

AI WEIWEI ATTACKS L.A.

THE CHINESE DISSIDENT ARTIST STORMS
THE CITY WITH A TRIO OF POWERFUL SHOWS

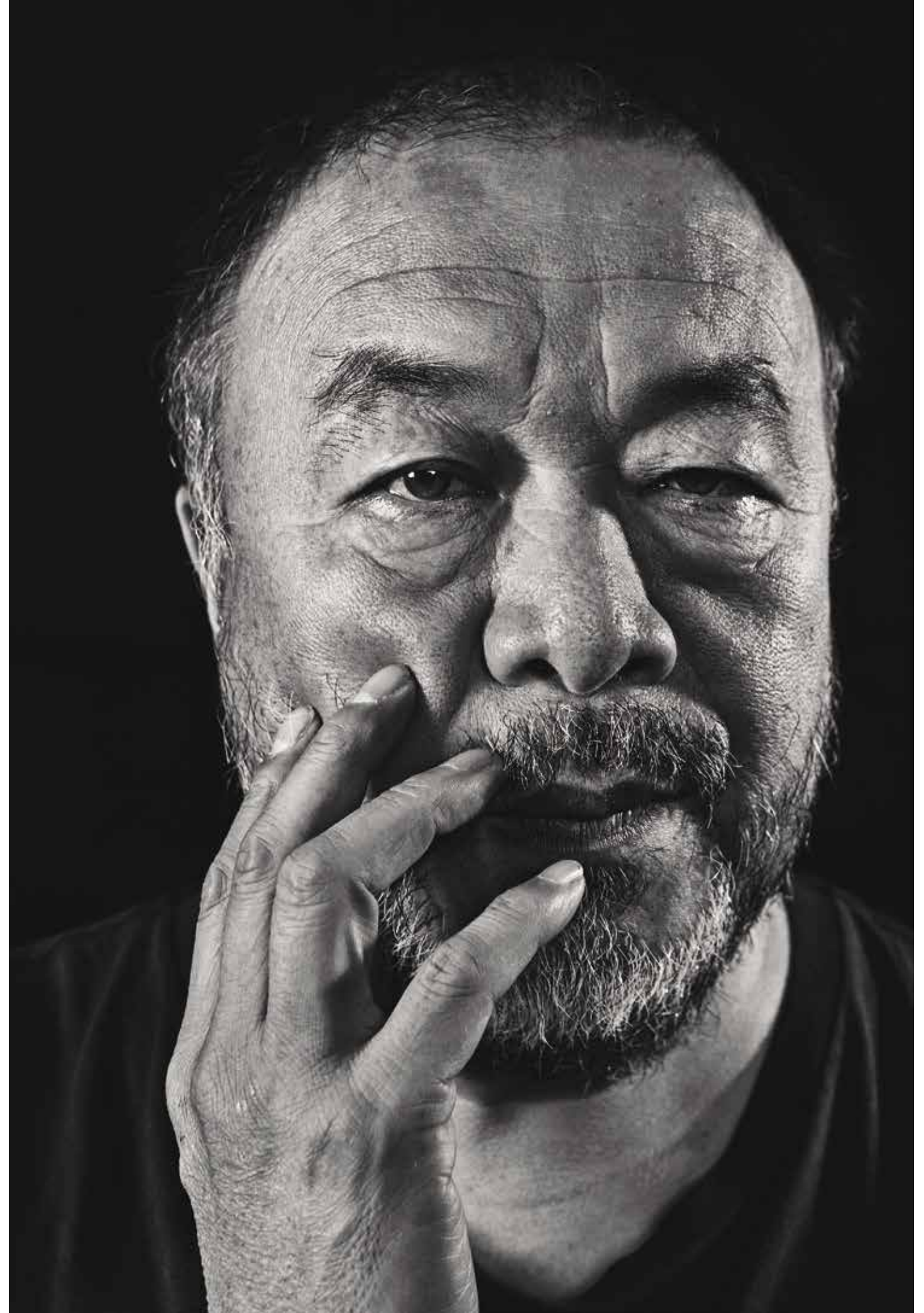
It's just past lunchtime on a Wednesday in late September and Ai Weiwei is in the middle of a coughing fit. "I'm not sick, just over-sensitive about the environment, this fixed office, the air, you know," says Ai. Though his bearded visage and raised middle finger have become symbols of anti-establishment sentiment the world over—replacing Che Guevara as the *du jour* icon of rebel chic—despite the stagnant air, the Chinese artist, architect, filmmaker, poet, activist and refugee is nothing if not inviting, humble and devilishly funny. Dressed in a California-casual uniform of well-trod Toms Shoes, a loose-fitting pair of black drawstring trousers and a blousy blue T-shirt, he's seated at the head of a conference table in a fishbowl office facing a circular stained-glass window. Once obstructed from this second-floor office, the window was previously utilized as a source of exterior illumination by the Scottish Rite Masonic order who originally inhabited this Millard Sheets-designed theater and meeting hall, now the Marciano Art Foundation. Though it's a banner fall day in Los Angeles, Ai has been held prisoner by the media circus inside this private museum; his only view to the outside world—for now, anyway—is through this rainbow-paned portal that depicts, ironically, an image of a double-headed eagle, a symbol of empire employed by the Masons and just about every other civilization from the Hittites to Peter the Great.

