁸⁸ Fairey's work exemplifies his skilful use of iconography, encouraging viewers to question authority, particularly in a contemporary context characterised by branding and surveillance. This critical approach was particularly evident when his lithograph of *Marianne*, a symbol of fraternity, appeared in far-right leader Jordan Bardella's campaign videos, contradicting its intended message and challenging

⁸³ "Ai Weiwei-La Commedia Umana/Memento mori," *Museo Nazionale Romano and Berengo Studio, News*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.museonazionaleromano.beniculturali.it/en/news/ai-weiwei-la-commedia-umana>.

⁸⁴ John Del Signore, "Shepard Fairey, Street Artist," *Gothamist*, June 21, 2007. Modified September 18, 2015. <https://gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/shepard-fairey-street-artist>.

⁸⁵ Liv Goodbody, "Icons of Rebellion: The Enduring Power of Shepard Fairey's OBEY," *My Art Broker*, last updated 11 September 2024, <https://www.myartbroker.com/artist-shepard-fairey/articles/icons-of-rebellion-enduring-power-of-shepard-fairey-obey>.

⁸⁶ Megan Gambino, "Shepard Fairey: The Artist Behind the Obama Portrait," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 14 January 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/shepard-fairey-the-artist-behind-the-obama-portrait-45936012/>.

⁸⁷ Hamdi Gökova, "Sokak Sanatında Üsluba Dair Yorumlar ve Muhalif Boyut," *Yedi: Sanat, Tasarım ve Bilim Dergisi* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 35-52, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/916440>.

⁸⁸ Caterina Bellinetti, "Three Decades of Dissent: Shepard Fairey's OBEY GIANT turns 30," *Art & Object*, 5 September 2019, <https://www.artandobject.com/news/three-decades-dissent-shepard-faireys-obey-giant-turns-30>.

its role in political iconography⁸⁹ (F. 12). With *Obey Giant*, Fairey established his reputation as an artist who combined art with social criticism, using the propaganda aesthetic as a signature technique that would shape his subsequent work.⁹⁰



Figure 11: Shepard Fairey's stickers: Beginning with the image of André the Giant's face alongside the word "OBEY," this sticker ignited a wider commentary on authority and social control. Fairey built upon this initial design, producing a series of stickers featuring similarly powerful visuals. Marked by bold lines and stark contrasts reminiscent of propaganda art, each sticker prompts viewers to challenge norms and question power

<https://obeygiant.com/facing-the-giant-shepard-fairey-postcard-box-set-available-today-december-10th/>

Building on the success of *Obey Giant*, Fairey refined his approach by embedding explicit political messages in works such as *Make Art, Not War* (2004).⁹¹ This piece, which features a female figure with a rifle in the background during floral patterns, combines beauty with themes of resistance.⁹² By drawing on the style of old war posters, Fairey critiques militarism and advocates creativity over violence, bridging contemporary anti-war sentiment with historical movements and promoting continuity in activist art.⁹³ This fusion of familiar propaganda aesthetics with a pacifist message challenges conventional uses of propaganda and illustrates how these visuals can be reimagined to promote peace.

⁸⁹Roxana Azimi, "Shepard Fairey, also known as Obey: 'The far right ruins the spirit of the imagery that is about fraternity,'" *Le Monde*, 18 June 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/m-le-mag/article/2024/06/18/shepard-fairey-aka-obey-the-far-right-ruins-the-spirit-of-the-imagery-that-is-about-fraternity_6675080_117.html.

⁹⁰Goodbody, "Icons of Rebellion: The Enduring Power of Shepard Fairey's OBEY".

⁹¹"Shepard Fairey: Make Art Not War," *Berlin.de*, <https://www.berlin.de/kultur-und-tickets/tipps/kunst/streetart/4383678-4376139-shepard-fairey-make-art-not-war.html>.

⁹²"Shepard Fairey New Mural In Santa Fe, USA," *StreetArtNews*, 25 February 2013, https://streetartnews.net/2013/02/shepard-fairey-new-mural-in-santa-fe-usa.html#google_vignette.

⁹³"Make Art, Not War," *Obey Giant*, <https://obeygiant.com/prints/make-art-not-war-2/>.

