



# LET IT

# FLOW

After four years of house arrest in Beijing, **Ai Weiwei** hit the road to document the world's refugee crisis — from Iraq to Burma to Mexico — through an epic series of installations and a harrowing documentary that may be his most ambitious work to date.

**BY MICHAEL SLENSKE**

Ai Weiwei in Lesbos, Greece, during the filming of *Human Flow*.



When Ai Weiwei got his passport reinstated in the summer of 2015—four years after the Chinese government bulldozed his Shanghai studio and slapped him with an 81-day secret detention—he left his northeastern Beijing HQ and began a new chapter, at the age of 58, as an expat with a studio in the cellars of a former brewery in East Berlin. In many ways Prenzlauer Berg offered a familiar mise-en-scène to the setting of his salad days in the East Village, where Ai spent a decade (from 1983 to 1993) documenting the artist community and his every conceptualist notion—be it nude selfies in his apartment or drinks with Allen Ginsberg—in what ultimately became known as the *New York Photographs*.

“It turned out later those photos were very interesting because they record a so-called meaningless life,” says Ai, laughing. “That’s a good title for a book.”

While that title might have applied three decades ago, when Ai still had trouble exhibiting his work around town, it’s a harder sell circa 2017. The man who left behind the scenesters of lower Manhattan to raise a middle finger to global power structures—figuratively, and then quite literally, in his eight-year photo series *Study of Perspective*—has arguably become the world’s most famous living conceptual artist by repeatedly using his broad platform (via sculpture, architecture, film, blogging, social media and activism) to champion the causes of human dignity and free expression at the cost of his own freedom, safety and livelihood.

“I would never see my father concerned about material life no matter how bad his life was. For years we didn’t have any nutrition, we really lived a bottom life, but still I can hear him telling me stories about Rodin, about the Impressionists, about the Roman empire, so I can see even the harshest political dictator could not touch his heart,” explains Ai, who was not even a year old when he was forced into exile along with his father, the modernist Chinese poet Ai Qing who was accused of being a “rightist” in 1958 and later forced to clean public toilets during the Cultural Revolution while his family lived in a trench. “That gave me strong courage and confidence in defending those very essential rights.”

“He is one of a very rare group of artists who takes on this moral mantle. It’s something [we see] when we look at artists of the past we admire, whether it’s [Théodore] Géricault painting *The Raft of the Medusa* or Bob Dylan, and you do it by putting yourself out front like this without fear,” says Jeffrey Deitch, who has been friends with Ai for 15 years and fondly recalls a visit to the artist’s Beijing studio during his detention. “They built a building next to him as a giant listening post and every day he would put flowers in front of one of the cameras.”

“My duty by calling myself artist is to really redefine our humanity and our freedom of speech and our basic rights in a contemporary language related to our daily life,” says Ai, his eyes sagging under the weight of a year spent traveling from location to location—his every movement scheduled almost to the minute—to film *Human Flow*, his epic 140-minute documentary released last month that tracks the world refugee crises across 40 camps and 23 countries. The film (and a string of exhibitions from Europe to New York serving as tactile feedback loops) may represent his most ambitious work to date, but you wouldn’t know it to speak with Ai, who is just as comfortable talking about his cats—all 42, including two who jumped out of his third floor Berlin apartment and survived—as he is about the impulses behind his latest multimedia spectacle.

Sportily dressed in a sheer white windbreaker, a plain white tee, tennis shoes and loose fitting periwinkle pants, he leisurely sips a coffee and scrolls his phone on a hazy fall afternoon in Los Angeles. His head is recently shaved, but his beard is bushy—just as they were in the film, which opens with a hypnotic Misrachian drone aerial of an overcrowded boat of refugees adrift on the Aegean Sea. From there, it dives knee-deep into the mud, rain and filth of these refugee camps, offering a wide-angle, disorienting immersion into the non sequitur existence of refugees. The film flips the script on the popular war adage: in the camps it’s months of terror punctuated by moments of boredom.

