

The art of dissent

Ai Weiwei, rebel with a cause¹

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The artist as intellectual

In December 2018, the prominent Chinese artist Ai Weiwei unveiled a flag to mark 70 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The light-blue flag has a footprint made up of white dots at its center. The design was inspired by Ai's time spent visiting Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, who were forced to flee attacks in *Myanmar*. While he was in the refugee camp, he noticed that nearly everyone was barefoot. He was inspired to see the bare footprint as a symbol for displaced people but also as a symbol of our common humanity. He took 100 muddy footprints of people, young and old, in various locations, and combined them in his design.

Ai hopes his design will act as a visual reminder for people to educate themselves on the meaning of human rights, to offer hope and to encourage further debate on the importance of human rights. "It's about human identity," says Ai in a video released to accompany the launch. "Human rights is not a given property, but rather something we can only gain from our own defense and fight [. . .] Not many ideas can relate to this very broad, but also very special, topic."² Elsewhere he explains, "As humans, as long as we can stand up or can make a move, we have our footprint."³

The flag was flown for seven days in June 2019 to mark the 70th anniversary, as part of the human rights grassroots' awareness campaign called Fly the Flag.⁴ Ai Weiwei commented: "I am honored to have the opportunity to design a flag for the 70th anniversary for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." He added, "as we all come to learn, human rights are the precious result from generation after generation's understanding of the human struggle. I am proud to be a part of this force."⁵ "Flown both physically and digitally, the flag will remind people of the international commitment made to ensure a minimum standard of safety and dignity to every human being," said the organizers. "We are living through turbulent times. Political instability, economic inequality, social change and technological revolution create new challenges and uncertainties," they added, and "the Universal Declaration of Human Rights offers people a beacon of hope in these uncertain times."⁶

The dissident artist, who has been in exile in Berlin since 2015, is considered to be one of the most prominent human rights activists worldwide. His peculiar mix of art and politics in the contexts of human rights, freedom of speech, and migration issues has made him into an intellectual icon of global stature. He comments relentlessly on the shortcomings of the nation states, China in the first place but also the United States, and of The European Union as an institution. He does so by using a wide range of art forms, media, and platforms. He is on the world stage as a denouncer of gross human rights violations, as a spokesperson for the exiled and disenfranchised, and as a rebellious opponent of authoritarianism and censorship.

His extensive oeuvre, which spans the fields of art, curating, installation, photography, architecture, film, happenings, blogging, and social media platforms, has inspired many followers and brought to center stage issues that authorities and repressive regimes prefer to sweep under the carpet. Iconoclast and uncompromising, Ai Weiwei could be defined as a public intellectual who navigates the terrain between individual expression and collective action. He is famous for crossing boundaries, not only between art and politics but also across different media genres and platforms, combining an attachment to tradition with postmodern irreverence, artisanal craftsmanship with seriality and commercial branding, foregrounding the materiality and everydayness of ready-made objects with high symbolism, mixing values and doctrines with ‘in-your-face’ confrontation and contestation (see the *Fuck Off* installations throughout the world, between 1995 and 2003, in which he showed his middle finger in front of canonical vestiges of power such as the White House, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the Eiffel Tower, etc.).⁷

Yet, despite his fame and notoriety there is very little scholarship on Ai Weiwei. Information is mostly of journalistic nature or linked to exhibition catalogues, but a systematic analysis is missing.⁸ Of interest is the maxi Taschen edition, *Ai Weiwei*, edited by Hans Werner Holzwarth and published in 2016, which offers a detailed overview of his life and works and collects some of the scattered essays on the artist. Included are texts by art promoter Uli Sigg and by academic William Callahan, a professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics with expertise on the global politics of China. Callahan has written a fascinating essay on Ai Weiwei based on his 90-minute interview with the artist at his studio in Beijing on May 27, 2013. As Callahan writes, “Ai Weiwei is an inside/outsider, an outside/insider, who mediates between different groups, first in art, then in architecture, and now in politics [. . .] Ai is the go-to-guy for dissidence in China” (Callahan, “Citizen Ai” 912).

It is interesting to insert Ai within a contemporary definition of the public intellectual, which includes art and activism as forms of engagement for changing the public sphere. This kind of intellectual, who operates outside the boundaries of the West, brings to the fore the positions and voices of marginalized people but also of art forms that would not normally be considered ‘high art’ or worthy of being included in museums and receiving serious critical consideration. His main

friend, promoter, and defender in the West, Swiss art collector and former ambassador to China, Uli Sigg, warned Ai to be careful, "'Don't let them mix your position as an artist and a political activist' because 'political art' is not a good word" (Callahan, "Citizen Ai" 901).⁹

Although he is a global political figure, the politics of his work have attracted little academic attention and analysis. As Callahan writes,

Perhaps this is because Ai is a polarizing figure: people either love him as a human rights activist or loathe him for playing the dissident-hungry Western media. Ai's activities are likewise full of contradictions: He is a global artistic force but has little artistic presence in China. As a dissident, Ai characteristically targets the state as his enemy; but at times he also works closely with the state on his various projects.

("Citizen Ai" 899–900)

Therefore, it might be better not to seek to resolve the contradictions of Ai as either a human-rights hero or stooge of the neoliberal West, but to look for the productive interactions between Ai as an artist and Ai as an activist intellectual who offers a model of civic engagement to promote cultural and political change through innovative and groundbreaking artistic manifestations. At least since the inception of the term at the onset of the 20th century, the term "intellectual" has designated a politically engaged figure who is deeply embedded in society rather than standing outside society. Yet, although public intellectuals are endowed with the difficult task of representing, or speaking for, specific social groups, they are also called upon to stand outside by being "objective," "neutral," or "independent" (Spivak). In this sense, they are *organic*¹⁰ to those constituencies, and their critical role allows them to mediate between one or more publics and institutions. (Gramsci; Bourdieu; Robbins)

As such, Ai much deserves the label that Edward Said reserves for the intellectual as someone who belongs to the established intelligentsia yet is always slightly out of place, unsettled, and unsettling. Said deems this figure *exilic*: an adjective to be understood both literally, as in belonging nowhere (here, Said draws on his own experience of displacement) and metaphorically, as in "outsider, amateur and disturber of the status quo" (Said x). Amateurs are particularly relevant, for it safeguards intellectuals from the threat of expertise. Since they operate within the boundaries of institutions, they must maintain a "relative independence" (xvi), that is, an almost romantic spirit of opposition and dissidence (Said).

