



# #AiWeiwei

Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995

APRIL 13 – JULY 2, 2017

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *#AiWeiwei* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at [mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php](http://mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php).

To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here. [mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php](http://mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php).



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*Illumination, 2009*

## Introduction

Known as one of the world's most provocative artists, **Ai Weiwei** (Chinese, b. 1957) creates work that boldly confronts contemporary sociopolitical issues, both in China and abroad. Prolific in practice, Ai has for over thirty years blurred the boundaries between art and politics, often at great personal risk.

As an outspoken human rights activist, writer, and curator, Ai crosses multiple disciplines in his practice, working in sculpture, public works, film, music, poetry, photography, and social media. Designed by the artist specifically for the Museum of Contemporary Photography, *#AiWeiwei* pairs Ai's early diaristic photographs from the 1980s and '90s in New York City and Beijing with his recent social media-based installations, work that he refers to as "photo activism."

Ai's fame drives over half a million followers to his Twitter and Instagram pages. With these tools, which he sometimes uses in conjunction with irony and humor, and often to disorienting effect, he brings attention to the most pressing humanitarian issues of our time. A combination of the personal and the political, the twelve series on view in *#AiWeiwei* trace the evolution of Ai's voice as he fine-tunes and expands his artistic responses to state power and contemporary geopolitics, giving a human face to global crises.

An extended essay can be accessed at the following link: <http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2017/04/aiweiwei.php>

## NEW YORK PHOTOGRAPHS

1983-1993

Series of archival inkjet prints



下东城区的餐馆中。  
Lower East Side Restaurant, 1988

Ai Weiwei moved to New York City in 1983 and began recording his daily life. His black-and-white photographs reflect his experiences and world-view from that period and document his gritty, avant-garde neighborhood of the East Village; artists such as the poet Allen Ginsberg, who lived near him on Twelfth Street; and Ai himself interacting with works of art by Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol. It is also in New York that Ai's interest in political activism blooms. Ai participated in and photographed demonstrations, where he was keen to capture the tension between the authorities and the people, as in his 1988 photographs of the Tompkins Square Park Riots. His protest images appeared in the New York Times, the Daily News, and the New York Post, among other publications.

## BEIJING PHOTOGRAPHS

1993-2003

Series of archival inkjet prints



The Forbidden City during the SARS Epidemic, 2003

In 1993, Ai Weiwei returned to China for the first time in over a decade to care for his elderly father, the poet Ai Qing, who had fallen ill. Having become accustomed to photographing on a daily basis in New York City, Ai continued recording his life back in Beijing. The 1990s were a particularly fruitful time for experimental art in China, and Ai was at the heart of it, making work with a focus on traditional materials and documenting the urbanization and transformation of Beijing into the global capital it is today. These intimate photographs record Ai's family living together in Beijing and the illness and death of his father in 1996; the building of his studio-house in Caochangdi in 1999; his artistic practice; performances, exhibitions, and artists; and an abundance of cats, Ai's preference in pets over the years.

## DROPPING A HAN DYNASTY URN 1995

Triptych: archival inkjet prints



*Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995

In 1995, Ai Weiwei intentionally broke a 2,000-year-old Han dynasty urn and documented the process. The provocative performance instantiates a popular Communist slogan from China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76): “Scatter the old world, build a new world.” Growing up, Ai Weiwei experienced the effects of the revolutionary slogan directly, including the obliteration of artistic freedom that prevented his father, renowned poet Ai Qing, from writing and who was violently persecuted in a government push to silence individuals determined to spread democratic or so-called Western values. Here the artist reflects on what is gained and what is lost as he produces a new artwork from the shattering of an ancient one.

## STUDY OF PERSPECTIVE 1995 - 2016

41 archival inkjet prints



*Eiffel Tower, Paris*, 1995

In his series of snapshots titled *Study of Perspective* Ai Weiwei flips his middle finger at monuments, landmarks, and institutions of cultural and political power. Traditionally, artists have done perspective studies as preparation for illusionistic drawings or paintings of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. Ai cannily uses the double entendre of “perspective” as he interjects his point-of-view into photographs of iconic landmarks in which his middle finger serves as both a universal symbol of protest and a device for evaluating the relationship of distant objects.

