

ART INNOVATOR

# AI WEIWEI

2016

In 2011, the controversial artist was detained in Beijing and his passport was confiscated for four years by the Chinese government. This fall marks his triumphant return to New York City with two new gallery shows.

BY TONY PERROTTET  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NAN GOLDIN

**F**OR ONE OF THE WORLD'S highest-profile artists, Ai Weiwei himself could hardly be more difficult to find. His imagery regularly causes internet controversies, and his visage, framed by cropped hair and the scraggly beard of an ancient philosopher, is widely known thanks to innumerable selfies with personalities as diverse as Paris Hilton and Julian Assange. Yet his studio in Berlin, the city where he has lived since 2015, is hidden beneath a former brewery complex called Pfefferberg that escaped bombing in World War II. The only clue to the entrance, obscured by a black metal panel, is tiny white script over a letter slot reading *Human Flow UG*, the working title of the documentary film Ai is making on the international refugee crisis. When the door is buzzed open, two staircases lie in view, one going up, the other down, as in an M.C. Escher print. Eventually, one of the artist's production assistants leads bewildered visitors through sepulchral underground chambers with raw brick walls and arched ceilings once used to shelter kegs of beer.



**IN HIS CORNER**  
Ai Weiwei in his studio in Berlin, where his partner, Wang Fen, and son, Ai Lao, live. Ai was able to join them after his passport was returned by the Chinese government last year.

At one end is a yard where the roof has been removed to allow in natural light and fresh air. Here the blue floor tiles are painted with tiny seeds that echo one of Ai's best-known works, *Sunflower Seeds*, which filled the Turbine Hall of London's Tate Modern from fall 2010 to spring 2011 with 100 million hand-carved porcelain grains. In another chamber stands *Map of China*, a 3-D map of the country created from wood salvaged from destroyed Qing Dynasty temples. Despite the studio's vast space—around 32,000 square feet—there is strikingly little art on display, or at least what one might traditionally call art. Instead, a team of assistants is cleaning, photographing and archiving clothing once worn by Syrian refugees.

On the other side of the courtyard, the 59-year-old Ai is hunched over his laptop. Over the past seven years, Ai has become as renowned for his deft use of social media as for his artworks. "I never thought of myself seriously as a studio artist," he says, shrugging. "I am very used to working in hotel rooms and airports." This indifference to the studio is part of what makes Ai a quintessential 21st-century artist, says Melissa Chiu, director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. "For contemporary artists, the idea is foremost. Once you had to be a sculptor or a painter. That concept has been turned on its head—now artists have the idea first and then find the right medium to express it."

Ai's work might easily involve rubber lifeboats, stacks of bicycles or music videos. "He has no signature style," says Greg Hilty, curatorial director of

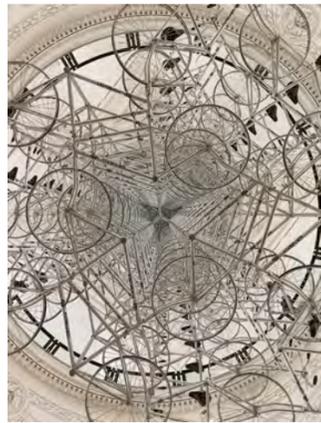
Lisson Gallery in London and New York, which represents Ai. He often employs ancient Chinese artistry in contemporary ways, such as in *Coca Cola Vase*, a Han Dynasty vase emblazoned with a version of the soft-drink logo, or *Grapes*, in which wooden Qing Dynasty stools are joined into a simple—and useless—starlike shape. But there have also been cheeky photographs of his middle finger raised to the giant portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square (inspiring one critic to describe him as a "scholar-crown") and the moving *Snake Ceiling*, featuring hundreds of backpacks bound together to create a giant serpent, evoking the over 5,000 children killed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China. In 2014, Ai exhibited *Trace*, a series of portraits of prisoners of conscience and political exiles made from Lego bricks in San Francisco's Alcatraz prison. And apart from his art, he has from his youngest days made his mark in documentary photography, experimental film and architecture. "There is an openness to his way of thinking in everything he does," Hilty says. "He pulls disparate things together and allows people to make their own decisions."

