Ai Weiwei: Art, Film, and Resistance on the Trans/National Stage

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Introduction

In the past decade, Ai Weiwei has burst out from his limited role of a Chinese artist to become an artist-activist who has “gone global.” Ai first gained international fame as the consultant for Beijing’s “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium, which was designed by the Swiss architectural firm Herzog and de Meuron. Just before the 2008 Olympics, however, Ai became infamous for denouncing the stadium as China’s “fake smile” to the world. In October 2010, Ai fascinated the art world with his Sunflower Seeds exhibit at London’s Tate Modern art gallery; before the exhibit closed in May 2011, Ai became a global political figure when the Chinese government illegally detained him for eighty-one days. After years of post-detention harassment by China’s party-state, in 2015 Ai moved into self-imposed exile first in Germany and now in the United Kingdom, where he continues to produce compelling art—and engage in political activism.

This chapter charts Ai’s transition from being a “Chinese” artist to be a global artist, and how this shapes his relationship with power and resistance. In China, Ai worked as a patriotic Chinese dissident to criticize the illegitimate power of the corrupt Communist party-state. After he went into exile in Europe, Ai refocused on the global issue of refugees, especially in his film Human Flow (2017). In this way, he expanded from a critique of China’s domestic oppression to creatively address the global problem of refugees. Strangely, though, one of the main beneficiaries of the globalization of Ai Weiwei’s work has been China’s party-state: for whatever reason, it is no longer the main target of
his art-activism. Before examining Ai's art and films, the essay first will
discuss theories of power and resistance, and visual IR methods.

**Power/Resistance and Visibility/Visuality**

How are we to understand the role of still and moving images in global
politics: what do they mean, and what can they do? Can visual art and
film serve as a site of resistance to power? State and corporate power
certainly have vast resources to govern our views of culture, society, and
politics. But such “cultural governance” does not exhaust political possi-
bility, because there are opportunities for resistance. Resistance here does
not necessarily take place in political institutions (e.g. political parties at
home and international organizations abroad), but also can emerge
through other modalities of expression—films, journals, diaries, novels,
and counter-historical narratives—that “challenge the state’s coherence-
producing writing performances” (Shapiro 2004: 49).

One way to figure the resistance capacity of visual images is to frame
discussion in terms of the “CNN-Effect,” where images drive policy: i.e.
how the spectacle of suffering and vulnerable people, displayed first on 24-
hour cable news programs and now on popular YouTube and social
media sites, is able to mobilize the viewing public—and ultimately their
political leaders—to respond to injustice (Strobel 1996). Indeed, in the
twenty-first century you need a visual image to transform local political
violence into a global political event (Andersen 2015: 260). Others argue
that the CNN-Effect is a ruse: rather than showing the democratizing
power of widely distributed topical images, such visual campaigns are
evidence of the elite manipulation of our emotions (Robinson 2002).

The argument about the impact of art on politics follows similar contours.
Alex Danchev (2016: 91) takes an emancipatory view of art/politics:
“contrary to popular belief, it is given to artists, not politicians, to create a
new world order.” On the other hand, Walter Benjamin (1968: 241)
famously concludes that “[f]ascism is the introduction of aesthetics into
political life,” and thus “[a]ll efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate
in one thing: war.” While the iconoclastic approach (seen in Benjamin’s
comment) employs the hermeneutics of suspicion to deconstruct ideo-
logical meaning, active witnessing (seen in Danchev’s comment) is better
explained in terms of an appreciation of how affect-work can provoke communities of sense that complicate what can (and cannot) be seen, said, thought, and done (Rancière 2004).

The visibility/visuality dynamic develops this approach to analysis of the global politics of visual art and film (Callahan 2020). The “visibility strategy” examines the meaning of art by considering how, as a “social construction of the visual,” art can resist oppression through witnessing. On the other hand, the visuality strategy explores how art can provoke new affective communities through a “visual provocation of the social”—and of the global (see Mitchell 2005: 343ff.). Visual art and film as a mode of resistance here works in complementary ways: on the one hand it acts ideologically as a witness to atrocities in order to speak truth to power, while on the other it works affectively to creatively excite new affective communities of sense (Rancière 2004; Hutchison 2016; Callahan 2020).