## 258 FAKE

2011

12 monitors displaying 7,677 images



Installation image from *258 Fake*, 2011

In 2009, Chinese authorities shut down Ai Weiwei's popular blog. For four years, the website had been a platform for Ai to spread news and information suppressed by official government media and broadcast his political dissent. Ai's *258 Fake* installation flashes through all the 7,677 photographs he took between 2003 and 2010 and posted to his blog and other internet sites. Their subject matter varies from the mundane—a picture of a plate of food—to the shocking—backpacks outside collapsed schools following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, in which over 5,000 students lost their lives. The combination of images displayed across twelve screens is loosely catalogued into chapters such as “Animals,” “Architecture Projects,” and “Social Political,” alluding to our current age of mass media and digital content overload. The title of Ai's installation is taken from the address of Ai's Caochangdi studio, where for many years his design company, FAKE DESIGN LTD., was based. FAKE, here, is a play on words, as the Chinese pronunciation of “fake” is similar to “fuck” in English.

## SELFIES

2012 - 2016

684 images



From *Selfies*, 2012-2016

Ai Weiwei has published thousands of selfies on social media sites over the last decade, first on his blog—from 2006 until the Chinese government shut it down in 2009—and now on Instagram with daily posts. Ai began taking self-portraits in the early 1980s while he was a student living in New York City. He began by recording his life in the East Village avant-garde and has continued the practice to this day. There are 684 selfies that make up this artwork, many of which are ordinary or humorous moments from Ai's routines. Through his active internet postings of these everyday acts, Ai has called attention to political and social injustice in China and across the globe, and his image has become a symbol of freedom and resistance.

## ILLUMINATION

2009

Archival inkjet print



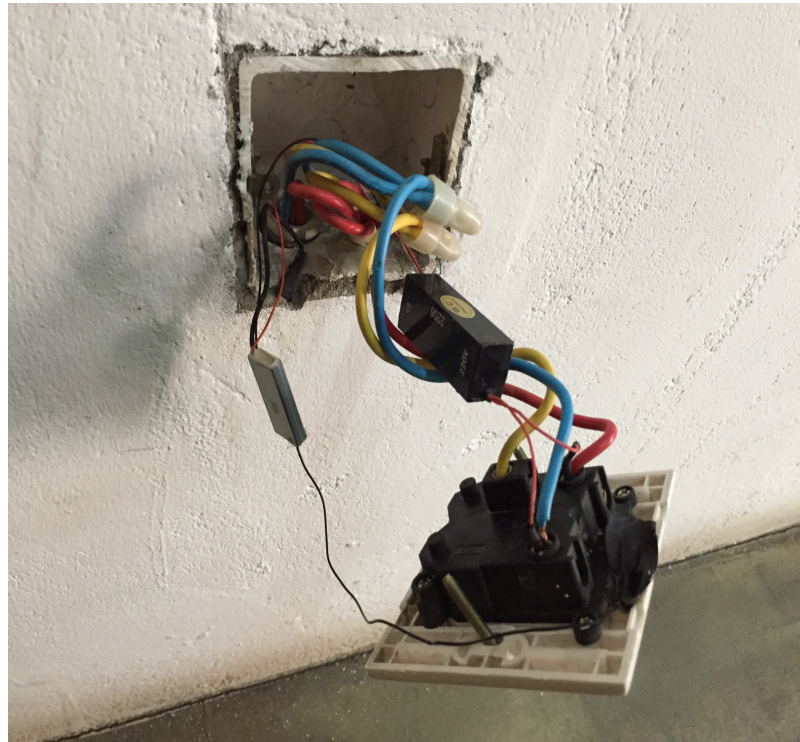
*Illumination, 2009*

In August 2009, Ai was in Chengdu, China, testifying on behalf of Tan Zuoren, an activist and writer who had been arrested for his involvement in researching the student fatalities in the Sichuan earthquake. At three o'clock in the morning of August 9, Ai was awoken by police who banged on his hotel door, burst in, and beat him. As the police were escorting Ai to the hotel elevator, he defiantly snapped this selfie of his reflection in the mirrored walls of the elevator and quickly posted it to the internet. Instantly, millions of followers knew that Ai had just been arrested. That year, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* used the image to illustrate an article titled "Smartphone Revolution" on the use of social media as activism, and today *Illumination* has become an iconic Ai Weiwei selfie.

## PHOTOGRAPHS OF SURVEILLANCE

2010 - 2015

324 images



*Bugs, Beijing, 2015*

On April 3, 2011, Ai Weiwei was arrested at the Beijing Capital International Airport and secretly detained for eighty-one days. Upon his release, he lived under probationary condition in Beijing without a passport, unable to travel outside of the country. Until the authorities returned his passport on July 22, 2015, Ai lived under constant surveillance, with his phones and computers tapped, and undercover secret agents following his every step. In an attempt to gain control, Ai began a series of experiments that mischievously interfered with his surveyors.