“They are casualties of globalization, some kind of warfare designed by someone from very far away,” says Ai. “They just see the bomb coming down and their relative is killed and probably that’s the only image they have, just one image, because there is not enough education and information about what is really going on.”



Weiwei's *Gilded Cage*, 2017, on view as part of the exhibition "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors" in New York City.



"I thought it was too much when I first got involved. But even if we feel this, those people are still in those desperate situations at the borders."

—Ai Weiwei

While early critics have wavered between labeling the film “a visual tone poem that proves both epic and highly human” and “just another famous person’s endorsement of the latest humanitarian bandwagon” it actually exists somewhere between these poles. But those looking for a (middle) finger-pointing polemic are missing the point.

“Every project, I have to defend my position,” says Ai. “I often say art is not the end but the beginning.”

The beginning, as it were, started with the most unbelievable Christmas revelation two years ago, when Ai told his girlfriend and son he wanted to go on a holiday in Lesbos. “They said, ‘Where is Lesbos?’ I said, ‘You know, the Greek island from all the philosophy and mythology and poetry.’” recalls Ai. “I’ve never had a vacation in my lifetime, so they were surprised when this guy says he wants to go on one.”

Of course, Ai had ulterior motives for this Greek sojourn. A year prior, when he was still in self-detention in Beijing, the Ruya Foundation, an Iraqi arts and culture NGO, launched a campaign to provide drawing materials to the refugees of northern Iraq’s Camp Shariya and Camp Baharka. Within a week they collected more than 500 submissions—including poems, prose, and works on paper depicting everything from tank-to-aircraft assaults to Mosul during a Yazidi festival pre-ISIS—and gave a selection to Ai to curate for *Traces of Survival*, a monograph that would be launched at the Iraqi Pavilion during the 2015 Venice Biennale.

“I looked at those drawings from the Iraqi camp and I was quite impressed. They are so innocent and naive, but telling the story of how people have been killed, what kind of life they had before and it was very beautiful,” says Ai. “So I did this selection but I made one condition very clear. I said, ‘I cannot do something once. I have to go there.’”

Without the ability to travel himself, Ai sent two assistants who conducted hundreds of interviews (and made photographic portraits) with the Shariya refugees. Despite his own experiences as a child refugee with his father in the Heilongjiang and Xinjiang provinces, by the time Ai got to Germany he had all but forgotten about the project, until a doctor friend mentioned that she was treating Syrian refugees at the Tempelhof Airport settlement.

“At the beginning we didn’t know we were making



Refugees, captured in *Human Flow*, walking in Greece near the brutal Idomeni camp.



a film. We have a tradition of making recordings of everything we do since the 1980s,” says Ai, who snaps an iPhone shot of me at the outset of our interview, which he immediately posts to Instagram, almost to prove this point. Instead of relaxing with a novel on the shores of Molyvos, Ai brought thousands of Olafur Eliasson’s solar-powered Little Sun lamps and distributed them to the Syrian refugees on New Year’s Day. “We wanted to make sure that on New Year’s Eve they had some lights in their little tents. It’s a very harsh situation. But those children, they loved it. The second day I was there I said, ‘I can have a studio anywhere, this is the intensity and the feeling I need to get.’”

Over the next two years that intensity took Ai and a crew of two dozen across the globe to document the vantages and victims of the refugee crisis: trading passports with a man at Greece’s hellish Idomeni camp along the Macedonia border; cutting a man’s hair in a Tijuana shantytown overlooking the ICE agents “protecting” Southern California from its southern neighbors; or simply cooking for people, comforting a woman who vomited while telling the story of her journey, or playing with children who flock to his drone and handheld cameras with smiles despite the horrors of their living conditions.

“I thought it was too much when I first got involved,” says Ai. “But even if we feel this, those people are still in those desperate situations at the borders.”

While he was shooting last year, 22 million people registered as refugees, and their displacement now averages 26 years, most of which is spent without access to regular sources of food, water, shelter, employment, or education, leaving generations of lost children to simply make due with the inhospitable climes of the Gaza Strip or Kenya’s Dadaab camp.