Fairey's *Hope*, produced during Obama's initial presidential campaign in 2008, represented a pivotal moment in his career, underscoring the significance of propaganda aesthetics in contemporary political art.⁹⁴ Depicting Obama in red, white and blue with *HOPE* written underneath, the image became a symbol of optimism, capturing a generation's desire for change. Using techniques such as high contrast, a muted colour palette and a heroic perspective, Fairey created a powerful yet accessible image that has been widely hailed as "one of the most recognisable political images of the 21st century".⁹⁵ The poster's resemblance to revolutionary imagery amplified its impact, but unlike his earlier work, *Hope* used propaganda to inspire rather than critique. Its viral success established Fairey's place in political iconography and demonstrated the power of propaganda aesthetics to stir public sentiment, fusing art and activism in a way that resonated globally.^{96,97}



Figure 12: Shepard Fairey's 2021 piece, *Marianne: L'action vaut plus que les mots* (Action is more valuable than words), challenges viewers to reflect on the importance of activism through its bold visual language. The work draws on the French revolutionary ideals of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* (freedom, equality, brotherhood), symbolising the enduring power of collective action and solidarity in driving social change

<https://obeygiant.com/prints/marianne-laction-vaut-plus-que-les-mots/>

Following the creation of the *Hope* poster, Fairey expanded his artistic focus to address significant social challenges in his *We the People* series (2017) (F. 13), responding to the tense political atmosphere in the United States. Featuring portraits of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as Native Ameri-

⁹⁴Peter Schjeldahl, "Hope and Glory," *The New Yorker*, 15 February 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/23/hope-and-glory>.

⁹⁵Gambino, "Shepard Fairey: The Artist Behind the Obama Portrait".

⁹⁶Michael Kaplan, "Former Obama Fundraiser is so Fed Up with the Left that She's Selling Her Million-Dollar Dem Collectibles," *New York Post*, 16 June 2024, <https://nypost.com/2024/06/16/us-news/former-dem-fundraiser-selling-her-million-dollar-obama-art/>.

⁹⁷Azimi, "Shepard Fairey, aka Obey: 'The Far Right Ruins the Spirit of the Imagery that is About Fraternity'".

cans, Black Americans, Muslims and Hispanic women- each image includes affirming phrases such as *Uphold Honour and Support Each Other*.⁹⁸ Echoing the style of wartime posters, this series reimagines patriotic visuals to deliver messages of unity and social justice. By incorporating elements of American symbolism, it questions traditional nationalist imagery and broadens the concept of American identity within a growing multicultural landscape.⁹⁹ With *We the People*, Fairey demonstrates his ability to use propaganda-inspired aesthetics to confront social prejudices and advocate for inclusivity, transforming familiar visuals into symbols of solidarity and resistance.



Figure 13: a, b, c, d: *We the People* series, 2017. The posters created by Shepard Fairey emerged from the context of social tensions and serve to celebrate diversity and advocate unity, conveying empowering messages in the process <https://obeygiant.com/people-prints-subliminal-projects-friday-0120/>

In recent years, Fairey has expanded his creative scope to address the pressing issues of environmental degradation and corporate malfeasance. In 2015, he introduced *Earth Crisis* (F. 14), an imposing globe suspended from the heart of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, adorned with depictions of endangered species and ecological slogans in his signature propaganda-inspired style.¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹ Unveiled just before the COP21¹⁰² climate conference, this immersive work broke away from Fairey's typical two-dimensional formats, using the Eiffel Tower as a striking emblem of the urgent, global dimension of environmental challenges.¹⁰³ By using the visual language of wartime messaging to highlight ecological concerns, he situates these critical issues within a broader historical framework, underscoring that the struggle to preserve the environment is as essential as any existential struggle. This thematic continuity appears in later works, such as the *Rise Above Earth Justice* mural in London, which further echoes calls for climate action.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸Bianca Silva, "The Story Behind Shepard Fairey's Inauguration Protest Posters," *TIME*, 19 January 2017, <https://time.com/4639618/trump-inauguration-shepard-fairey/>.

⁹⁹Beverly Hall Smith, "Looking at the Masters: Shepard Fairey," *Cambridge Spy*, 11 July 2024, <https://cambridgespy.org/2024/07/11/looking-at-the-masters-shepard-fairey/>.