An intellectual is therefore someone who speaks truth to power. Yet the role of public intellectuals is not merely a question of speaking up in the name of others. As Foucault pointed out in his interview with Deleuze, the idea of 'speaking for' has ethical implications, as the public intellectual not only takes responsibility

for speaking for others but can also end up ventriloquizing and silencing them (Spivak). Therefore, the role of public intellectuals is particularly complex for non-Western or (post)colonial intellectuals who juggle competing regimes of political representations, individual and collective, playing a crucial role within their community as well as in the host society. I have considered elsewhere the figures of (post)colonial public intellectuals, trying to avoid normative definitions in favor of more nuanced and complex understandings that would include artists, activists, and movements as influential in changing public opinions and representing/foregrounding the interests of marginalized groups (Ponzanesi and Habel). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that intellectual labor is also performed outside academia, and that the myth of intellectuals is also informed by professions and market dynamics (Robbins, *Intellectuals: Aesthetics; Secular Vocations*; Small).

The definition of the intellectual is brought forward also by Callahan in his definition of Ai as the citizen intellectual. By comparing Ai's work with that of other public intellectuals and placing it in the context of civil society, the notion of 'citizen intellectual' emerges to include a broader movement of activists and public intellectuals who are creating a new form of political space. Citizen intellectuals are liminal figures who sometimes work with the state and sometimes against the state. Citizen intellectuals do not worry about these contradictions because they value what is good for humanity and the interplay between "structure and agency, radical opposition and embedded action, and individual activity and community building" (Callahan, "Citizen Ai" 905).

The notion of 'citizen intellectual' starts with the Czech dissident and later president Vaclav Havel's 1978 analysis of civil society in "The Power of the Powerless." Havel suggests that being a dissident can be counterproductive because it isolates intellectuals as an exclusive group separate from the rest of society. Rather than arguing that an elite movement can lead a revolution, Havel thought that everyone can contribute by making their own revolution by "living in truth" (58). This implies rejecting the lies of the regime. But it is also important to do small-scale work to create parallel cultures and parallel markets and thus a parallel society that exists side by side with official culture. Havel argues that ultimately, official structures "simply begin to wither away . . . to be replaced by new structures that have evolved from 'below' and are put together in a fundamentally different way" (qtd. in Callahan 914). It is noteworthy that Ai won the inaugural Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent in 2012.¹¹

Citizen intellectuals are independent voices not because they stand in opposition to power, but because they take advantage of the new opportunities offered by China's elastic social space to choose when to work with or against the state. "While not political in the sense of always directly criticizing the party-state, citizen intellectuals are certainly political in the broader sense of probing the boundaries of what is allowed in Chinese society" (Callahan, "Citizen Ai" 916). Rather than judging Ai as either a dissident or an official intellectual, the flexibility of the citizen intellectual allows individual events and activities to be put into a broader

and more nuanced context. For example, in the case of Ai a connection can also be made to the notion of ‘citizen media’ due to his engagement with multi-media platforms (from blogs to Twitter and Instagram). ‘Citizen media’ refer not only to the form or content produced by non-affiliated citizens but also to the impact they make in the public sphere and the way in which they propose to transform it. Citizen media are therefore meant to operate through a wide range of art forms, creating diversified political interventions pursuing a more inclusive agenda (Baker and Blaagaard). Therefore, the figure of Ai could be better labelled as that of citizen media more than citizen intellectual as he actively engages in transforming the public sphere through different media engagements.

Genesis of a dissident artist

Ai Weiwei is an artist, dissident, provocateur, and human rights activist who has come to be the face of China in the contemporary art world. Born in Beijing, China, in 1957, Ai Weiwei grew up during the nascent stages of China’s Cultural Revolution, which saw the persecution and exile of artists, writers, and intellectuals who were perceived to be a threat to Mao Zedong’s Communist sociopolitical movement. Ai’s father, the renowned poet Ai Qing, was one of the 300,000 intellectuals forcibly displaced to rural labor camps as part of the Down to the Countryside Movement, where he and the rest of his family endured unexplainable hatred, discrimination, unprovoked insults, and assaults. Ai Qing was later hailed as a great national poet after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Ai Weiwei was only 12 months old when his family was sent to labor camp. He suffered greatly as a young child from the poverty and repression, but also used that period to learn how to craft something out of nothing and develop a phenomenal aversion toward authoritarianism and dehumanization.

In 1981, Ai moved to New York, where he spent his most formative years from the age of 24 to 36. He enrolled to study visual art at the Parsons School of Design at The New School, but he dropped out after only six months and had to scrape by as a street artist and by working odd jobs. With no diplomas and “not even a half-decent art career,” Ai Weiwei visited “every single exhibition,” moved frequently, gambled during the weekends, and was more of a “thinking artist” than one who actively produced (Sigg 8). Several modern artists inspired Ai’s use of found or recycled objects from everyday life, including Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Jasper Johns (b. 1930), and Andy Warhol (1928–1987). He developed in particular a deep appreciation of Marcel Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ – found objects of everyday use elevated to the status of art – and their implied critique of cultural value systems. The influence of Pop Art and Andy Warhol’s serialization is also evident in his later work.

In 1993, upon learning that his father was ill, he returned to China, where he started to become a prominent artist, architect, and social media activist. Connected to this period of return are some of Ai Weiwei’s most famous and provocative artworks, such as the series featuring Chinese antique urns – some more than

2,000 years old. He bought antique Neolithic urns and transformed them into contemporary art works.

Ai's *Neolithic Culture Pot with Coca-Cola Logo* exemplifies this crossing of boundaries within a single artwork. By whitewashing an ancient urn in *White-wash* (1993–2000), and branding an antique pot with the Coca-Cola logo, in *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* (1994), an obvious symbol of Western ideals and reminiscent of mass production and Andy Warhol's style, Ai brings together both traditions to question the global capitalistic system.

One of Ai's most famous pieces, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), incorporates what Ai has called a 'cultural ready-made.' The work captures photographs of him as he drops a 2,000-year-old ceremonial urn, allowing it to smash to the floor at his feet. Not only did this artifact have considerable value, it also had symbolic and cultural worth. The Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) is considered a defining period in the history of Chinese civilization, and to deliberately break an iconic form from that era is equivalent to tossing away an entire inheritance of cultural meaning about China. By destroying the urn, he evoked the widespread destruction of the Cultural Revolution and the commodification of the contemporary world.

With this work, Ai began his ongoing use of antique ready-made objects, demonstrating his questioning attitude toward how and by whom cultural values are created. While being rooted in Chinese tradition and influences, his art simultaneously embraces the Western model of the avant-garde, of a "radical destruction of tradition" (Sigg 8). This prolific period on his native soil is what launched Ai Weiwei's career on the international stage, according to Western critics.