Ai has also expanded the definition of the artist's role by delving into politics. His creative use of social media has meant that his opinions on everything from the Sichuan earthquake to the Syrian refugee crisis have reached large audiences. At last count, he has 338,000 followers on Twitter and 254,000 on Instagram and maintains a thriving Facebook account, turning him into an Information Age celebrity and the bane of the Chinese government, which he criticizes often. Official hostility toward him increased rapidly after the Sichuan earthquake, when Ai began a grass-roots investigation into the collapse of shoddily built schools. His postings on the earthquake so antagonized the government that in 2009, when he traveled to Chengdu, where he planned to testify on an activist's behalf, he was beaten by police and subsequently suffered a brain hemorrhage. Taking up social media, Ai became only more openly defiant of the system, until he was arrested in 2011 at Beijing Capital International Airport when he tried to travel to Hong Kong, part

of a larger sweep of detentions by the Chinese government. He was imprisoned for 81 days without trial—ostensibly for tax evasion, disseminating pornography and bigamy, although he was never officially charged. His passport was then confiscated, only to be returned without explanation last year.

exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts was one of the best attended of any living artist, and his 2010 work *Tree* was installed as the centerpiece of the Tate Modern's display in its new wing. Ai's influence now goes further afield: When the British government denied him a six-month business visa in 2015, he posted the refusal letter on Instagram and within days the decision was reversed. Likewise, when Lego would not sell him its product in bulk earlier this year, his posts provoked massive donations of bricks from around the world, forcing the company to change its policy on sales.

"A lot of people think art exists in a vacuum, but not Ai Weiwei," says his longtime New York dealer Mary Boone. "He doesn't want his work to be just another luxury item. There are other artists whose practice has to do with raising social consciousness, which puts artists in a bigger discussion." She cites Barbara Kruger and Theaster Gates, who mixes art with renovation projects to revitalize poor neighborhoods in Chicago. "Ai Weiwei lives by that. There



#### ART OF PROTEST

Since his 2011 detainment, Ai has continued to actively produce work and exhibit internationally. From left: *Very Yao* (2015), *Trace* (2014), *Souvenir From Shanghai* (2012), top, and *He Xie* (2010).



FROM LEFT: VERY YAO, 2015, INSTALLATION OF 150 BICYCLES, COURTESY OF AI WEIWEI STUDIO; TRACE, 2014, INSTALLATION OF 100 MILLION PAINTED PORCELAIN SEEDS, COURTESY OF AI WEIWEI STUDIO; S.A.C.R.E.D., 2013, NEOLITHIC VASES (6000-4000 B.C.) AND INDUSTRIAL PAINT, COURTESY OF AI WEIWEI STUDIO; COLOURED VASES, 2015, RUBBLE CAUSE, 2016, FILMING THE HUMAN FLOW IN KENYA, 2008, COURTESY OF AI WEIWEI STUDIO; HE XIE, 2010, INSTALLATION OF PORCELAIN, COURTESY OF AI WEIWEI STUDIO

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Ai had recently been released from prison when *ArtReview* named him the most influential person in the contemporary art world in 2011, and he has gone on to become one of the most prolific and recognized, with two studios and dozens of assistants. (When asked how many work for him, he shrugs and says, "I don't know. There seem to be a lot.") His inner circle of assistants in Beijing and Berlin helps with research, while the actual artwork is made by specialist carpenters, woodcarvers, bicycle makers, chandelier manufacturers and porcelain fabricators in China.) His work is widely collected; one group of the bronze *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* set a record at auction for his work last year of \$5.4 million, at Phillips in London, while his 1995 photo triptych *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* sold for over \$1 million at Sotheby's this past February. His 2015

is no separation between his art and his philosophy about how you should behave in the world."

