

On Instagram, the Artist Ai Weiwei Focuses on Refugees

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By MASHA GONCHAROVA AUG. 18, 2016

Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist and dissident, is known for his films, sculptures and photography. Last July, the Chinese government returned Mr. Ai his passport after four years of detainment in Beijing. Since sharing the moment on his Instagram, Mr. Ai has been traveling — first moving to Germany, where he settled with his family, then to London in September for his single-artist show at the Royal Academy of Arts, and in January to Paris for an atrium and window display inside the Bon Marché department store.

Featured most prominently on Mr. Ai's Instagram after his release from China were not the shows, but rather his extensive travels to the Greek island of Lesbos, which he has visited frequently since late December. Each time he went, Mr. Ai posted many (a handful a day was not uncommon) poignant photos of refugees. (This interview was conducted by email.)

Instagram: @aiww

Followers: 238,000

Q: You posted a photo of yourself with your passport a little bit more than a year ago — the first time in four years that you were allowed to travel out of China. How did the prospect of travel after so long at home feel?

A: My right to freely travel was restored late last July. Since then I have been busy adjusting myself to life in Berlin, opening myself to a more global culture and political environment. In particular, I have been focusing on the refugee crisis. I have traveled through Greece, visiting the island of Lesbos, where many refugees first step foot in Europe, and the refugee camp at Idomeni along the Greek-Macedonian border. I have gone to Turkey, stopping in Istanbul, Gaziantep and Izmir, a main point of departure for many refugees making the journey across the Aegean Sea. I visited Lebanon, stopping in Beirut and the Shatila slum. I traveled to the areas bordering Syria, in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. I have been to dozens of camps.

Being able to travel has given me a great opportunity to understand these regional issues, to learn about the historical, geographical and political conditions here. I feel fortunate that my restored ability to travel has given me this experience.

Q: Your first stop was Berlin — to join your partner, Wang Fen, and your son, Lao Ai, and to set up a studio. Why Berlin? Do you intend to continue traveling back and forth between your Beijing and Berlin studios, and do you plan on setting up studios anywhere else?

A: Berlin was my first stop for several reasons. During my detention, [German representatives] had very frequently visited me and expressed a deep concern about my situation, and made remarkable efforts in every communication with Chinese society. Secondly, I had previously agreed to take on a visiting professorship at the Universität der Künste Berlin. Also, I set up a studio five years ago in this city. That gave me a reason to go some place I could immediately continue my work.

I don't think artists really require a studio today. As long as you are informed online, you can have your studio anywhere, in any hotel, train station or airport terminal. I don't feel the need for a studio. We have been working on the Lesbos coast and at every other location I have traveled to, making use of hotel conference rooms. I will stay outside of Beijing, but I have to go back because my mother is there. Beijing is no longer my priority since the situation has become so severe for anyone who wants to speak out. Many of those I know are still in prison today.

Q: How did you get the idea to use Instagram as a medium to document the refugees in Lesbos?

A: I went to Lesbos to experience, firsthand, the refugee situation. The idea only comes when I felt suffocated by the condition. I couldn't believe what I had seen. There was an inner need to grab that reality, which looked so surreal. When you take a photograph and expose it to social media, such as Instagram, you create another reality that can reach others, to share with them this very real situation. It's also a challenge to yourself and a challenge to those who follow you. The reality of this refugee situation should be shared.

Q: Your photos and videos of the refugees are candid and unedited — a striking difference from many images we often see online and in magazines. Was this a conscious decision to focus on the real people and their plight?

A: Sometimes reality is so fresh and vivid. Any artistic or aesthetic intervention would distort that feeling. In those moments, I think of it as an opportunity to redefine our aesthetic understanding, and as an artist, that is my favorite practice, to change the way we look at things.

Q: Have you been keeping track of where the refugees you have met are coming from, and where they are trying to get to?

A: Most of the refugees come from Syria. Some come from Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan. You cannot really track where they are going; they are like water pushed through a pipe, flowing to different locations and destinies. Most of them are now stuck at the Greek-Macedonian border, where the door is completely shut. Others, I have met in Germany and we have been collaborating with them on new projects; some of them are still on the journey and we try to follow them, to better understand through their lives the most difficult journey you can imagine. These people include pregnant women, young children and the elderly.

Q: You are one of the most active artists on Instagram, sometimes posting several photos a day of where you are traveling and what you are working on. What does it mean for you as an artist to instantly connect to your audience daily?

A: Instagram functions as a notebook or diary. It helps me put down anything I feel is worth recording and sharing. I announce everything on Instagram, just like I used to on Twitter. It's a window connecting to the outside world. Sometimes it catches the public or the media's attention, other times it just disappears. More importantly, due to the nature of social media, because it's so convenient, I can express clearly my thoughts or position and I can do so instantly, such as during the situation with Lego [when the Lego Group refused to sell a bulk order of blocks for an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Ai Weiwei posted its refusal letter on Instagram, calling the decision an act of "censorship and discrimination"; Lego later changed its policy on bulk orders] or when I was refused a six-month visa by the U.K. embassy in Beijing [during this conflict, Ai Weiwei used Instagram to post the embassy's refusal letter, a photo of his British visa and a photo of a toilet, describing his telephone conversations with British immigration and embassy officials in the caption; the embassy reversed its decision]. The outcome always surprises me and, I should say, I'm often overwhelmed by the response.