In 2003 Ai established his architecture studio Fake Design¹², (shut down by the government in 2012), beginning the migration of his celebrity into other domains (Driessens). Ai moved toward architecture, which demonstrated that his work had more of a functional impact on society than that of many other conceptual artists, thereby illustrating his value in terms of social impact. "I realized that doing it by myself wasn't enough. The project had to be big [...] and could raise public consciousness much more" (qtd. in Obrist 60). Ai has built upon his socially engaged credentials by using architecture to transform people's lives. "The risk, as with any brand extension, was brand dilution; however, by staying true to his brand values (or vision), Ai managed to make a smooth transition" (Preece 426).

In 2005 Ai was invited to start blogging by Sina Weibo, the biggest Internet platform in China. For the following four years, he used this as a platform for his scathing critique of the Chinese regime, producing a steady stream of social commentary, criticism of governmental policy, and miscellaneous thoughts on art and architecture, as well as autobiographical writings. The blog was shut down by Sina on May 28, 2009 due to its popularity (over a million people visited the blog regularly) and Ai Weiwei's outspoken attitude to events such as the Beijing Olympic Games and the Sichuan earthquake.¹³ He then turned to Twitter and wrote prolifically on the platform, claiming to spend at least eight hours online every day.

In 2007, Ai participated in the prestigious art exhibition, *Documenta 12*¹⁴ with two projects. Taking the Scheherazade story as his cue, for his project *Fairytale* Ai invited 1001 Chinese citizens from all over China, “such as workers, students in a rock ‘n’ roll band, etc.” to the city of Kassel in Germany in five stages (200 people at a time, given the complexity of the logistics), from June 12 to July 14, 2007. People were chosen through an open invitation on his blog. Quoting from the catalogue, “they came from different regions in China, were chosen from thousands of applicants, have never been to a foreign country, and most do not speak a foreign language.” (VV. AA). The exhibition was also populated with 1001 wooden chairs from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) that Ai, an antiques aficionado, had collected and restored.

Fairytale is the largest-scale performance piece ever created. It was also the most expensive exhibit in the *Documenta* of 2007. Two Swiss organizations provided the funding. With a team of about 40, Ai organized passports and visas for the visitors, as well as arranging accommodation in an old factory in Kassel. They were each provided with a suitcase and a set of clothes. They came on condition that they would describe their trip to and experience in Kassel. Each had a USB memory stick strapped to their wrist to store text and photos. Ai’s project has its roots in Ai’s own youth in Communist China, where there was little scope for travelling and limited creative freedom. *Fairytale* was a powerful figuration, for the East and the West, a source of inspiration in its pedagogical function as a transmitter of values and foreign worlds. The project was based on the idea that “Against the backdrop of a totalitarian regime and massive social changes China needs an exchange not based on the institutional but on the individual” (Conde 10).

Ai gained international fame as the artistic consultant for Beijing’s “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium, which was designed by the Swiss architect firm Herzog & de Meuron. Just before the 2008 Olympics, Ai became infamous for denouncing the stadium as China’s “fake smile” or “pretend smile” to the world. Ai refused to attend the opening ceremonies. He later tweeted that “No outdoor sport can be more elegant than throwing stones at autocracy” (@AiWW, 10 March 2010).

He later told journalists that he regretted having helped the Communist Party to stage successful Olympic Games with his design of Beijing’s Bird’s Nest stadium, which he saw as just propaganda for the ruling party. “The Beijing Olympics have oppressed the life of the general public with the latest technologies and a security apparatus of 700,000 guards,” he told the paper. “I became disenchanted because I realized I was used by the government to spread their patriotic education. Since the Olympics, I haven’t looked at (the stadium),” he said.¹⁵

Ten days after an 8.0 magnitude earthquake took place in Sichuan, a western province of China, (May 12, 2008), Ai led a team to survey and film the post-quake conditions. This was in response to the government’s lack of transparency, trying to cover up the scale of the tragedy as caused by the government’s shoddy ‘tofu’ constructions. Many of the dead were kids in school and the families

wanted names and bodies to mourn. Ai's politics of memory eschews compassion in the pursuit of justice (Sorace 414). Ai's dedication in finding and recording the names of each student is not only a way of honoring the dead but also a way of undermining the "hierarchy of grief" through which certain bodies are invested with value during their lives and mourned after death while other bodies remain anonymous, abandoned, and exposed to suffering. This is resonant of Butler's notion of a grievable life, according to which on a global scale some lives are more grievable and mournful than others because of the different cultural and economic value attached to them:

If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition. Although we might pursue that it would be impractical to write obituaries for all those people, or for all people, I think we have to ask, again and again, how the obituaries function as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed.

(Butler 34)

Like many public intellectuals, Ai was critical of the official response to the earthquake. Noticing that public schools often suffered more damage than surrounding buildings, many people felt that the schools collapsed due to substandard construction stemming from official corruption. After the Party refused to investigate, Ai recruited volunteers online and launched a 'Citizens' Investigation' to compile names and information about the student victims.

Although the citizens' investigation was "frustrating", it was also cathartic for many people. The volunteers were able "to release their anxieties, their anger, by doing very simple small things, everybody can do it. Ask the questions. Do the research and put in on the internet."

(Callahan, "Citizen Ai" 905)

Ai and his team eventually shamed the government into releasing its own list of 5,335 names of children who were killed in the earthquake. Ai Published the list of names and numerous articles documenting the investigation on his blog, which was shut down by the Chinese authorities in May 2009.

On September 14, 2009 Ai had emergency brain surgery. The cerebral hemorrhage was believed to be linked to a police attack in August, where he was beaten for trying to testify on behalf of a fellow investigator of the student casualties in the earthquake.

From October 2009 to January 2010, Ai exhibited *So Sorry* at Haus der Kunst in Munich. This was Ai's largest retrospective. For his show, Ai created the installation *Remembering* (2009) to honor over 80,000 Chinese, most of whom were children. The artwork featured 9,000 backpacks covering the façade of

the Munich Haus der Kunst, representing the school children who perished in the May 2008 Sichuan earthquake.¹⁶ It was so captivating and popular that it rubbed the Chinese ruling regime the wrong way. This was considered ‘dangerous art.’