This month, he has two related solo shows in Manhattan, at the Lisson Gallery and at Mary Boone Gallery, on the theme of roots and branches. Both shows reveal Ai's creative use of tradition: Lisson will be filled with pieces of cast-iron tree trunks, branches and roots, using modern industrial artifice to evoke the ancient Chinese passion for exotic natural shapes. Among several pieces at Boone's two Manhattan galleries will be a circular field made from 40,000 porcelain spouts broken from antique Chinese teapots. Meanwhile, at his current retrospective at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, Ai has taken over the museum's elegant 15th-century palace. "We asked Ai Weiwei to respond to the Renaissance structure," says the director, Arturo Galansino. The ornate facade is now adorned with 22 orange refugee lifeboats, and *Trace* has been expanded to include such rebels as the exiled poet Dante Alighieri and the scientist who fell foul of the Papacy, Galileo Galilei. "We liked to challenge Ai Weiwei," says Galansino, "and he always responded with a better idea."

**A**IS THE SON OF ONE of modern China's revered literary figures, Ai Qing, a renowned Communist revolutionary who was close to Mao. Shortly after Ai was born, his father fell from favor with the Party as a suspected "rightist," and the family was banished from Beijing to the remote countryside. By 1967, when Ai was 10, the family had been moved again to an even more dismal village near the Gobi Desert, where his father was brutally "reeducated." Ai Qing—who had hobnobbed with luminaries such as Pablo Neruda in Paris in the late 1920s and early '30s—was given the humiliating job of cleaning the public toilets. Ai watched his father endure insults for a decade: Villagers forced him to publicly confess his "crimes," covered his face with ink and hung mocking placards around his neck. "As a young child, you remember everything," says Ai. "I saw how society can be so unjust and blind." Later in life, as an adult facing official persecution, he drew inspiration from his father's stoic endurance

attending classes at Parsons School of Design and the Art Students League. He took over 10,000 mostly black-and-white photographs and created conceptual artworks from simple materials that presage his later work, including *Profile of Duchamp With Sunflower Seeds* (1983), a "readymade" profile portrait of Marcel Duchamp made from a twisted wire coat hanger, mounted on a wooden board and partly filled with sunflower seeds.

But he never felt at home in the city. "I was so young," he recalls. "I was completely broke." To come from the remote countryside of Communist China to New York was "more than a culture shock. It took years to adjust." He had dubious visa status—a human rights group helped him get his green card in 1989 after the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing—and was barely able to pay his paltry rent on the tenement apartments he often shared with other Chinese artists, musicians and filmmakers. He survived by doing odd jobs, even drawing portraits of tourists in Times Square. "I learned a lot

other creative types gathered in a Beijing district they called the East Village, and he organized a protest art show during the 2000 Shanghai Biennale called, in Chinese, *Non-Cooperative Approach*, and in English, *F— Off*. "I was just an artist in my mind," he says with a laugh. According to Ai, he built a studio in Shanghai in 2000 only because his mother felt he had squandered his years in America and was too embarrassed to introduce him to her friends. "I had a space but I didn't know what to do with it," he recalls. "So I started to do architecture." He founded a firm called FAKE Design and soon gained a reputation within China not just as an architect but as a cultural commentator.

The turning point came in 2003, when he collaborated with the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron to win the competition for the Olympic stadium—dubbed the Bird's Nest for its twiglike metal form—for the 2008 Beijing Games. Around the same time, he returned to making art and was soon invited to show in a museum in Bern, Switzerland. Even so, Ai



#### SEEDS OF CHANGE

Ai works across media, including, from left, an installation of 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds, titled *Sunflower Seeds* (2010-2011), and a diorama of his life in detention, *S.A.C.R.E.D. (Supper)* (2011-2013). Right: *Coloured Vases* (2015).



#### GOING PUBLIC

In recent years, Ai has shifted his attention to the international refugee crisis. Right: In 2016, he adorned Berlin's Konzerthaus with life jackets that had been used by migrants fleeing Syria, Iraq and other countries and arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos.