**Ai as a Chinese Artist-Activist**

Ai Weiwei is famous for crossing boundaries, especially the boundary between art and politics. His activities explore the limits of what is acceptable in China both in terms of political action and aesthetic taste: in 2000 he coorganized an exhibit in Shanghai called *Fuck Off* (Hua et al. 2000), and more recently his nude photos were denounced as pornography both by the police and in the court of public opinion. He thus is a polarizing figure among both artistic and nonartistic audiences who delights in making people—both friends and enemies—feel uncomfortable. Ai’s 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”.1 After Ai was illegally detained in April 2011, a critic in one of China’s official newspapers complained that Ai’s art “confounds the boundary between the artistic and the political; in fact, he uses it to engage in political activities” (Liu 2011).

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1  Ai Weiwei, interview with the author in Beijing, May 27, 2013.
However, Ai’s work as an activist-artist is not noteworthy because it is “new.” His critique of China’s politics and society is actually part of a broad and ongoing debate about the moral crisis that China faces after four decades of economic reform and opening. In other words, China’s New Left, traditionalists, and liberals are all worried about the “values crisis” presented by what they call China’s new “money-worship” society (see Callahan 2013). Intellectuals from across the political spectrum thus are engaged in what Chinese call “patriotic worrying” (youhuan yishi); they feel that it is their job to ponder the fate of the nation, and to find the correct formula to solve China’s problems (Davies 2007).

Ai’s contribution to this debate is straightforward: he feels that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a corrupt authoritarian state and that the country can only be saved if the government respects freedom of expression and the rule of law. As he wrote in his blog:

“Return basic rights to the people, endow society with basic dignity, and only then can we have confidence and take responsibility, and thus face our collective difficulties. Only rule of law can make the game equal, and only when it is equal can people’s participation possibly be extraordinary.” (Ai 2011a: 181f.)

Here Ai conceives of politics as a Manichean struggle of good versus evil, wherein the heroic dissident fights the cruel state (see Kraus 2004: 1).

Ai thus shares many political values with Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, who also questioned Beijing’s authoritarian rule: in his co-authored “Charter ’08” manifesto, Liu (2012: 301) argued that the Chinese people need to “embrace universal human values, join the mainstream of civilized nations, and build a democratic system.” Yet Ai’s style and tactics are quite different. Liu acted as a classic dissident. The Charter ’08 manifesto, which landed Liu in jail for “state subversion,” reads like a five-year plan for rational democratic reform in China. Ai, however, takes a different approach to resistance that blurs art, life, politics, and activism. Rather than writing earnest essays that demand rational governance, Ai appeals to people’s outrage, mocks the government, and works primarily through the internet to witness and expose the party-state’s oppression in new and interesting ways.

2 Ai Weiwei, interview with the author in Beijing, May 27, 2013.
This often takes the form of an ideological campaign for government transparency and accountability that is expressed through visual art (Strafella and Berg 2015). Although Ai has always been political in the sense of demanding freedom of expression, he was moved to intervene more directly in politics by China’s Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 (see Sorace 2014). Noticing that public schools often suffered more damage than surrounding buildings, many people felt that the schools collapsed because of substandard construction stemming from official corruption. After the government refused to investigate, Ai enlisted hundreds of volunteers in what he called a “Public Citizen Investigation Project” to expose the combination of state and private corruption that had produced this tragedy.3

Eventually the citizens’ investigation compiled and published a list of the names of the 5,212 children who were killed in the earthquake. Again jamming the line between art and politics, Ai turned this tragedy into visual art (Marlow and Tancock 2015: 136–143). The Wall of Names, which lists in Chinese and English the name, gender, age, and school of each of the victims was exhibited as an artwork. Ai’s massive mosaic Remembering (2009), exhibited at Munich’s Haus der Kunst, lined up nine thousand school bags to spell out one mother’s reaction to her daughter’s death: “She lived happily on this earth for seven years.” Ai also straightened out 150 tons of twisted steel rebar that had been salvaged from the Wenchuan ruins, which was exhibited in orderly piles as “Straight” at the 2013 Venice Art Biennale (Marlow and Tancock 2015: 128–141). Indeed, Ai’s first films came out of the collaborative experience of the “Public Citizen Investigation Project” (Sniadecki 2011). Ai thus uses art to highlight the party-state’s lack of accountability; this includes the literal counting of dead children. To fight the crookedness of official corruption that led to the collapsed school buildings, Ai straightened out the mangled rebar taken from the ruins of those buildings.