## WEIWEICAM

2012

Single monitor, 17, 803 images



Video still from *Weiweicam*, 2012

In 2012, one year after Ai Weiwei was arrested and detained for eighty-one days for “inciting subversion of state power”—an ambiguous charge often leveled against citizens who criticize Communist Party rule—he launched *weiweicam.com*. At the time, Ai was under house arrest and continually surveilled by the Chinese government. In a defiant parody, Ai set up cameras in his house and studio and live broadcast footage of his every move on the internet to “aid” the government in keeping an eye on him. This self-imposed scrutiny attested to the censorship and repression being inflicted on the artist yet the revelation was short-lived. The government shut down *weiweicam.com* after only forty-six hours, but not before over 5.2 million viewers visited the site.

## LEG GUN

2014

765 images



From *Leg Gun*, 2014

Shortly after the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, on June 11, 2014, Ai Weiwei shared an image of himself holding his leg out like a gun on Instagram and Twitter. The image was loosely based on a pose Ai encountered while watching a dance troupe reenact the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, created by Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao’s wife, and first performed in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution. The dancers, dressed as female soldiers, held their left legs up as if they were shooting rifles. Ai’s image quickly became an Internet meme with thousands sharing their own interpretations of the pose, often adding hashtags such as *#endgunviolence* to their posts. The adaptability of Ai’s original post reveals the power of social media to engender resistance in the face of violence, both actual and implied.



## CHANG'AN BOULEVARD

2004

Color video with sound, 10h 13m



Video still from *Chang'an Boulevard*, 2004

Spanning 45 kilometers, Chang'an Boulevard bisects Beijing, dividing the city along its east-west axis with Tiananmen Square, site of the 1989 student-led protests and massacre, at its midpoint. In 2004, Ai Weiwei traversed the length of the Boulevard, recording one-minute frames at measured intervals. The resulting film is 10 hours and 13 minutes in duration, and composed of 608 individual segments. In Chinese, Chang'an is Eternal Peace. But that is not reflected in Ai's film, which captures instead an increasingly globalized capital at a moment of historical transition: its demographic movements, receding natural landscapes, and major public infrastructure projects. Rich in cultural significance, Chang'an Boulevard was the scene of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and the 2008 Olympic Games. The National Museum of China, National Center of the Performing Arts, and the Beijing Concert Hall are located along its expanse. Ai's film unites these landmarks with the rhythms of a 21st century political power center, its industry, commerce, and social structure, in one urban montage of past and present.