#### RUBBLE CAUSE

Ai is currently working on a documentary, tentatively titled *Human Flow*, that focuses on refugees and migrants around the world. Below: Ai filming in Kenya with his team.



of this tragic fall from grace. "He was dropped from being a prince of poetry in China to the lowest possible condition."

This traumatic experience shaped many of Ai's life decisions. After Mao's death in 1976, his family was permitted to return to Beijing, where Ai enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy. But he found himself more drawn to sketching, painting—his father had trained as a painter—and political activism. He fell in with a group of avant-garde artists dubbed the Stars and became involved in a reform movement called the Democracy Wall. Neither was tolerated by the government. In 1979, the Democracy Wall leader was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and many artists decided to leave the country. The United States was a random choice: Ai's girlfriend at the time was leaving to study in Philadelphia, so he joined her in 1981.

Ai spent 12 years in the U.S., including a decade in New York City from 1983 to 1993 as an impecunious art student in the East Village. He immersed himself in the raucous bohemian scene of the time, meeting Allen Ginsberg and Robert Frank, going to the same downtown gallery openings as Andy Warhol,

about contemporary art, but most of the time I was just hanging around," he says. "I never registered in school. I never graduated. I never established myself. I left New York empty-handed."

This ambivalence remained when he revisited in 2005 and stood by the cube in Astor Place, staring in wonder at the rushing crowds. "I couldn't believe this was a city I'd lived in for 10 years. I had nobody to call. I didn't know one person there!" Yet he now sees his East Village decade as an essential part of his artistic gestation. His experience of the 1988 Tompkins Square Park riots, when squatters clashed with police, also helped shape his politics. "It was in New York that Weiwei learned about protest," Chiu says. "He saw it happen right in front of him. It left its mark."

News that his father's health was failing convinced Ai to return to Beijing in 1993, but he remained an outsider within China. Although he produced some enduring work—including the triptych of himself dropping a Han Dynasty urn—he was more interested in enjoying a "Duchampian lifestyle," as he calls it, cultivating an "artistic attitude." He and

remained little known in the West until 2007, when he denounced the upcoming Beijing Olympics as Party propaganda and dropped out of the Games' opening ceremonies, gaining huge attention. Overnight, Ai went from being a local activist to an international figure.

**GIVEN HIS GENIUS** for social media, it comes as a surprise to learn that Ai Weiwei says he'd never touched a computer until 2005, when a Chinese website, Sina, offered to set up a blog for him. "I didn't even know how to type," he says with a laugh. Yet a few mornings later, he woke up to see that 200,000 people were reading his blog, he says. "I was completely shocked. In China, you never have a chance to express your opinion. Now I had a platform." By 2009, according to Ai, he had over 70 million readers. By then he was publicizing his investigation into the Sichuan earthquake, of which the Chinese government was blocking reporting. So Ai made an online appeal to recruit dozens of volunteers, including human rights activists, students and ordinary citizens, to go village by village, knocking (Continued on page 158)

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## AI WEIWEI

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on doors to get the names of the dead students, their birthdates and their home addresses, despite police harassment. He then posted the details online as an irrefutable memento mori.

“Of course, I was very naive,” he says now. “They shut off my blog. But by then it was too late.” He immediately switched to Twitter, despite initial reservations. (“I said, ‘Oh, no, what can you say in 140 characters?’ Then I realized that in Chinese, with 140 characters you can write a novel! It’s very different from English.”)

His father’s legacy was high in his mind when, after two more years of criticizing the government, he was detained by Chinese police at the Beijing airport in 2011 en route to Hong Kong and Taiwan and taken to a detention center with a black hood over his head. When the hood was removed, Ai told his interrogator that his father had experienced the same situation 80 years earlier when he was arrested by the Nationalists in 1932. “It was the same kind of accusation, the subversion of state power and disrupting public order,” Ai recalls telling his captor. “The interrogator just laughed and said, ‘Times are different.’”