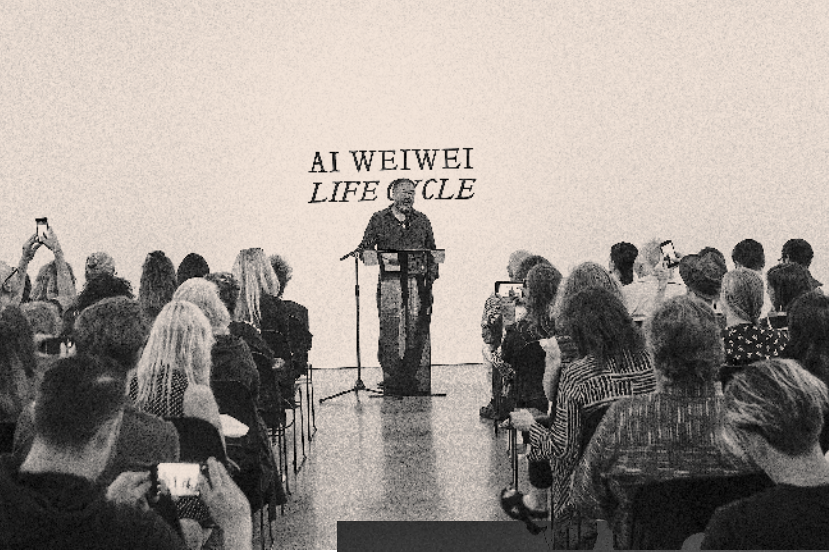
"I'm completely lost," Ai admits about his presence in Los Angeles, then apologizes if he doesn't "function that well" because he was "totally blacked out for two days" before our meeting. In addition to visiting a few casinos in the Greater L.A. area, Ai took a temporary break from the reality of his daunting work schedule—over the past few years he's traveled to 40 refugee camps in 23 countries to bear witness to the global refugee crisis for his epic Oscar-shortlisted documentary *Human Flow*; placed 100 border-fence sculptures throughout the five-boroughs of New York City for a massive public art installation called *Good Fences Makes Good Neighbors*; and prepared for his first solo exhibitions in Los Angeles at the Marciano foundation, the debut of the 15,000-square-foot gallery of former MOCA director Jeffrey Deitch, and the new UTA Artist Space in Beverly Hills, which Ai designed—to indulge in a decidedly Angeleno experience: frequenting a weed dispensary.

"We were eating at a Korean restaurant and it was right around the corner," recalls Ai, with a laugh. "My friend found it on Google Maps. It was funny. This shop with no windows. There was this guy pretending to be a cop. I was like, 'Wow, everything is here.' So many products, so much candy and soft drinks. So I got some of them, but it was so strong. I have no culture of that. Hopefully this interview is still right."

Text by Michael Slenske / Photography by Sam Frost

Ai Weiwei in Los Angeles,
September 26, 2018.





The Marciano Art Foundation is currently exhibiting three Ai Weiwei installations: *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), made up of 50 million hand-painted porcelain husks; *Spouts* (2015), comprised of thousands of teapot spouts; and *Life Cycle* (2018), a bamboo-and-silk sculpture depicting refugees in a lifeboat surrounded by deities. Top left: Ai Weiwei at the September 27 press preview.