For his 2010 installation *Sunflower Seeds* (commissioned by London’s Tate Modern and displayed in the Turbine Hall), Ai Weiwei produced a bed of 100 million porcelain seeds, all hand-painted. Ai had less than a year to “develop an idea,” “draw up a concept,” and mobilize a workforce of 1,600 to “mold,” “paint,” “fire,” and “glaze” each one of more than 100 million *Sunflower Seeds* (Sigg 9). These were tasks that required mobilization of massive personnel resources in the shortest timeframe, tasks that “every other artist would have rejected.” This installation is an attempt to retrain the eye to see differently the relationship between the individual and the commons. As Sorace commented,

For his exhibition Ai hired sixteen hundred Chinese artisans from the town of Jingdezhen to handcraft and individually paint over one hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds. In this way the viewer of the exhibition is confronted simultaneously with the sublime power of the mass and the unique singularity of each individual seed. The precarious dialectic between the individual and the communal is staged rather than overcome in favor of either.

(410–411)

The sunflower following the sun is a well-known metaphor for the people during China’s Cultural Revolution. The Chinese people were represented as sunflowers following Mao’s radiant face. The sunflower seeds also provided much-sought-after nourishment during the period of poverty under the Cultural Revolution and were used to chew on too during discussions and conversation. Ai Weiwei created a deceptively unified field with a large number of individual seeds. *Sunflower Seeds* comments on social, political, and economic issues relevant to contemporary China, such as the role of the individual in relation to the collective. But the seeds also reference the high level of craftsmanship of Chinese artisans, with the seriality and individuality of each seed. The exhibition was a massive international success with people walking on, sitting on, and feeling the seeds as a fully immersive aesthetic experience.¹⁷

While the Sichuan earthquake project primarily targeted a Chinese audience, the sunflower seeds were made as a comment on Chinese mass production and collectivism for a Western audience

As such he is represented as a genuinely “authentic” Chinese artist due to his frequent use of traditional Chinese crafts, for example, yet a defender of “Western” values in the form of democracy and liberal thinking, successfully symbolizing that ideology as an iconic brand.

(Preece 627)

It is no surprise, then, that the Chinese government is no great fan of Ai and censors him to the best of their ability. On April 3, 2011, Ai was arrested and detained for 81 days on charges of tax evasion. The government charged him 15 million RMB (\$2.3 million) in back taxes, allotting him 15 days to pay. In response, thousands of people began “lending” him money, expressing their solidarity. In China it is called lending because a charitable donation would have to be approved through the appropriate bureaucratic channels. Ai received 6,725,139 RMB (approximately one million dollars) in loans. Some of the loans were open

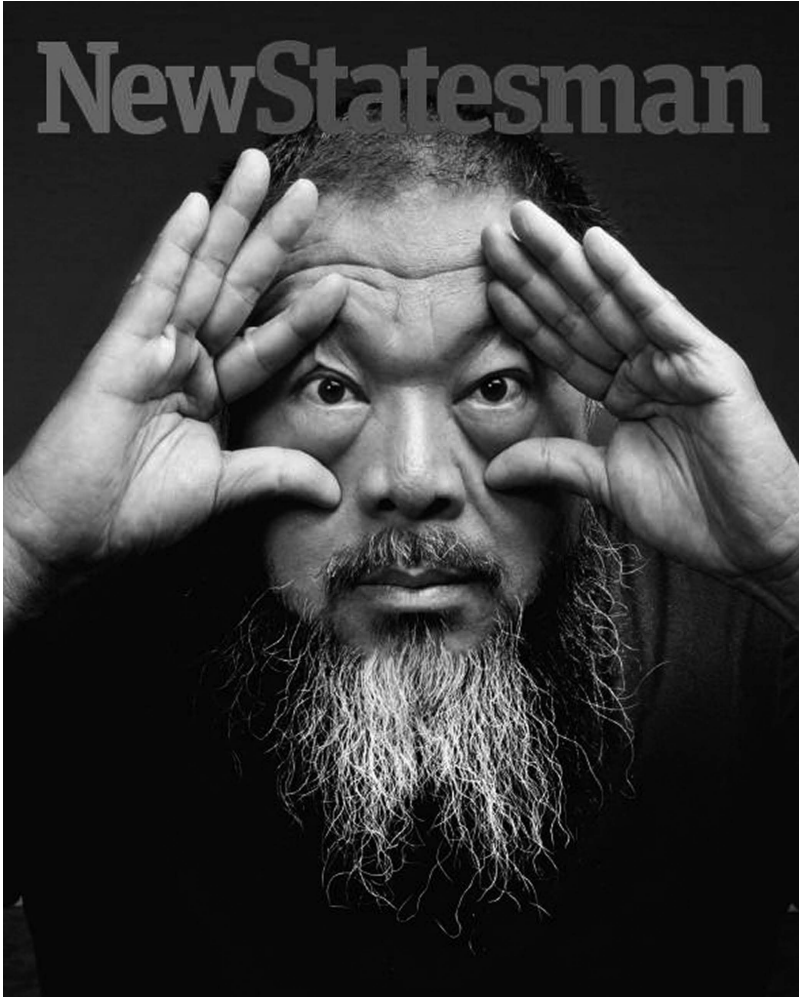


Figure 12.1 Photographed by Gao Yuan for Ai Weiwei Studio.

Source: Courtesy of New Statesman magazine.

political criticisms. One person donated 512 RMB (\$80) commemorating the date of the Sichuan earthquake (May 12, 2008); another loan was for 89.64 RMB, suggesting the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre (June 4, 1989) (Sorace 415).

The final blow for the government was when Art Review proclaimed Ai the “most powerful artist in the world” (ArtReview).¹⁸ *Time Magazine* declared Ai among the 100 Top Global Thinkers of 2011,¹⁹ and in 2012 Elton John dedicated his concert in Beijing to Ai.²⁰ In 2012, London’s *New Statesman* invited him to be a guest-editor for a special issue on China (Figure 12.1). The statement proclaiming, “‘The rebel artist reveals a China its censors don’t want to see’ was used to promote the special issue.”²¹ The issue was made available also in Mandarin. In addition to uploading it to newstatesman.com, it was also made available for free via torrent sites allowing people located in the region of the “great firewall of China” from Tibet to Shanghai to access the magazine. The issue was awarded the Amnesty International Media Award 2013.²²

The arrest was even dramatized on stage in London with the play *#aiww: The arrest of Ai Weiwei*.²³ His imprisonment was, therefore, the government’s biggest gift and favor to Ai. It meant that he immediately became world-famous, an icon of resistance to censorship and dictatorship, an advocate of human rights worldwide, and Ai Weiwei’s career has never been the same since. Through his new location in Berlin,²⁴ Ai Weiwei has witnessed and followed the European refugee crisis from close by and documented it with provocative artworks and staged events, but also tried to put it in a larger context of globalization and human movement.