## ON THE BOAT

2016

Color video, 9m 40s



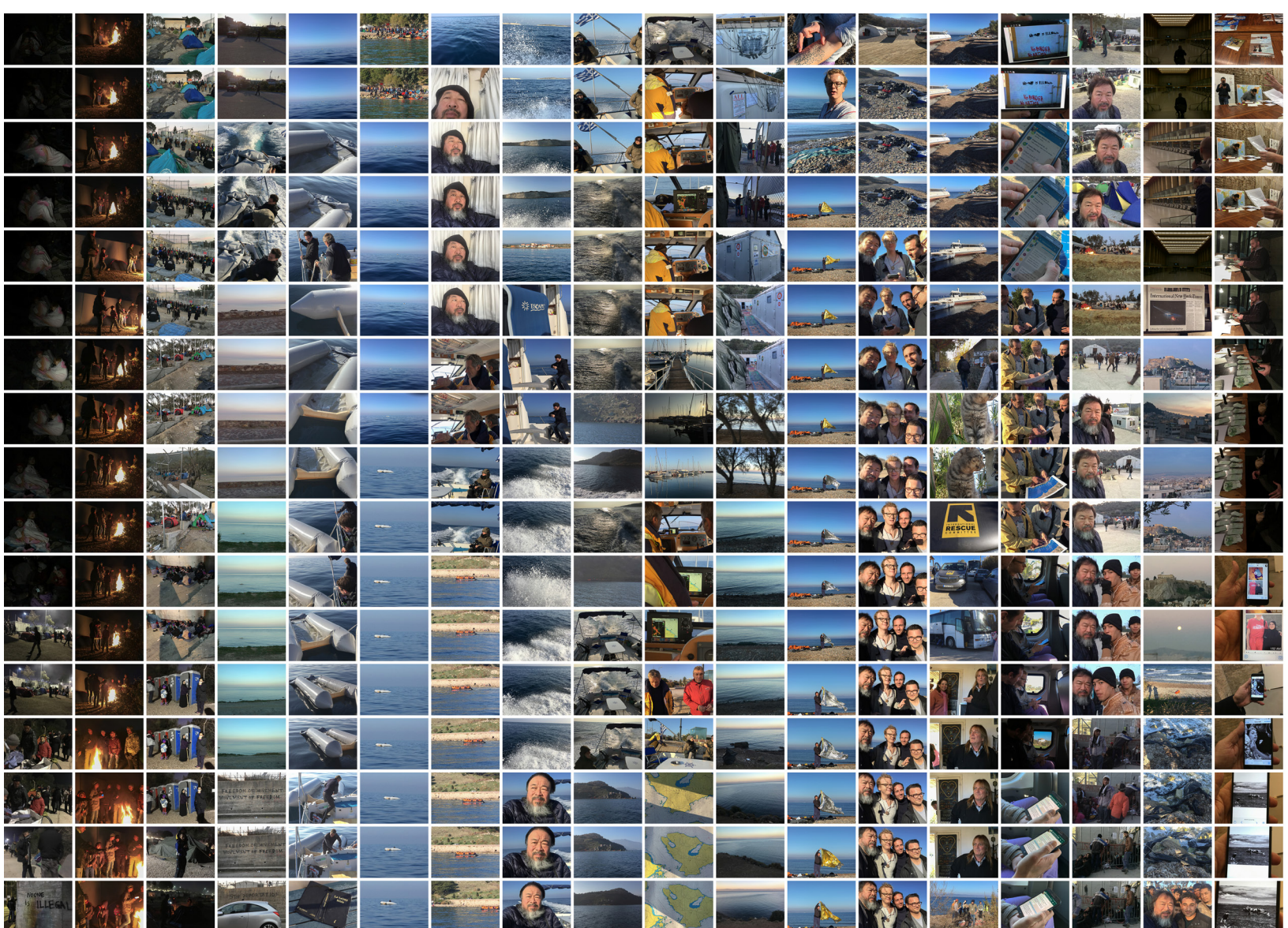
Video still from *On the Boat*, 2016

In December of 2015, at the onset of the global migrant crisis, the Greek island of Lesbos had become one of the main gateways to Europe for Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghani refugees fleeing war and persecution. Ai Weiwei traveled to the island to witness firsthand the scale and severity of the crisis, meeting, interviewing, and photographing migrants in transit. While on Lesbos, Ai took a boat out onto the Aegean Sea, along the routes traversed by countless others seeking refuge in Greece. From the deck, he spotted an empty, half-submerged inflatable raft. Ai decided to board it, asking the captain of the boat he had chartered to give him time alone there. Once aboard, Ai found the remnants of another's life—a baby's bottle, a shoe, a bible drenched in seawater. With the fate of the raft's passengers unknown to him, Ai created *On the Boat*, a video of himself at sea on that same weather-beaten raft.

# RELATING TO REFUGEES

2015 - 2016

16,276 images



From *Relating to Refugees*, 2015-2016

Having endured years of government surveillance, Ai Weiwei finally left China in 2015 when the Chinese authorities returned his passport, which they had confiscated years before during his 2011 arrest. He currently resides in Berlin, removed from the political dangers of China to an epicenter of the global refugee crisis. Having spent his entire childhood living in exile with his father, the renowned poet Ai Qing, Ai is a refugee himself and empathetic to the over one million migrants who have entered the European Union since 2015 fleeing war, terrorism, or famine in the Middle East and Africa. Revealing the humanity of people enduring an impossible situation, Ai's project offers a counterpoint to the contentious debates and news stories that circulate via traditional media channels. At the same time, the overwhelming number of images displayed reflects the indescribable scale of displacement and the impossibility of distilling the scope of human suffering into a tidy narrative.

