

FREEDOM REQUIRES STRUGGLE

AI WEIWEI'S GLOBAL CRUSADE BRINGS HIM TO SNOWMASS VILLAGE, WHERE HE'LL
ACCEPT ANDERSON RANCH ARTS CENTER'S INTERNATIONAL ARTIST AWARD.

BY SUE HOSTETLER



Ai Weiwei, *Forever
Bicycles* (2011)

When Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei opened his blockbuster show *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors* last fall in New York City, it was met with rock star-like pandemonium: Barricades, screaming fans and a scrum of paparazzi greeted the artist at the public opening for an exhibition that featured more than 300 artworks spread across all five boroughs. This may seem more Katy Perry than contemporary art, but Ai Weiwei may just be the most world-famous, celebrated and recognizable visual artist working today. And this summer, he's coming to the Roaring Fork Valley for the first time, to be honored by the Anderson Ranch Arts Center.

The 60-year-old was a prominent working artist for years, but came to global notoriety in 2011 when he was detained by Chinese authorities for 81 days and stripped of his passport for general criticism of his government, including accusing it of corruption and construction negligence when thousands of children died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Along with his relentless social media criticism, Weiwei also set up a citizen investigative team to uncover the names and details of more than 5,000 children who died. He then opened a now-legendary exhibition, *So Sorry*, in Munich, where the entire Haus der Kunst museum's facade was dramatically covered in 9,000 student backpacks in an installation called *Remembering*.

After several years under house arrest and the subsequent return of his passport in 2015, the political artist immediately moved to Germany, where he has since lived in exile with his family, participating in a three-year guest professorship at the Berlin University of the Arts that ends this summer.

Weiwei has focused the last few years almost exclusively on issues of civil rights, geopolitical themes and the human condition. His first feature-length documentary, *Human Flow*, premiered last year at the 74th Venice International Film Festival, in which he traveled to a dozen countries investigating the tragedy of the current international refugee crisis. In March, he released the book *Humanity*, a collection of his thoughts concerning attacks on democracy, the role of art in providing a voice for the voiceless and human displacement, which is something obviously personal to him, now having lived in exile twice—in a labor camp as a boy, when his father, the poet Ai Qing, was accused by the Communists of being a rightist; and, now, in Germany.

"My experience in China, including my father's exile and growing up under discriminatory political conditions, gave me my political consciousness and the possibility to understand the tragic conditions faced by others. That is the foundation for many of my works," says Weiwei.

Interestingly, his newer works through film and book seem to be more focused on the collective human condition, as opposed to his earlier work featuring a lone rebel fighting the corrupt system. Is this just natural, organic growth? "Looking back, I should say it was a natural condition. I have always struggled to see how I am a part of human society, how I can contribute my knowledge and creativity to affect aesthetic and philosophical change," he says. "It's not a choice, but, rather, a calling for my identity while developing my art practice, which comes naturally. I'm often surprised by the outcome of my acts."

During recent travels, Weiwei visited the makeshift Idomeni refugee camp, on the border of Greece and Macedonia. He and his team collected, washed and organized possessions haphazardly left behind during the brutal migrant crisis. The artist created large-scale traveling installation "Laundromat" using these belongings to bring the current international humanitarian emergency into sharp focus. "Freedom requires struggle. Once I regained my freedom to travel, I went to over 150 destinations. ...

I worked harder than ever because I felt more responsibility to make my voice clearer and louder for those without the opportunity to do so," he says.

Given China's ruthless censorship, it's somewhat ironic that Weiwei's use of technology—specifically the internet—has been a tool most crucial to the acceleration and success of his activism. "My struggle in defense of free speech and human rights has been amplified by the possibilities afforded by modern technology," Weiwei explains. "Without the internet, my fight would be the same, but less efficient; far fewer people would know about my struggle."

One can't help but wonder, after personally experiencing and witnessing so much human pain and suffering, and seeing the seemingly intractability of the world to solve some of these issues, if Weiwei ever becomes disheartened. "I never become cynical," he offers, "because I understand that freedom of speech and human rights require a strong defense at all times. Without that effort, or trusting our human ability to contribute to society, I would become cynical."

The world—even the utopian Roaring Fork Valley—lives in unsettling times. In his new book, Weiwei writes, "The tragedy is not that people have lost their lives (in the refugee crisis). The tragedy is the people who, in very rich nations, have lost their humanity." Which begs the question to Weiwei, what is the responsibility of those in first-world countries? "Responsibility is tied to privilege," he says. "As much as you take from the world, as much as you enjoy freedom and luxurious lifestyles, there must be an equal weight of responsibility. We cannot ask desperate people

"As much as you take from the world, as much as you enjoy freedom and luxurious lifestyles, there must be an equal weight of responsibility. We cannot ask desperate people to bear it; only those living in privilege have that responsibility. Failure to do so would be a tragedy for humanity." -AI WEIWEI

to bear it; only those living in privilege have that responsibility. Failure to do so would be a tragedy for humanity."

And he remains hopeful that art can change society. "Art is a part of the human effort, and society is made up of humans," says Weiwei. "If art can change how man sees his relationship with society, then it does change society."

In accepting public honors and awards—which he has done numerous times for prestigious recognitions—Weiwei hopes to further raise consciousness and extend the important message of his work. "The Anderson Ranch International Artist Award is a big honor for an artist who is defending aesthetic and moral conditions in every aspect," he says. "Growing up in China, we didn't have public awards—both in reality or as part of our private vocabulary. There was no such thing. There was no way to extend an individual's ideas to the wider public. That is why I so love public platforms, like a plant loves the sun and water." *Artist in Conversation, July 18, 12:30PM, free, Anderson Ranch Arts Center; Annual Recognition Dinner, July 19, 6PM, sold out, Hotel Jerome; andersonranch.org*



Clockwise from top: Ai Weiwei's "Arch" was installed in New York's Washington Square Park in 2017 to address the refugee crisis; the "Gilded Cage" was installed in the southeast corner of Central Park as part New York's nonprofit Public Art Fund; life jackets pile up on a shore in Greece from Weiwei's movie, *Human Flow*, also addressing the refugee crisis; a Han Dynasty urn with Coca-Cola logo, 1993; "Straight" at the Brooklyn Museum, 2014.