The human flow²⁵

“The Refugee crisis is not about refugees. It is about us.”²⁶

More than 65 million people around the world are refugees who have been forced from their homes to escape famine, climate change, and war. As a filmmaker, Ai Weiwei examines the staggering scale of the refugee crisis and its profoundly personal human impact in *Human Flow* (2017), Ai’s first long feature film. For the realization of this documentary, the artist and his team spent three years travelling to over 23 countries and 40 refugee camps, interviewing and filming. Some of the camps are relatively new, coping with those who have fled the war in Syria. Other camps – such as the Ain al-Hilweh camp in Lebanon – have existed for decades and have now sheltered three generations of refugees (Figure 12.2).

But instead of offering representations by journalists and by Western media, which focus on the enormity and the flows of these exoduses, Ai Weiwei focuses on the individuality, the ‘human’ face behind the massive crisis in order to compassionately document the experience of the contemporary refugee and the various, mostly failed, institutional responses. “When the Berlin Wall fell, there were 11 countries with border fences and walls,” Ai said.



Figure 12.2 Ai Weiwei, *Human Flow*, Palestinian girls from Gaza for Ai WeiWei Studio.

Source: Courtesy of Amazon Studios.

By 2016, that number had increased to 70. We are witnessing a rise in nationalism, an increase in the closure of borders, and an exclusionary attitude towards migrants and refugees, the victims of war and the casualties of globalization.²⁷

The crew gathered 900 hours of material to be edited and composed into a breathtaking narrative by editor Niels Pagh Andersen, one of Scandinavia's most influential editors who has worked on more than 250 films, including Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, the 2012 documentary film about individuals who participated in the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–1966. The camera appears to be mounted high above the stream of refugees, or seemingly hovering in a drone. This captures stunning shots of refugee camps from above, where drones are used by the artist to capture the scale of this humanity rather than functioning as a surveillance mechanism. The film has a lot of texts and captions, with statistics and facts, that counteract the rather poetic visual language of the film. It gives a geopolitical location and a sense of continuity to a film that otherwise might come across as a mosaic of different pieces, countries, and traumas. The focus on the people behind the word 'refugee' is a humanizing approach that is often absent in the conversations about the crisis, where people are reduced to economic terms. Victims of war, famine, disease, climate change, genocide, and laws that make life unlivable are demonized as criminals, freeloaders, and extremists, painted as a faceless and malevolent horde, often by the same countries and people that are responsible for their displacement. But in this film even tigers,

cows, dogs, and other animals get centerstage, shown as trapped by the nature of migration, just like human beings.

There is a moment in the film in which you see people taking photo portraits; they look very uncomfortable and vulnerable, a unit within a distressing bigger whole. Ai is always present, talking to people, filming with his smartphone, a large presence that at times can come across as narcissistic and self-aggrandizing. The sweeping aerial shots of expansive refugee camps and lines of migrants show the human species as a force of nature that, like rivers and oceans, will eventually make its way to wherever it must be.²⁸ The film brings to the fore an aesthetic of humanity as a flow in open contestation of borders, boundaries, and walls. Ai Weiwei's protests of border walls is further magnified in his subsequent project, with a huge New York installation.²⁹

Good fences make good neighbors

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors was a multi-media exhibition for public spaces organized throughout New York City. It lasted from October 2017 until February 2018 (Public Art Fund).³⁰ The title is a quote from Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," which refers to the way Ai's structures are installed; it is apparent that contradiction as a theme pervades his exhibition. The exhibition documents the current global migrant crisis, connects it with earlier histories of exile, and in doing so, mainly reveals two types of tensions: between the individual and the collective and between the visible and the invisible. The ambitious project, comprising seven structures, ten bus shelters, 100 advertising platforms, and 200 lamppost banners, was scattered throughout the five boroughs of New York from Manhattan to the Bronx and Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island. It connected all the pieces through an interactive map that provided the background information on the artworks and the subjects, accessible via smartphones. The exhibition was both strikingly interruptive of the visual regime of the city and self-effacing, blending in with its surroundings to become invisible, and reminding us of its temporary existence. The art (advertising platforms and banners) served to insert facts of the refugee experience into the public discourse, intervening directly in the lives of the millions of New Yorkers who use public transit every day. These artworks are at first invisible but once you notice them you see them everywhere. You cannot un-see them anymore.

Culturally, the banners serve to illustrate the fact that immigration is not a new phenomenon, and – especially in a city like New York – immigrants have been there the whole time, whether we recognize them as such or not. In placing images of Joseph Conrad, Joseph Brodsky, or Victor Hugo amongst images of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island and Ai's own cellphone photographs taken at refugee camps in Lesbos, Greece, Ai is dismissing the differences of their social statuses, political environments, and even historical eras in order to emphasize "their shared humanity" (Public Art Fund). These double-sided vinyl portraits were created by cutting squares in black vinyl banners to generate images in the

space that remained. According to Ai, this play of positive and negative space speaks to the ambiguity of the boundaries between refugees and migrants.

Most of Ai's structure installations were in the form of distinctive steel barriers. His structure *Arch*, installed in Washington Square Park, was a steel cage that occupied the space underneath the marble arch, with a mirrored opening that took the form of two conjoined figures. Similarly, *Five Fences*, which were chain-link fences fitted on the stone wall of the Foundation Building of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art filled the arches with stainless steel and transformed the wall into a prison-like barrier. The beautiful *Gilded Cage* (Figure 12.3), placed at the corner of Central Park and Fifth Avenue, expressed the luxury of a golden cage, glistening in the sun, with an opening for getting in and out and therefore allowing you to peep through at the sky and the surrounding architecture through a game of shadows and light.

It is the non-invasiveness of his art that returns us to Ai's distinctive style of bridging two paradigms to form a single proposition. The unobtrusiveness of his art appears to emerge from Ai's utilization of New York City's ready-made form, of weaving the standardized, perspective nature of the urban surroundings into his art whilst transforming some aspect of the surroundings in his art, much like his use of the Neolithic pots as a canvas. What is created is what Ai calls "very almost-art, but maybe, maybe not" (Loos), one that individuals notice and understand as art, but may not pay close attention to. Perhaps Ai's larger project is not to raise awareness of the global migrant crisis itself, but rather to shed light on what Ai perceives as the way individuals around the globe react to the plight of refugees and migrants; we are well aware of the borders, the displacement, and the victims, but we choose to walk past them, like Ai's advertisement platforms, after a perfunctory glance.