Through his nude photography, Ai also promotes witnessing, visibility, and transparency in a more playful way that blends art, politics, and life. Many Chinese artists and intellectuals visited Ai during his New York sojourn (1981–1993). At this time, he always carried a camera, and often persuaded his friends to pose nude in public with him: Ai and Yan Li are

3 Ai Weiwei, interview with the author in Beijing, May 27, 2013.
smilingly nude in a now-iconic photo at the World Trade Center Plaza (1985) (Bei 2011). After his release from detention in 2011, Ai used nudity to poke fun at China’s political leadership. “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle” is a photograph of a naked Ai covering his genitals with a stuffed animal, which Ai posted on the Internet. Its title invokes the word-play (e’gao) used to resist the keyword-based online censorship of China’s Great Firewall: “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle” is a homophone for “Fuck your mother, Communist party central committee.” Ai also returned to his New York habits: in 2011 four activists wanted a photograph with Ai to commemorate their visit to his studio in Beijing. Ai suggested that they take off their clothes, and the result is a nude photograph of him with these four women, “One Tiger, Eight Breasts,” that was posted on the Internet. The police reacted by accusing Ai and his photographer of spreading pornography online, and then China’s netizens responded in support of free artistic expression by posting online naked photos of themselves (Branigan 2011). Like with the Citizen’s Investigation of accountability after the Wenchuan earthquake, here Ai brings together a diverse group of artists and activists to protest the party-state’s lack of transparency. To protest the opaqueness of the state, Ai witnesses its invisibility through the hypervisibility of nude photography.

Ai Weiwei’s eighty-one-day illegal detention also provoked activist art that targeted China’s party-state. Some of it is playful: Ai’s debut music video Dumbass is a foul-mouthed mockumentary about his time in detention (Branigan 2013). But other work is more serious: S.A.C.R.E.D. is a six-part installation of half-scale dioramas in iron boxes; it uses the themes of supper, accusers, cleansing, ritual, entropy, and doubt to reproduce the scene of Ai’s illegal detention in a cheap hotel room (see Marlow and Tancock 2015). This art work exemplifies both the invisibility of being held in secret detention and the hypervisibility of being under constant surveillance by a team of guards. The themes of nudity and surveillance are combined in “Cleansing,” which witnesses how Ai was forced to take a shower under the watchful gaze of two (fully clothed) guards (Marlow and Tancock 2015: 215). It also addresses issues of transparency at a structural level: in the art gallery, people can only see into S.A.C.R.E.D.’s six boxes through small, awkwardly placed holes;
hence viewers are turned into voyeurs who are complicit with China’s party-state.

Art, Exile, and Global Witnessing

Up until his illegal detention in 2011, Ai’s work focused almost entirely on China. His art and film, as we saw above, aimed to expose the oppression of the party-state. Ai’s art generally exhibits Chinese things to the world—one hundred million ceramic sunflower seeds in London, or thousands of children’s backpacks in Munich. However, after 2009, Ai more or less disappeared from the mainland’s Chinese-language media, which was restricted by the censorship regime from even criticizing his work. At the same time, Ai received support and praise from the artistic and activist communities outside China. After his release from detention, Ai was named one of Foreign Policy’s “100 Top Global Thinkers of 2011,” and he made the shortlist for Time magazine’s “Person of the Year 2011.” The coup de grace was when ArtReview chose Ai as the “most powerful artist in the world” (“Power 100” 2011). Still, even after his release in 2011, Ai was worn down by the strain of four years of quasi-house arrest, artistic and political censorship, and threats against his family.