Like some kind of perpetual-motion dignity, traveling with (and into) the closest facsimile to a White House press pool in the international art world, Ai has no choice but to be right, or at least present. His schedule insists that he is always in the moment, whatever that moment might bring. Oftentimes it's just people stopping him on the street, be they collectors, fans, well-wishers or just curious citizens wondering: Who is this energetic bulldog of a man constantly taking selfies?

Waiting for Ai after this sit-down are a handful of photographers from various print publications. They're lighting vignettes for drive-by portrait sessions—Ai, with a publicist minder constantly watching the clock, will spend about 15 minutes posing for each camera—on the mezzanine and in the lobby while a CNN camera crew shoots B-roll in the foundation's main hall Theater Gallery. There Ai and a team of assistants have installed three epic sculptural installations: *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), *Spouts* (2015) and *Life Cycle* (2018), which are respectively comprised of 50 million hand-painted porcelain husks (or half of his jaw-dropping 2010 Turbine Hall installation at the Tate Modern in London) made by 1,600 artisans in Jingdezhen; thousands of teapot spouts dating back to the Song dynasty; and the last piece shipped from his Beijing studio before the Chinese government bulldozed it in August—a stunning reproduction, sort of an analog hologram that dematerializes before your eyes, of a 2017 PVC sculpture, *Laws of the Journey*, depicting refugees on a lifeboat.

Hewn from bamboo and silk by Shandong province kite-makers, who employ a craft alive since the 14th century, *Life Cycle* recreates a refugee lifeboat surrounded by various deities, middle-finger gestures and references to Ai's art-history icons like Duchamp's final work, *Étant donnés*, floating above or casting shadows against the walls. The addition of refugee quotes from Homer to Zadie Smith prompted *Times* critic Christopher Knight to write: "The work feels, if not exasperated, certainly argumentative. The quotations are like academic footnotes, as if such are needed. For all its heartfelt compassion, the sculpture doesn't carry the quiet, stately power of *Sunflower Seeds* and *Spouts*." Still, taken in

total, it's a knockout effect that is further magnified by the Deitch effort.

"I think Ai Weiwei is thinking about what is next—he's looking at cities, he's looking at people, and I think one of the thing he's looking at is the diversity of people," says Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where Ai unveiled *The Zodiac Project*, his first public artwork featuring twelve bronzes of animal heads representing the Chinese Zodiac symbols, which date back to 1750 and once adorned the fountain at the Old Summer Palace in Beijing until a century later, when Anglo-French troops looted them during the Second Opium War. LACMA first exhibited the piece in 2011, but Ai couldn't make that show, as he was under what would become a heavily

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surveilled four-year house arrest following an 81-day detention by Chinese authorities, who had just bulldozed his Shanghai studio.

"Los Angeles is a target in Ai's mind because it's a big, diverse, crazy city and he didn't get to see it when we showed his work here," adds Govan. "So this is a great intervention. I think it shows his interest in the diversity of Los Angeles, and Los Angeles has been receiving him really well. What I like about him is that he's got that unsuspected ambition. He's quiet, kind of funny, but there's huge ambition, and that feels a little like this place."

With a second studio demolished, Ai was actually looking at properties in L.A. for months until a collector friend located a space for him in upstate New York this summer. "There are very strong characters in Los Angeles, but we couldn't find a

location that I could use as both a residence and a studio," explains Ai, who also maintains a live-work studio inside a former East Berlin brewery. "You either find a place too wild or a place with no living conditions but nice studio space. I'm very familiar with New York. I don't want to go to the city, but outside the city it's okay."

In some respects, this move stateside represents a through-the-looking-glass moment for Ai Weiwei. He studied at the Parsons School of Design and lived in the East Village from 1981 to 1993. Lower Manhattan was where Ai wet his toes in the contemporary art world and met icons like Andy Warhol and Allen Ginsberg. But a lot has happened in the past three decades.