By then, he had a 2-year-old son, Ai Lao, with his current partner, the filmmaker Wang Fen. The effect his imprisonment might have on his son preyed on Ai. “The interrogator told me: ‘You will not see [your son] for the next 30 years. When you get out you will see a boy who won’t even recognize you.’” The idea tortured him. “You are fighting for something you believe in, but at the cost to somebody very vulnerable, which is hard to accept.” Upon his release in June 2011, he posted a photo on Instagram of himself standing on a set of scales, showing that he was regaining some of the 25 pounds he had lost in prison. Even so, Ai decided that he could not risk passing his father’s legacy on to his own son. After learning that his passport had been confiscated—perhaps forever—he eventually asked Wang to leave with their son for the safety of Berlin.

The German capital had long appealed to him thanks to its vibrant art scene and rootless, restless spirit. “Berlin is like a ruin,” he says. “Nobody feels a sense of history; nobody cares where you come from. It’s all a new start.” He had been renovating the cavernous studio in the converted brewery since leasing it in 2009. “It reminded me of my childhood, living underground,” he says of the grottolike space, recalling that in exile in China his family had been forced to live in an “abandoned hole” covered with brushwood, “to show that we were the lowest creatures of the village.” Today the old brewery complex is an evocative refuge. Other renowned artists, including Olafur Eliasson, with whom Ai has collaborated, have studios there—albeit in cheerier, aboveground spaces.

**SINCE THE UNEXPECTED RETURN** of his passport by the Chinese government in July 2015, Ai has been making up for lost time, mixing visits to exhibitions

of his work with journeys to investigate the refugee crisis. It’s a new, peripatetic phase in his life, which he feels blurs his art with politics to advocate against injustice.

His fascination with the refugee crisis began in 2015, when the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq commissioned him to curate an exhibition of some 500 artworks from an Iraqi refugee camp for the Venice Biennale, *Traces of Survival*. (It has since been released as a book.) But his interest in the crisis has shifted into high gear since the return of his passport. He visited refugee centers in Berlin and on Lesbos, the entry point into Europe for tens of thousands of asylum seekers. He was profoundly affected by seeing boatloads full of refugees landing on the beaches there. “I really didn’t expect to see it in front of me,” he says. “It was shocking.” Seeing the human face of the crisis and its overwhelming scale inspired him to make a documentary, which has sent him on almost constant international travel—to the Idomeni refugee camp, where some 14,000 people were trapped on the closed border between Greece and Macedonia; to the Lebanese camp Ain al-Hilweh, which was established in 1948 and currently shelters around 100,000 refugees; to Jordan, Turkey, Kenya and Bangladesh. “I have to first observe and learn,” he says. “The visits help adjust my own views on the global political situation. I hope what has touched me can also impact others.”

The project seems on the surface a change of direction for Ai, but he regards it as part of a continuum with his life and art. “It has to do with me, every bit of it,” he says. His childhood exile in China was a similar experience of dislocation, he explains, as was his decade trying to adjust to life in New York. “The reason can be economic or political or religious or even environmental, such as famine,” he says, but the result is the same—“to go to an unknown area you never dreamed about and be forced to survive. Every step involves so much pain and anxiety.”

Naturally, controversy has followed his new project. In February, he asked celebrities at a fundraising dinner in Berlin to take selfies while wrapped in refugees’ emergency blankets, which came off to some as a fatuous publicity stunt. He then re-created the famous photo of a drowned Syrian child found on the coast of Turkey, posing as the toddler himself. Some found the image haunting. Others found it crass. But there is no question he is touching a nerve. As Chiu points out, his oeuvre is often difficult to digest: “Ai Weiwei has pushed the limits of what is acceptable in art.”

His return to New York this month will mark another new phase, as he becomes more comfortable with his former home. He was unable to return to see his well-reviewed 2014 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, yet after years of feeling remote from the city, he made a short visit this past June, which began to dissolve his unease. Now a wildly successful artist, he is in talks for a major show at the Park Avenue Armory as well as a project with the Public Art Fund. “Maybe it’s because my situation has changed,” he says. “I’m much more relaxed now. I have started to see the best part of the city. It’s so passionate about creativity and new ideas, more than anyplace else in the world.” ●