Ultimately, Ai's massive network of art installations is working to reshape the perception of the migrant in America. His use of Frost's quotation, "good fences make good neighbors," as the title for the project invokes the American perception of the need to keep people separate to avoid conflict. This perception is at least part of the reason for the resurgence of the political far right, the widespread fear of the immigrant, and Trump's insistence on building "The Wall" to keep the undesired other out.³¹ In weaving his works throughout New York, introducing facts and images into the discourse, de-emphasizing the differences between past and present immigrants, and altering the meaning of the term "good fences," Ai's project confronts the instinct to separate and offers instead the potential to cooperate as "good neighbors."

Ai Weiwei is in fact questioning the very need for a boundary wall. Robert Frost was a poet celebrated for his deftness in concealing larger, darker, and more complex meanings behind a façade of innocence and simplicity. In the spirit of Robert Frost, Ai's "good fences" are ironically not impenetrable barriers but are often both an obstruction and a passageway at once. By erecting chain-link walls, cages, and fences that prove to be unobtrusive in the bustling city, Ai can be said to also question the necessity of the "wall" and boundaries in the first place.

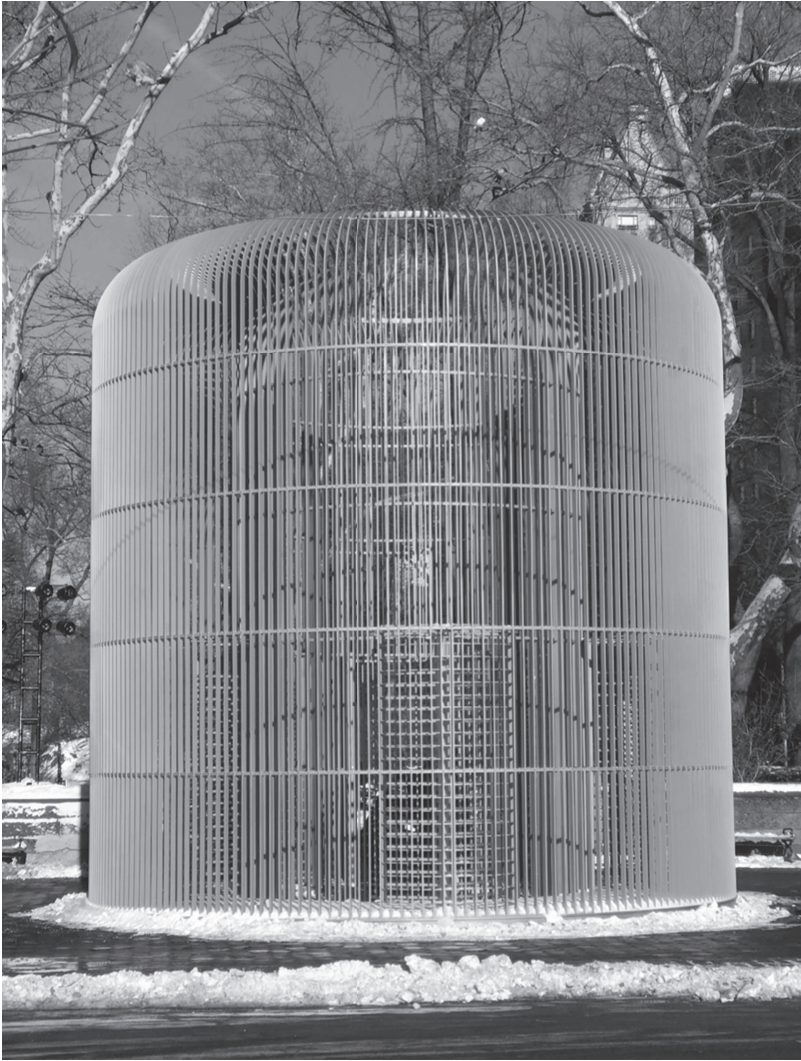


Figure 12.3 Ai Weiwei, *Gilded Cage*, 2017. Mild steel, paint.

Source: Courtesy of Lisson Gallery for Ai Weiwei Studio. Photo Sandra Ponzanesi.

Art as contestation

Ai Weiwei is considered to be a hyperbolic character, either adored or abhorred, often framed as a troublemaker and a smart ass. His persona has certainly undergone a global branding that translates his contrarian attitude into a *modus operandi* for a sustained critique of oppression, censorship, and social injustice. Though

often perceived as a mad tweeter, egomaniac, and narcissist, his larger-than-life personality has shrewdly used all media channels to promote not just himself but also human rights advocacy and actions to tackle the plight of migrants. His prominence can be also interpreted as a “Western” tokenism for the non-Western artist called to represent these issues, bestowing on him prestige and recognition while ignoring many other artists with similar concerns who struggle for visibility and do not have the same access to the international circuit of art and commerce.

Ai is indeed a brand name, carefully crafted, which has skyrocketed internationally after his detention in 2011 by the Chinese government.³² As a result, the scope of his work’s content has also expanded dramatically, whereby he has turned his attention to global crises. The narrative of “Ai the Rebel” is thus born, writes William Callahan, and its “uncompromising view of the individual vs. the totalitarian state” is especially seductive as Ai Weiwei seems to be playing to the “dissident-hungry audience in the West” (Callahan, “The Art of Politics” 463–464). Granted, in only a few years Ai Weiwei evolved from a nameless artist who engaged in activism in China to become “one of the world’s top dissidents,” as he first gained fame from designing and later denouncing the Beijing 2008 Olympics Bird’s Nest stadium as China’s “pretend smile,” then fascinated the world with *Sunflower Seeds* in 2010, and eventually became a global political figure and received worldwide acclaim in the global art forum after his illegitimate detention in 2011 (Callahan, “The Art of Politics” 461).

Ai Weiwei’s political activism, his stance as the lone hero against the cruel state, more than anything else helped pave the way to his international stardom. Ai has “secured the highest possible degree of international visibility by role-playing with the international media,” Uli Sigg writes (11). Although to this Ai Weiwei would respond: “That’s not my game. I hate it, I really hate it” (Callahan, “The Art of Politics” 464). Ai writes that he “spends very little time doing ‘art as art’”; to produce art without being political is not an option, for Ai Weiwei feels “to be political means you associate your work with a larger number of people’s living conditions. . . . And you try to use your work to affect the situation” (Warsh 40, 44).