"I had one small show in a small gallery in New York in 1987," says Ai. "After that I gave up. I said it's not possible for me to survive in this kind of art world." He eventually went back to China, where he began making books and curating shows. He launched his architecture practice, FAKE Design, while studying antiquity and making a name for himself with political rants, musings on art and architecture, and investigations into humanitarian crises like the 2008 Sichuan earthquake on a blog that ran from 2006 until 2009. But after Ai covered the façade of the Hitler-commissioned Germanic art museum Haus der Kunst with 9,000 primary-colored backpacks spelling out a letter from a mother who lost a child in the quake (it read simply: "All I want is to let the world remember she had been living happily for seven years"), Chinese authorities pulled the plug on Ai's blog, the platform for the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, which had thus far uncovered more than 5,000 of the victims' names. "I never thought I would become an artist again," says Ai. "To me, to have that kind of profession is beyond anything I would never think."

But again, a lot can happen in 30 years. In the past decade alone Ai designed the Bird's Nest stadium (with Herzog & de Meuron) for the 2008 Olympics and the 2012 Serpentine Pavilion; conceived major exhibitions for the Royal Academy in London and Washington D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; and had his studio hand-straighten 150 tons of

steel rebar recovered from the Sichuan earthquake for a mountainous installation, *Straight*, at the 2013 Venice Biennale. He even made three music videos, including *Dumbass*, which spoofed his 81-day detention at the hands of Chinese authorities after his investigations into the doctored death tolls from the earthquake. Given all he's seen in the past six decades—Ai actually lived his early adolescent years with his family in a dugout trench after his father, the modernist Chinese poet Ai Qing, was accused of being a “rightist” and forced to clean public toilets in the hinterlands during the late 1950s—it's amazing he manages to cope with it all on a single-dosed candy and a few rounds of blackjack.

“He's not constrained by those inside art-world issues the way some other artists are,” says Jeffrey Deitch, admitting that his gallery basically ran a 24-hour opening (with 36 valets on hand) to accommodate the Weiwei wave with some degree of civility. “He's not strategic. It's basically if people are embracing him, he'll respond, and here he's responded to the three spaces that were proposed to him. There were many major artists at our opening and the Marciano opening. They know this is something important.”

In fact, Ai's import is such that countless Angeleno art stars and Hollywood heavyweights didn't just linger for hours at his trifecta of openings, they literally lined up to take selfies with him and read his quotes on Crisis (*History teaches us that at the beginning of the greatest tragedies was ignorance*), Borders (*I hate fences, any kind of fence. It stops people, it separates people, and it makes so many lives difficult*), Power (*I have no illusions about power, where there is power there is danger*), Displacement (*Only in the most extreme conditions do you see how broken this world is*) and Freedom (*Freedom is not an absolute condition but a result of resistance*) from his little blue book *Humanity* for an aggregating video piece at the UTA space.

“The critical mass of art and advanced culture is really here with artists, curators, galleries, museums, the Frieze art fair coming,” adds Deitch. “And for one of the great artists of the world to be here and doing something on this level of ambition, this is very exciting

for Los Angeles.” Deitch immediately thought to open his massive Frank Gehry-designed space in Hollywood—formerly a warehouse for film lighting equipment—with Ai because he knew he could “handle a space of this scale” with iconic works like five minimalist cubes (including one made from a ton of compressed Pu'er tea, another of two tons of cast crystal, and another of three tons of marble); *Stools*, a vast sculptural landscape—or pointillist sea of humanity—comprised of nearly 6,000 hand-joined stools collected by the artist dating back to the Ming dynasty; and a dozen “paintings” made from thousands of Legos that feature the twelve symbols of the Chinese zodiac (a work that references and merges *The Zodiac Project* and Ai's eight-year-long *Study of Perspective* photo series of power struc-

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tures like the White House, Eiffel Tower and Tiananmen Square interrupted by the artist's raised middle finger). “I think he's showing this ambitious way for presenting your work as an artist and just taking on the town,” says Deitch. “And I hope it will be inspiring to other artists to think big, go all the way.”