This combination of push-and-pull factors finally motivated Ai to accept Germany’s offer to set up a studio in Berlin. Once the Chinese government returned his passport in 2015, Ai moved into self-imposed exile. But this European exile was not a totally new experience. Actually, Ai has spent most of his life like that. Soon after Ai was born in 1957, his family was sent into internal exile on the harsh borderlands of the PRC because Ai’s father, the famous Communist poet Ai Qing, had criticized Mao and the Communist Party. The family only returned to Beijing in 1976, as the Maoist period drew to a close.

After living in Beijing for five years, Ai was frustrated by the restrictions on artistic expression in China, and in 1981 he went to study in the United States. After dropping out of art school, Ai bummed around New York as an illegal alien: he did odd jobs and hung out with visiting Chinese artists, filmmakers, and poets, all the while shooting over ten thousand photographs and numerous films (Ai 2011b; Bei 2011). He returned to Beijing in 1993 to see his sick father, and was based in China
until 2015. Hence, Ai has only spent seventeen of his sixty-some years not in exile.

It is not strange, then, that Ai Weiwei made *Human Flow* (2017), a film about the current global crisis of the world’s sixty-five million refugees. Like with Ai’s art-activism in China, the message of *Human Flow* is extremely clear: we need to look beyond national borders and national interests to appreciate the refugee problem as a global issue of humanity that demands a global solution (see Ai 2017). Ai’s goal in this film is not simply to inform people about the inhumane conditions of refugees but also to provoke a new global activist community that would creatively do something to help refugees. As one of Ai’s colleagues explains, the film “reminds us that in this crisis, we have to look, we have to feel, we have to not accept the status quo and we have to change it” (Diane Weyerman in Ai 2017b). Ai likewise states that “[t]here is no language to describe this crisis. I am trying to see what is the role of civilization and human nature, how they treat these refugees, how they spread the most basic values and human dignity” (*ArtsBJ* 2017). In other words, the CNN-Effect of providing information for rational discussion of policy options is not enough; *Human Flow* engages active ethical witnessing beyond language, to creatively move people to act in new affective communities of sense.

To understand the global artistry of *Human Flow* it is helpful to see how it addresses the fluid situation of transnational migrants through the interplay of the local, the national, and the global, as well as the individual and the collective. *Human Flow* not only criticizes nationalism and territorial borders; it also aims to efface such borders in its presentation. Although people in the film are categorized according to their citizenship for bureaucratic reasons, *Human Flow* forces viewers to appreciate less national and more global identities, spaces, and experiences. While national police certainly are shown guarding national borders, most of the film presents the plight of migrants who are often a multinational or transnational group of travelers. Likewise, most of the expert testimony offered in the film is from people who work for the United Nations and transnational aid groups. Ai questions national boundaries by juxtaposing different geographical scales through the journey to twenty-three countries and over forty refugee camps: “At times during the film, the viewer may be disoriented, [and] not know which country or camp he or
she is in. Yet this sensation is integral to the film” (Andrew Cohen in Ai 2017b).

Even so, the film risks reproducing the hackneyed logic of a package holiday that overwhelms the audience. One reviewer felt that the film’s “patchwork construction can make it hard to determine exactly which particular crisis you’re in at any given moment. The colors of land, skin and sky are often all you have to go on” (Collin 2017). In other words, Human Flow is like a grand tour of suffering that merges many horrible experiences in ways that risk reaffirming the hierarchical division of a safe “here” in Euro-America from a dangerous “there” in refugee camps (Tzanelli 2017). Interestingly, because of its appeal to global humanity, there is not a clear Other or enemy in this film. It is certainly critical of European (and Western) policing, apathy, and complicity. But since the Westerns are the target audience, “the West” is not constructed as the Other to the refugee self. Indeed, Ai’s new country of residence—Germany, which let in over one million refugees in 2015 alone—comes off as a welcoming place.