To fully reinforce what he’s witnessed, Ai and his team have been busy making immersive art installations across the globe, including a 200-foot inflatable raft holding 258 rubber refugee figures that hovered over the lobby of Prague’s National Gallery, and thousands of life vests gathered from Lesbos that they wrapped around the facades of Berlin’s Konzerthaus and Copenhagen’s Kunsthall Charlottenborg. He even turned Deitch’s Soho gallery into a high-gloss faux boutique that some passersby mistook for an outlet store until the thousands of accompanying documentary photos revealed the owners of these garments to be Idomeni refugees.

“There were thousands of refugees in this camp with no sewage, no running water, and the Greek government decided they were going to close the camp. Ai Weiwei’s team happened to be there when the bulldozers were burying the clothing and brought it back to the Berlin studio. These are clothes people had worn through several months of travails, so you could imagine what they were like. This was a devotional act of giving respect back to these people by perfectly laundering their clothes,” says Deitch. “People would emerge from the show in tears. You realize this is the professional class of Syria—teachers, students, doctors, engineers—these are the refugees and it was a very meaningful thing for me to see and understand better. It was this gesture of giving dignity to these people who in a way are non-persons with no valid passport, no place to live, no ability to get a job, and it’s a very important story to tell now.”

As is the case with all Ai Weiwei productions, the refugee work

wasn’t free from scandal. When a photographer for *India Today* shot Ai on the beaches of Lesbos recreating the same lifeless pose as Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Kurdish Syrian boy who drowned on September 2, 2015 with his mother and brother and washed up on the rocky shores of Bodrum, Turkey—one of 3,600 victims who died crossing the Mediterranean that year—critics were outraged.

“I think that shows a lot about our society and the fakeness of our moral judgment,” says Ai. “We have thousands of people dying every day and people killed with drones during their sleep and we pretend nothing is happening.”

He also had to wade into the controversy surrounding the Guggenheim’s “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World” survey, whose film section he curated, and defended the works removed by the museum by saying, “When an art institution cannot exercise its right for freedom of speech, that is tragic for a modern society.” Ai is now hoping to engage in a more productive discussion with “Good Fences Makes Good Neighbors.” Though it’s already been met with some NIMBY backlash, the multi-site public art exhibition (up through February 11) is the widest-ranging project executed by Public Art Fund in its 40-year run. Bringing together 100 fence sculptures—fabricated in Europe, China and New York—the project will test the limits of the

“As individuals we are the power. Most people their education or life experience tells them they are not the power, but that kind of notion kills humanity.”

—Ai Weiwei

age-old koan popularized by Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” across the five boroughs via interventions like an infinity mirrored cage filling the Washington Square Arch, a gilded one welcoming visitors to Central Park and more utilitarian cordons wrapping the tops of Essex Street Market, the Unisphere at Flushing Meadows and various bus stops throughout the city.

“He’s very carefully inviting or engaging the public. There’s this ability he has to be both generous and profound at the same time and raise really difficult and challenging issues, and that’s just a very rare thing to be able to do successfully,” says Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of Public Art Fund. “It’s interesting just walking around with him in different parts of the city where people recognize and respond to him, and they are not necessarily Chelsea gallery-goers. He occupies this unique position where he’s at the pinnacle of the contemporary art world as well as being an internationally recognized human rights advocate, activist and political dissident, so he reaches beyond any one world and really connects with people in many different ways.”

While some might hope for an easy top-down policy prescriptive to emerge from this two-years-in-the-making effort, Ai would rather his audience simply recognize, “If you build walls, build boundaries, those divide people, cut off communication and build hatred. That’s why we’re living in a world that has much less tolerance and compassion.” He says this before snapping one more shot, this time of the two of us on my phone. “For five years I lived with my father underground and if you’re born in the darkness you think the world is just darkness. As individuals we are the power. Most people their education or life experience tells them they are not the power, but that kind of notion kills humanity.”



Weiwei's installation Arch in Washington Square Park.

PHOTO BY ALEXANDER SCHULTE FOR ARTIST STUDIO OF AI WEIWEI