¹⁰⁰"PARIS // COP21: Shepard Reveals Earth Crisis Globe, Located in the Centre of the Eiffel Tower," *Obey Giant*, 20 November 2015, <https://obeygiant.com/paris-cop21-shepard-reveals-earth-crisis-globe-located-in-the-center-of-the-eiffel-tower/>.

¹⁰¹Henri Neuendorf, "Shepard Fairey Installs a Massive Globe on the Eiffel Tower To Address Climate Change," *Artnet News*, 25 November 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/shepard-faireys-paris-climate-change-369935>.

¹⁰²COP21, formally known as the 21st Conference of the Parties, was a major United Nations climate summit held in Paris in 2015. See: "The Paris Agreement," *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>.

¹⁰³"COP 21: Shepard Fairey Produces Earth Crisis, a Sphere at the Heart of the Eiffel Tower," *Eiffel Tower Press Release*, 20 November 2015, <https://sete.toureiffel.paris/en/press/press-releases/cop-21-shepard-fairey-produces-earth-crisis-sphere-heart-eiffel-tower>.

¹⁰⁴Sami Wakim, "Shepard Fairey Unveils 'Rise Above Earth Justice' Mural in London, Promoting Climate Awareness," *Street Art United States*, 7 October 2024, <https://streetartunitedstates.com/shepard-fairey-unveils-rise-above-earth-justice-mural-in-london-promoting-climate-awareness/>.



Figure 14: a, b, c, d: Views of the installation of *Earth Crisis* by Shepard Fairey in, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, in 2015 <https://www.unoeilquitraine.fr/?p=3133>

In 2022, Fairey once again explored the themes of peace and unity with his work entitled *Unity*. Known as *Standing Together*, the mural depicts intertwined hands in a vibrant, patriotic colour scheme. Fairey's work often walks a fine line between activism and commercial influence, blending elements that challenge societal norms while remaining accessible to a wide audience.¹⁰⁵ His approach of reinterpreting propaganda aesthetics to promote unity reflects his consistent commitment to inspiring collective solidarity, as seen in his environmental installation *Earth Crisis* on the Eiffel Tower, another profound public call for awareness and action. This piece reflects Fairey's conviction that art serves as a strong force for fostering social unity and resilience.¹⁰⁶

The concept of *Unity* embodies, Fairey's method for transforming traditional symbols of control into ones of hope and common purpose. This was echoed in the 2021 *Unity* group exhibition at StolenSpace Gallery in London, where Fairey, alongside artists *D*Face* and *Kai & Sunny*, presented works centred on collaboration and peace, reflecting the collective power of art to address societal issues.¹⁰⁷ Fairey's approach here aligns with the philosophy of his well-known *OBEY* series, which, as Liv Goodbody explains, stands as an enduring icon of resistance to authoritarian imposition.¹⁰⁸ Through these diverse works, Fairey continues to reinvent political iconography as a unifying emblem that promotes resilience and empowerment across communities.

Fairey's work exemplifies the enduring influence of propaganda aesthetics in political iconography, demonstrating how familiar visual elements can be reimagined to engage audiences with critical social issues.¹⁰⁹ By adopting and subverting the visual language of propaganda, Fairey creates images that are accessible, direct and emotionally powerful, addressing issues of authority, identity and justice in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences.¹¹⁰ In an image-saturated world, however, what distinguishes his work is not only its immediacy but also its layered approach, which forces viewers to engage with his images on multiple levels. This duality invites reflection on societal norms while highlighting the possibility of alternative perspectives to the prevailing status quo.

However while Fairey's images often provoke viewers to question the visual narratives of power and ideology, they also run the risk of being absorbed into the very systems they critique. Fairey acknowledges the complex interplay between his anti-authoritarian message and his commercial success, noting that his

¹⁰⁵Lola Méndez, "Shepard Fairey on Activism, Capitalism and a Life in the Space Between," *InsideHook*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.insidehook.com/culture/interview-shepard-fairey-balancing-capitalism-activism>.

¹⁰⁶Rooksana Hossenally, "Shepard Fairey Calls for Unity with Street Art Installation at Eiffel Tower," *Wallpaper*, 3 September 2022, <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/shepard-fairey-earth-crisis-eiffel-tower>.