Human Flow also addresses these artistic-activist issues through an individual and collective dynamic. The film starts off with an image of a boat rocking gently in the deep blue sea. Filmed from a drone far above and accompanied by evocative music, the scene is more beautiful than agonizing: the bright orange dots (that we later recognize as people in life jackets) look cute against the aquamarine canvas. It is only when the drone descends that we see the precarious position of the people in this overloaded boat. A police boat comes up alongside the refugee-filled vessel, and the refugees come ashore on the Greek island of Lesbos. At this point, Ai Weiwei appears, filming the scene with his smartphone. Next, we witness Ai offering hot tea and a reflector blanket to a tired and wet man who has come from Iraq (see fig. 1).
The cinematography of this opening scene is repeated numerous times in the film to visually depict a mixture of collectives and individuals, who are both general and specific, on the one hand, and abstract and material, on the other (see fig. 2). It is common in documentary films to choose an individual and follow that person on a journey, either to show his or her unique idiosyncrasies or to represent the general experience of a collective (see Lawrence 2020). Ai, however, explains that he didn’t want to choose between the faceless mass of the collective and the unique experience of the individual; his purpose was to “get more knowledge on a global scale. Not making a film about one family or one person, but global scale to see the humanity, the human flow” (Ai 2017b).
This appeal to the collective has echoes in Ai’s earlier artistic work: in the one hundred million porcelain Sunflower Seeds (London, 2010–11); in the 5,212 names on the Wall of Names of the Wenchuan earthquake victims (London, 2015); 150 tons of straightened rebar in “Straight” (Venice, 2013); and in the more than forty camps in twenty-three countries depicted in Human Flow. Many of the film’s sections begin with a drone’s-eye view, an establishing shot that shows wide landscapes and seascapes. Again, as the drone descends, the view shifts from the abstract to the material, from the aesthetic to the social, and from the collective to the individual. One scene starts far above an abstract pattern that evokes Islamic geometric designs; as it descends,
a refugee camp of orderly tents in the desert takes shape; then we see things moving around like ants; finally, we see these things emerge as people, including young children, who cheer on the drone as it hovers just above them. The transition from collective to individual, however, is incomplete: since the images are captured from above, we don’t clearly see specific people’s faces.

After these establishing shots, which highlight the shared experience of global humanity, the film offers a series of images of individuals. In addition to depicting how people encounter challenging situations, the film also shows them doing things in everyday life: cooking food; checking and charging mobile phones; and playing. The film thus employs a “pluralist” strategy that presents refugees not just in life-or-death crises but also as ordinary people who do ordinary things in daily life (see Bleiker and Kay 2007). Everyday life is also where Ai again enters Human Flow as a character: we see him grilling meat, getting a haircut, giving a haircut, and taking selfies with refugees. Here we are shown that refugees are just like “us” in Euro-America—and indeed could be us. In one scene, Ai offers to exchange passports and homes with a Syrian man in a camp: “Next time you are Ai Weiwei. Exchange tent for studio in Berlin. … I respect you.”

“Human Flow” thus ethically witnesses the migration crisis through an interesting mix of the visibility strategy and the visuality strategy. It makes visible the often invisible challenges faced by refugees, and it also is a film that aims to “do” something by provoking new relations in an audio-visual (re)construction of transnational communities of sense. This activism was seen both at the film’s world premiere at the Venice International Film Festival (2017), and its British/Irish premiere across 120 cinemas that was followed by a live interactive panel discussion with Ai Weiwei. “Human Flow” is a consciousness-raising and activity-provoking performance that is like an extended Public Service Announcement, complete with injunctions to do something: contact your Member of Parliament! Donate to charity organizations through this URL link! At the end of the panel discussion Ai Weiwei bowed to the ecstatic cheers of the various audiences, perhaps provoking new social-ordering and world-ordering.
At my university, I’ve screened “Human Flow” to students in class and to a diverse audience at a public event, and it provoked an ecstatic response in both groups. Indeed, one student told the class that seeing “Human Flow” in 2017 changed his life; it showed the power of artistic documentary films, and thus inspired him to study filmmaking as a mode of political activism. This exemplifies Alex Danchev’s (2016: 91) emancipatory view of art/politics: “contrary to popular belief, it is given to artists, not politicians, to create a new world order.”