For Ai Weiwei there are no half-measures, and if that throws down a gauntlet for other artists on their home turf, so be it. “Today, if I count, I have over one hundred solo exhibitions, which could be higher than anybody, and over four hundred group shows, but not one of them did we initiate” says Ai. “It's always been through friends.” He was slightly cynical about the prospects of showing in Los Angeles until Deitch, who has known the artist for more than 15 years, made him an offer on the heels of seeing *Stools* during a 2016 visit to the artist's Berlin Stu-

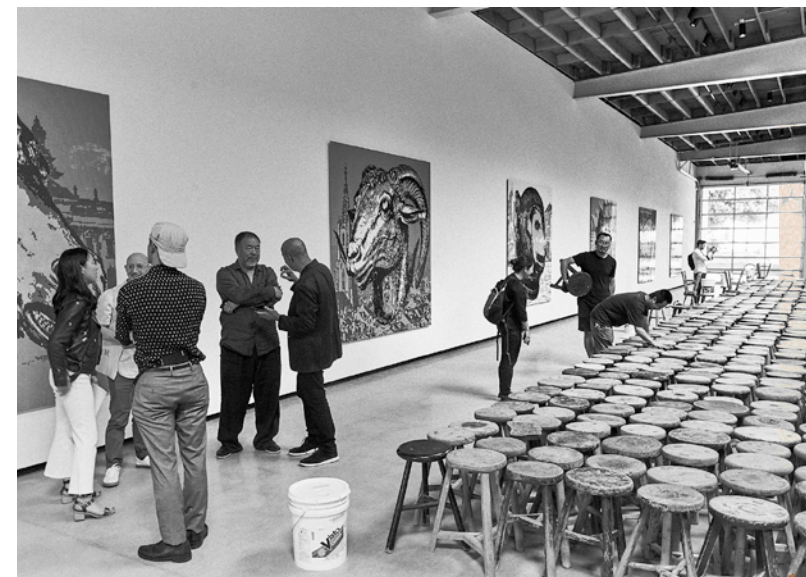
dio. (In 2016, at his SoHo gallery, Deitch exhibited Weiwei's *Laundromat* installation, featuring the laundered, and once buried, clothes and thousands of photos of Syrian refugees.) “Here, we wanted to have one spectacular work taking advantage of the dimensions of the space where people would come in and be amazed,” says Deitch.

Amazing in a lone museum-sized gallery space, however, is just not that amazing to Ai. “Once I show in a place, one location seems like it's not enough,” says the artist without a hint of bragadocio. “It's like you're a boxer and you only fight for two rounds. I want to be beaten, I want to see the spew of the blood, otherwise I don't feel that much. It's basically very selfish.”

Where other artists of Ai's stature might be tempted to take it easy in his position—buy houses, cars, collect art, open a private museum—he's not happy until he's mentally and physically exhausted from work. *Exhausted* is a word he uses with frequency and seems to equate with some sense of liberation. The last time we spoke he couldn't say enough about his first “vacation” with his family to the Greek island of Lesbos, a location chosen so he could get a firsthand look at the refugee crisis. That fateful trip inspired *Human Flow*.

The week he arrived in L.A., CNN was reporting that 130 children detained at the southern border of the United States might never be reunited with their families. Still, Ai was optimistic. “I think the situation is pretty dark, but of course there is always light, and when it's darker the light should be brighter,” he says. “We've lost control to politicians, to this diplomatic movement bringing more hatred, becoming more narrow-minded. So since the liberals are not really liberal, they're just losing ground in defending the very basic values, and that's a problem that will continue—we're just one step deeper in the shithole. But certainly we realize the situation now.”

In other words, in the Trump era it's easy for the theater of the absurd to seem like everyday fare. Case in point, as Ai walked onstage for his LACMA talk, the standing-room-only crowd (including Frank Gehry, Will Ferrell and 125 overflow attendees who watched on a movie



The Jeffrey Deitch gallery is showcasing Ai Weiwei's *Stools* (2013), made from nearly 6,000 hand-joined stools collected by the artist and dating back to the Ming dynasty, and Lego “paintings” from the artist's *Zodiac* series. Right: A selfie from Ai Weiwei's Instagram feed features the artist with Jeffrey Deitch and Judy Chicago at the opening on September 29.



aiww • Following
aerykwilliams 🍌
zara_ellexi Trifecta!!!
tashakubesh Hi Judy! ;)
caryl_church Yes
donegandonegan 🍌



On September 28 Ai Weiwei spoke at LACMA, and on October 1 he appeared at the press preview of his *Cao/Humanity* exhibit at the UTA Artists Space. Top left: The artist chats with Jeffrey Deitch at LACMA. Bottom left: Ai Weiwei's Instagram selfie with architect Frank Gehry.

screen in an auxiliary space below the Bing Theater) laughed at the *Dumbass* video playing on the video screen in the background. While it is slightly satirical, and while Ai cracks a number of jokes throughout his talk with Michael Govan—ribbing Gehry that his design for Deitch wasn’t like any of his other buildings, and for that reason he really liked it—it becomes easy to forget that two years prior to his detention, Ai was beaten so badly in a hotel room by police as he was about to testify on behalf of a fellow earthquake researcher that he received emergency surgery for a brain hemorrhage at a Munich hospital just before his Haus der Kunst opening.