Ai has always used social media as his own platform to reach wider audiences despite control and censorship. His blogs reached millions of readers. Ai has written 2,700 blog posts and uploaded thousands of photographs. Blogging was a natural extension of his work: “The blog is a modern drawing. Whatever I say there could be seen as part of my work” (qtd. in Obrist 45). A believer in the Internet’s integral role in promoting freedom of speech, Ai Weiwei never stops arguing, asking questions, and writing on social media platforms for the Chinese people – although both his blog and Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter) accounts were blocked by the Chinese government. He commented without restraint and in no uncertain terms on subjects such as the dire consequences of official mismanagement before and after the Sichuan earthquake. Many of Ai’s compatriots were thrown in jail for less. According to Sigg:

And were you to remind him where Chinese draw the line regarding human rights activism – where the fun ends in their estimation – this audacious man

would gracefully thank you for telling him. But it will not affect him or his endeavor to build a new Chinese society. Many people will feel exactly the same, but so few of them dare to raise their voice in this way. He writes for them, they will owe him.

(9)

But on May 28, 2009 the government cut him off from his audience of millions when his blog was shut down by the authorities. He subsequently started a series of micro-blogs on the Chinese version of Twitter, which were swiftly identified and blocked by the Internet police. Today Ai is very active on global Twitter, whose imposed brevity suits his style. His Twitter account @aiww has 365,600 followers. The messages, however, are accessible from within China only to people who know how to overcome the “Great Firewall,” which prevents Chinese users from navigating the uncensored global space of the Internet. His Instagram account is also incredibly popular. Ai is famous for taking endless selfies with all kinds of people he meets all over the world and posting them on his account without captions, leaving the interpretation to the power of the image. His Instagram account has 19,800 posts and 495,000 followers.³³

Ai’s art has, thus, inextricably been tied to his life and politics, serving more than just “art” for its own sake. From a Western vantage point, Ai’s art, persona, and to a certain extent his social media presence, presents a narrative of him as a political martyr rallying against a repressive government. His arrest and detainment, as Sigg observes, have since damaged China’s image in the West, reinforcing the view of the Chinese government as an oppressive force that silences freedom of expression (11).

Three years after his release from illegal detention, Ai Weiwei has gone from a liminal figure who blurs the lines between art and politics to a world celebrity/star. This is also interesting from the point of view of the culture industry (Ponzanesi) in order to unpack Ai as an authentic celebrity brand that is highly mediatized and globalized. By using his role as “native informant” (Spivak) for China but from the point of view of the democratic West, Ai plays the card of “China’s most famous artist” (Bach) to market tradition as well as stretching his artistic output over a highly fragmented and competitive global market. “His brand therefore contains a number of different ‘products’ (often produced by artisans, volunteers or sometimes factory workers), which until closed down by the Chinese government in 2012, were managed through his company: Fake Cultural Development Ltd.” (Preece 618).

Authenticity is part of the star persona, which is the property of the star’s relationship with the public (Dyer), not dissimilar from the recognition of the public intellectual as someone whose charisma, authority, and capacity to speak truth to power are recognized by the public/audiences (Small; Misztal; Ponzanesi and Habel). Ai’s brand has received so much attention in comparison with other artists and activists that it has ultimately enabled him to become a global celebrity. According to Preece, this is due to several factors:

generating wider attention through operating in multiple markets under various guises, which compose what we refer to as the “product portfolio” (artist,

curator, architect, blogger, activist); achieving coherence and clarity by consistently repeating brand values in each of these markets; and encouraging the various stakeholders to participate in the brand and make it their own.

(Preece 623)

The core of Ai's product is his works of art. However, Ai is very skilled in playing different roles and using different media outlets to increase his influence, expanding his brand into various realms. Ai uses different media to communicate with the public; while art has a relatively small audience. Ai, with his controversial personality, has a great talent for manipulating production of his fame behind the scenes:

By connecting directly to different publics and inviting them to collaborate and co-create within his vision, he allows for an authentic brand culture. Indeed, we would argue that Ai is one of the few celebrities to have understood the full significance of the medium used to communicate with the public in performing authenticity.

(Preece 631)

Indeed, Ai has always been a part of the "twenty-first-century approach to dissent that blurs art, life, politics, and activism" ("The Art of Politics" 464), as William Callahan claims. As the poster boy for freedom of expression, Ai Weiwei "bears the flaw of loving his country and not the party" (Sigg 11). Osnos writes so appropriately that "Ai's use of new media has subverted the usual Chinese method of dissent: favoring bluntness and spectacle over metaphor and anonymity. He shamed the system with his own transparency" (Osnos 60).

Notes

- 1 The author declares that the research, authorship, and/or publication of this chapter is done with financial support from the ERC (European Research Council) consolidator grant "Digital crossings in Europe: Gender, diaspora and belonging" (CONNECTIN-GEUROPE), grant 647737.
- 2 See Ai Weiwei, "On Human Rights." 10 Nov. 2018. www.europarl.europa.eu/cms-data/157201/Ai%20Weiwei%20On%20Human%20Rights%20Nov%2020%202018.pdf
- 3 Ai Weiwei, "Fly the Flag." Video: www.itsnicethat.com/news/ai-weiwei-flag-human-rights-art-101218
- 4 This grassroots campaign was established by a host of arts organizations and charities, including Fuel, Amnesty International, Donmar Warehouse, Human Rights Watch, Liberty, the National Theatre, Sadler's Wells, and Tate Galleries. See: <https://flytheflag.org.uk/>
- 5 Baines, Josh. "Ai Weiwei Creates Flag for New Human Rights Awareness Campaign." *It's Nice That*, 10 Dec. 2018. www.itsnicethat.com/news/ai-weiwei-flag-human-rights-art-101218.
- 6 Hitti, Natasha. "Ai Weiwei Designs Footprint Flag as a Symbol for Human Rights." *Dezeen*, 10 Dec. 2018. www.dezeen.com/2018/12/10/ai-weiwei-flag-human-rights/
- 7 See: <http://gofuckyou.altervista.org/ai-weiwei-fuck-off/>