For some, however, the film is problematic. Although Ai says that the purpose of the film is not to follow one family or one person, the film actually does follow Ai on his own personal journey of discovery. Whereas in his earlier work, Ai positioned himself as the rebel of Chinese art, he now presents himself as the Chinese savior of humanity (see Callahan 2014). Sometimes this presentation is compelling, but at other times it is like Marie Antoinette’s performance as a milkmaid at the Versailles dairy. Ai was criticized for an earlier refugee-themed photograph, whereby he appropriated the image of the toddler, Alan Kurdi, who was found dead on a Turkish beach in the summer of 2015, by lying down on the beach in a similar way (India Today 2016). While it is common to criticize Euro-Americans for appropriating the experience of people of color, here we have an example of the Chinese savior mentality, also known as the “Yellow Man’s Burden” (see Nyíri 2006). Although the lingering gaze of the camera can “humanize” suffering people, it also risks becoming a “colonial gaze” that exploits them (Fanon 2008). And, as mentioned above, the colossal scale of the film risks morphing the experience into a Grand Tour of dark travel (Tzanelli 2017).

This beautiful and agonizing film risks aestheticizing the suffering: the camera is fascinated with the bright orange life jackets, and the deep blue sea (Bradshaw 2017). Individual refugees are largely nameless and voiceless in similar ways to the “humanitarian” style of photography that targets Western audiences (Bleiker and Kay 2007). Visualizing refugees as masses of faceless people crammed onto a boat—rather than individuals with a face—is problematic politically and ethically. According to an article by Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison, and Xzarina Nicholson (2013: 413), this is a common strategy for dehumanizing refugees, treating them more as a security threat.
than as “a humanitarian crisis that involves grievable lives requiring compassion.”

Lastly, it seems odd that China is invisible in a film about the global refugee crisis. On the one hand, China is a major source of refugees in the world; on the other hand, China is one of the most antirefugee places in the world. According to an online poll, 97 percent of the Chinese public opposes receiving any refugees at all (Li 2018). Beijing is commonly criticized both for sending North Koreans back across the border to face certain punishment, and for not allowing dissidents, Uyghurs, and Tibetans leave the PRC. Ai actually mentions North Korea in one of the interviews promoting his film, but he does so only to criticize a “Western mentality”: “I’ve seen people who escape North Korea and cannot accept the Western lifestyle. Don’t take the Western lifestyle as the natural, absolute condition” (Ai 2017b). Interestingly, this criticism of Western hypocrisy chimes with the message promoted by the Chinese Communist Party’s Propaganda Department. This is not a one-off: in exile, Ai focuses his activism on global issues rather than on the Chinese party-state. For example, although he lived in Xinjiang for over twenty years, Ai has been relatively quiet about the PRC’s mass “reeducation” camps. Ai’s global resistance activities in exile are therefore still shaped by the party-state back in China. And, as mentioned above, Germany, Ai’s new home, also comes off looking pretty good in the film.

*Human Flow* thus shows how Ai Weiwei has followed the lead of China’s state-owned enterprises to “go global” (Shambaugh 2013). While many political dissidents become irrelevant in exile because they still focus on the authoritarian state back home, Ai has successfully recast both his art and his activism to adapt to his new European exile experience. Rather than being simply an individual artist creating individual works, Ai has expanded to work as a director who orchestrates artistic and cinematic works on an epic scale. The film is interesting because it works hard to provide objective facts for rational discussion at the same time as it provokes collective emotional experiences.
Conclusion

As a Chinese artist struggling against a Communist party-state, Ai Weiwei seems like an idiosyncratic case that does not explain much else. But Ai is interesting for a number of reasons. Living and working in China, America, Europe, and refugee camps has allowed him to creatively combine these experiences for art, film, and activism that is truly global. As a long-time exile who has felt the sharp boot of the party-state on his own body, Ai doesn't simply represent other people's suffering: his art demonstrates how his own oppression is also a collective experience shared by many inside and outside China. Ai's concern with accountability raises the important issue of how one can speak truth to power in an authoritarian state.

Ai's film *Human Flow* shows that he is not simply a “Chinese artist”: this creative juxtaposition of his personal refugee experience with those of a range of other refugees is an indication of his working hard to provide information about the horrible situation migrants face, while at the same time provoking a global form of resistance. Still, Ai's shift from a very visible resistance to the Chinese party-state to a global activism in which China is largely invisible shows how his resistance is still shaped by the global power of the People's Republic of China.

References


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