“He has celebrity status in a very different way,” says Govan. “It’s not from being in movies, it’s from being in prison and surviving and being tough and speaking his mind and having a moral compass and all those other things. That’s the cool way to be a celebrity.”

But what does being a celebrity—or having other celebrities like Ferrell, who read from *Humanity* (“Humans do not rule the universe, we are temporary passengers”) wearing a rainbow-striped blazer outside the VIP party in LACMA’s Pavilion for Japanese Art before the talk at the Bing—really mean when Ai informs me that there are now 68.5 million displaced people in the world, up from 65 million since we spoke last fall.

“We’re in a deep struggle,” says Ai. “Art is always above the reality, but it cannot be detached. It always relates to humans’ deepest sorrow, otherwise there is no literature, art and poetry.” Take the numerous bamboo and silk renderings of the deities and mythic creatures from the *Shanhaijing*, or *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which Ai installed above and around the refugee raft in the *Life Cycle* installation at the Marciano. On one hand the *Classic* is China’s ur-geo-cultural text, with vivid mythologies of hundreds of geographical landmarks and fantastical creatures. On the other hand, depending on how you view such a heavily edited source material in this hyper-partisan moment, you might also see the *Classic* (and Ai’s translations of it) as somewhere between the Bible and “fake news.”

“Yes, it’s good you put these two words together: *Bible* and *fake news*,” Ai notes. “You have to have humor to look at things like that. One hundred years from now they will look at us to see how ridiculous circumstances can happen, like that time nations would have nuclear bombs to destroy the whole universe one hundred times over. What is the intention? How are they going to use it? Why don’t they give it up? These are questions everyone should ask themselves when they wake up, when they put their children to bed, even just for a moment. Why are those nuclear bombs being held by the United States, China and Russia? It’s a really ugly game. We’ve given up the fundamental beliefs of how these nations were founded: human rights, everyone created equal. If those things are still an argument, it means we are not that far from a barbarian society, we’re still quite bloody and primitive in our politics.”



It doesn’t matter how you feel, it’s total emptiness. I have several very close associate friends who passed away, and I kind of feel that maybe that’s something to do with me.” He pauses between thoughts. “I start to feel strangely. We were so close, and then suddenly they just disappeared. So who’s next? It gave me a sense of urgency to see life is ephemeral—it’s very short, unpredictable.”

In the face of that unpredictability, that fragility, Ai once again raised his middle finger—for the iPhones of hundreds of fans on the street outside the UTA opening, and inside through a cast-glass sculpture of an arm from shoulder to extended digit; on custom wallpaper printed with spiraling vortexes of flipped birds; and in a small patch of “grass” pieced together with hexagonal marble tiles sprouting blades that embody the other meaning of *Cao*—at the establishment for the displaced, the discarded and the deceased.

An hour and a half before last call at the UTA opening, Ai Weiwei leaves his final party in L.A.—at least for now—so he can hop an early flight to São Paulo, for his biggest solo show to date. It’s somehow fitting that this city-wide assault transpires during Brazil’s presidential race, in a time when the leading candidate (now president-elect) is a far-right nationalist in the mold of Trump, who famously called refugees “the scum of the earth.” If that weren’t ironic enough, the day after Ai leaves L.A.,

Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the United States Supreme Court, which likely won’t be a boon to the refugee crisis either. Nor will the State Department’s reduction in refugees admitted into this country.

So the question remains: Why, after all this, does Ai keep going ... and going ... and going? Even when he tells me he’s “quite exhausted” from it all? To get some better understanding, I read from Action, the final chapter in *Humanity*, Ai’s call to arms for every citizen from every nation ignoring the countless humanitarian crises around the world while wrapped inside the comfort of our smartphones and dumbed-down politics. “I don’t need anything,” Ai explains of himself. “I just want to burn myself out. It’s life—you better use it.” As for the rest of us? “If you can, you have to help.” •