- 8 Among these books are Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Warsch, editors. *Weiwei-isms*. Princeton UP, 2012; Pera, Rosa, editor. *Ai Weiwei: On the Table*. La Fabrica; Multilingual edition, 2015; Ai, Weiwei, and Cheryl Haines, editors. *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly: Art, Human Rights, and the Power of Writing a Letter*. Chronicle Books, 2018; Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Wars. *Humanity*. Princeton UP, 2018.
- 9 Ai Weiwei interview quoted in Callahan, "Citizen Ai" 901.
- 10 Antonio Gramsci theorized the distinction between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals. According to Gramsci anyone could be an intellectual. An organic intellectual is a member of a social class, as opposed to a member of the traditional intelligentsia that regards itself as a class apart from the rest of society. Organic intellectuals are meant to change the status quo and fight for equality and justice (Gramsci).
- 11 https://hrf.org/events_talks/2012-havel-prize-acceptance-speech/
- 12 In Chinese the characters that sound like 'fake' mean 'scientific development,' a Communist Party catchphrase. The spoken word also sounds like how a Chinese person would say 'fuck.'
- 13 A book of English translations of over 100 of Ai's blog posts for Sina, the Chinese MSN-style web portal, along with a few other short essays was published as *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews and Digital Rants, 2006–2009* (MIT Press). See also Smith, Terry, "Art of dissent. Ai Weiwei." *The Monthly*, June 2011. www.themonthly.com.au/terry-smith-ai-weiwei-art-dissent-terry-smith-3356
- 14 The *Documenta* is one of the pinnacles of contemporary art and recognized as a 'cathedral' of the avant-garde since its foundation in the 1950s. Held every five years, it returned in 2007 with its "grand mass of contemporary art" (Conde 4).
- 15 Ai, Weiwei. "I Wish I Never Designed Birds Nest." *Artlyst*, 9 Mar. 2012. www.artlyst.com/news/ai-weiwei-i-wish-i-never-designed-birds-nest/
- 16 See: <https://publicdelivery.org/ai-weiwei-remembering-haus-der-kunst-muenchen-2009/>
- 17 The project was initially meant to be interactive: visitors were supposed to stroll through the hall with sunflower seeds – walk on them, handle them, and establish their own relation to them. The Tate eventually prohibited people from walking on the seeds because of concerns about the health problems created by the porcelain dust (Sorace 410).
- 18 See: https://artreview.com/power_100/2012/ and www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-15285939
- 19 John Huntsman. "Ai Weiwei", the 2011 Time 100. Thursday, 21 Apr. 2011. http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2066367_2066369_2066464,00.html
- 20 See: www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/26/elton-john-dedicates-show-ai-weiwei
- 21 See: *New Statesman*, in Callahan 912.
- 22 See: <https://anjawohlstrom.com/New-Statesman-The-Ai-Weiwei-guest-edit>
- 23 www.hampsteadtheatre.com/whats-on/2013/aiww-the-arrest-of-ai/
- 24 Ai Weiwei had spent over four years under house arrest in China until his passport was returned and he was finally allowed to leave China at the end of July 2015. According to some critics, Ai Weiwei purportedly surrendered making art about China in exchange for his passport, thus his more recent focus on migration and refugees. As intended before his arrest, the outlawed artist moved to Berlin to join his family and take up a guest professorship at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) that he'd been offered in 2011. He was declared by the mayor a 'friend of the city.' His three-year visiting professorship ended in summer 2018. At the moment of writing Ai Weiwei has declared that he will leave Berlin without saying where he is moving to. He explained that the language remained a problem and that "Germany is not an open society. It is a society that wants to be open, but above all it protects itself. German culture is so strong that it doesn't really accept other ideas and arguments." as he told in an interview in the German daily *Die Welt* (9 August 2019). See link: <https://www.thelocal.de/20190809/germany-is-not-an-open-society-chinese-born-artist-ai-weiwei-on-leaving-berlin>.
- 25 *Human Flow*, premiered at Venice in 2017 and won multiple awards.

- 26 Ai, Weiwei. "The Refugee Crisis Isn't About Refugees. It's About Us." *The Guardian*, 2 Feb. 2018. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/02/refugee-crisis-human-flow-aiweiwei-china. Accessed 3 Mar. 2019.
- 27 Barone, Joshua, "Ai Weiwei's Latest Artwork: Building Fences Throughout New York City." *New York Times*, 26 Oct. 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/03/26/arts/design/ai-weiweis-latest-artwork-building-fences-throughout-new-york-city.html.
- 28 With its heightened visual sense and need to trace the contours of a certain type of experience, *Human Flow* is similar to Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea*, about migrants on the island of Lampedusa. It has points in common with Alejandro González Iñárritu's immersive VR installation-drama about immigrants, *Carne Y Arena* (2017). These projects are part of a renewed form of public engagement of the artist as intellectual and the intellectual as artist. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/02/refugee-crisis-human-flow-ai-weiwei-china
- 29 Ai Weiwei's new documentary, the film *The Rest*, went in premiere on 22 Mar. 2019 during the CPH:DOX (20–31 Mar.). The film participated in the festival's main competition and the artist was present at the festival. Ai Weiwei was guest curator at CPH:DOX in 2013 but was unable to visit the festival due to travel ban posed by the Chinese authorities. *The Rest* is a parallel work to *Human Flow*, as it also focuses on the refugee crisis and is an indignant defense of humanism and human dignity. *The Rest* accounts for the life and experience of these refugees in political limbo in Europe but with the individual human being in the lead role, "the scale here is in line with the body, voice and experience of an individual refugee." And it is precisely in the individual's story that some hope emerges in the midst of hopelessness. The film is also edited down to "an unsentimental, clear-sighted, and all the more gripping film. . . . The form is listening and attentive. The intricate chaos of various crises, which in the European public has been called 'the refugee crisis', has not blown over." (Bjerregaard 2019). For more info see: Sofie Bjerregaard, "Chinese artist, documentary filmmaker, and critic, Ai Weiwei, is coming to CPH:DOX 2019 with his newest film 'The Rest' premiering in the festival's main competition." *CPH:DOX*, 8 Feb. 2019. <https://cph-dox.dk/en/ai-weiwei-to-visit-cphdox-2019> and Tom Grater, "Ai Weiwei talks new doc 'The Rest', Criticizes Global Film Industry for Working with China," *Screendaily*, 22 Mar. 2019. www.screendaily.com/features/ai-weiwei-talks-new-doc-the-rest-criticizes-global-film-industry-for-working-with-china/5137937.article
- 30 The installation was organized in collaboration with the Public Art Fund. The exhibition website can be found here: www.publicartfund.org/ai_weiwei_good_fences_make_good_neighbors/about
- 31 "Everything We Know About Donald Trump's Proposed Border Wall," *Fortune Magazine*, 19 Jan. 2018.
- 32 "Ai Weiwei: Life and Work." *Ai Weiwei*, edited by Hans Werner Holzwarth, Taschen, 2016, p. 561.
- 33 These figures are from 21 Mar. 2019 and subject to further fluctuations. It is interesting to make a comparison to gain an impression of the reach that an artist-activist can achieve. For example, pop stars like Beyoncé have of course stratospheric numbers of followers (Beyoncé has 1761 posts, and 126 million followers), while Michelle Obama has 145 posts and 27.7 million followers.

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