¹⁰⁷"Unity: D*Face, Kai & Sunny, and Shepard Fairey Group Show, 10 September -10 October 10, 2021," *StolenSpace Gallery*, https://www.stolenspace.uk/portfolio_page/unity/.

¹⁰⁸Goodbody, "Icons of Rebellion: The Enduring Power of Shepard Fairey's OBEY".

¹⁰⁹Newell, *Shepard Fairey and Street Art as Political Propaganda*, 18.

¹¹⁰Gambino, "Shepard Fairey: The Artist Behind the Obama Portrait".

participation in the commercial art world has been both an advantage and a compromise.¹¹¹ Fairey sees his role as straddling the line between a civic agitator and a brand ambassador, carefully balancing activism and capitalism as he engages with mainstream audiences.¹¹² Fairey's contribution to the field of art lies in his demonstration that propaganda iconography, when recontextualized with deliberate vision, continues to serve as a potent medium for inspiring social awareness and catalysing change. However, as his work attains commercial recognition, its capacity to maintain a subversive impact within the mainstream art world is subject to scrutiny.

Discussion and Conclusion

An analysis of political iconography in contemporary art highlights how symbols serve as agents of challenge, provocation, and engagement with societal institutions. Artists like Banksy, Barbara Kruger, Ai Weiwei, and Shepard Fairey show that iconography transcends aesthetics, becoming a refined language of dissent and reflection. Visual, textual, and cultural symbols form a shared lexicon that goes beyond words, resonating directly with the public psyche and delivering critiques that break through traditional boundaries.

Banksy's street art turns anonymity into a bold gesture, shifting the focus from the artist to the message. His stark, stenciled images—rich with protest and irony—confront dominant narratives, prompting a re-examination of governance, social norms, and institutional power. The absence of a named creator enhances the work's universal reach, amplifying its resonance with a global audience. This raises a question: can art's power stem purely from its connection with viewers, unbound by individual ownership? Displayed in public spaces, Banksy's art suggests its greatest strength lies in sparking collective questioning and reinterpretation.

Barbara Kruger, by contrast, uses language as her primary weapon, borrowing advertising's style to critique consumer culture, identity politics, and social frameworks. Her sharp phrases and striking visuals force viewers to face the ideologies woven into everyday language, questioning whether it inherently controls us. Repurposing capitalism's visual tools, she reveals how language shapes consciousness and restricts perception, proving it is not just a medium for meaning but a force that both builds and challenges social order.

Ai Weiwei reclaims cultural symbols to confront state power, historical memory, and national identity. Through provocative acts, he challenges the idea of tradition as untouchable, urging viewers to question whether cultural heritage deserves blind reverence. His work insists that authentic cultural engagement means grappling with historical complexities rather than clinging to curated narratives, positioning his art as a philosophical critique of how we value the past.

Shepard Fairey adapts propaganda's aesthetic to reflect on visual power, promoting justice, environmental care, and human rights. Unlike conventional propaganda that reinforces authority, his familiar motifs inspire a collective purpose, creating a paradox: can tools of control also liberate? His art balances fostering solidarity with the risk of being co-opted by the systems it resists, hinting that the visual language of power can be reclaimed, though its independence is delicate.

The digital age adds complexity, as platforms spread iconographic art rapidly, making it a collective experience. Yet, this pace prompts a concern: does it preserve the message's depth or turn it into shallow

¹¹¹Maria Popova, "Shepard Fairey on Capitalism, Freedom, Selling Out, and What Makes Great Art," *The Marginalian*, 11 June 2014, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/06/11/shepard-fairey-capitalism-selling-out/>.

¹¹²Méndez, "Shepard Fairey on Activism, Capitalism and a Life in the Space Between".

consumption? In a media-heavy world where engagement often merges with consumption, iconography's ability to drive change rests on maintaining its impact during constant reinterpretation.

These artists demonstrate that political iconography is a dynamic force, shaping, cultural and ideological currents. As it expands into the digital and public spheres, its role grows, raising a pivotal question: can it retain its critical edge, or will it be absorbed by the systems it critiques? Its transformative power as a language of resistance and introspection depends on its capacity to provoke thought and challenge norms in our evolving, interconnected world.



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Author Details

Vildan Işık

¹ Düzce University, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Department of Fundamental Art Sciences, Düzce, Türkiye

 0000-0001-7794-9263  vildani@duzce.edu.tr

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