# Ai Weiwei Timeline

1893 - 2016

	1900	1893	Mao Zedong born
	1910		
1910			Ai Wewei's father, Ai Qing, is born.
	1920		
1929 - 1932	1930	1934-1935	The Long March leads to Mao Zedong's ascent to power.
		1937	Second Sino-Japanese War
1943	1940		
		1949	People's Republic of China (Communist Party in control of mainland China)
	1950		
1957		1955 - 1975	Vietnam War
1958	1960		
		1966 - 1976	Cultural Revolution
	1970		
1976		1976	Mao Zedong passes away at age 82
1978		1979	United States transfers diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Mainland China.
1979			
1980	1980	1980	Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee is not happy about the impact caused by the Stars Art Group
1981 - 1983		1983	The Stars Art Group disbanded, many members travel/study abroad due to political pressure from the Chinese government.
1983-1993			
		1989	Tiananmen Square Massacre
		1989	Berlin Wall goes down

19  
90

1993 Ai Qing falls ill, Ai Weiwei returns to China

1993 -  
2003 *Beijing Photographs 1993 - 2003*

1995 Ai Weiwei creates *Dropping A Han Dynasty Urn*

1995 -  
2003 *A Study of Perspective*

1996 Ai Qing passes away at age 86

1999 Ai Weiwei founds and builds his Beijing studio in Cao Chang Di

2003 - Ai Weiwei is hired as artist consultant for the Beijing  
2008 National (Olympic) Stadium, "The Bird's Nest"

2005 - Ai Weiwei invited to blog by Sina Weibo, China's web  
2009 platform, and writes scathing political commentary and uploads many pictures that will later be included in his piece *258 Fake*. The blog is used to track and publicise the death toll of the Sichuan Earthquake and other information suppressed by the Chinese government.

2009 Ai Weiwei's Sina blog is shut down by the government

2010 -  
2015 *Photographs of Surveillance*

2011 Ai Weiwei arrested; held for 81 days by police with no charge

2011 -  
2015 Ai Weiwei unable to leave China

2012 -  
2017 *Selfies*

2012 *Weiweicam*

2014 *Leg Gun*

2015 -  
2016 *Relating to Refugees 2015 - 2016*

1991 End of the Cold War

1997 Hong Kong returned to China after Great Britain's lease on the city for 99 years.

20  
00

May 12, 2008 Sichuan Earthquake

July 1, 2008 Yang Jia's allegedly stabs police in Shanghai

August 8, 2008 Opening Ceremony for Olympics in Beijing

20  
10

2011 Arab Spring and Start of the Syrian Civil War

2015 Peak of the Refugee Crisis

2016 More than one-hundred thousand migrants have fled Syria.

## Questions for Looking and Discussing

1.

Looking at Ai Weiwei's series *Selfies* (2010-2016) do you see these photographs as highly personal documents from the artist's life, or carefully staged compositions designed for an online platform and art exhibition, or both? Explain your answer using images in the gallery.

2.

When an artist makes a picture of himself, is it always a self-portrait? How does Ai use his body to depict his own identity and point-of-view? How is his body used symbolically for issues larger than personal identity, such as sociopolitical events or human suffering? Do his images give a human face to global crises, the scale of which we cannot otherwise imagine or do they make you feel disconnected from the realities they represent?

3.

How does Ai Weiwei use selfies as a form of activism? Do you see similarities between his Instagram and blog posts and his earlier analog photographs on the tops floors of the museum that were made in New York City and Beijing?

4.

How does social media give artists and activists voice? What change can social media facilitate in the world? What about art museums? Can art exhibitions be a force for change?

5.

Look at Ai Weiwei's *Leg Gun* (2014) series. What is its message? How is it political? Do you think the meaning of the work transformed as it went viral? Why might the Chinese government want to suppress this work?

6.

Who made the photographs in *Leg Gun* (2014)? How do you feel about Ai Weiwei using images made by others in his exhibition? Is he the sole author, or does the piece have many authors?

7.

Are we more likely to trust activists' interpretations of political events? Why do their social media posts carry authority? Is there bias?

8.

In the series *Photographs of Surveillance* (2010-2015) and *Weiweicam* (2012), Ai Weiwei broadcast surveillance footage of his daily life over the internet as a reaction to his discovery that he was being surveilled by the Chinese government. Do you think this form of self-surveillance is impactful? How? What risks did Ai Weiwei undertake by publicly illustrating government attempts to spy on him? How is Ai Weiwei's self-surveillance a form of empowerment?

9.

Do the codes and conventions of surveillance video imply guilt, even when a person being taped is innocent?

10.

How do people change their behavior if they are aware that they are being surveilled? Does the threat of government tracking, security cameras, and wiretapping impact the ways citizens move through the world? What are the positives? Negatives?

*\*Instructors may wish to note the concept of panopticism and the influence of surveillance footage on behavior.*

11.

Can you think of other ways video has been used by dissenters in opposition to authoritarian governments?

12.

*Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) is a performance Ai documented for the camera. Does this make *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* a performance or a photograph? How do the multiple images in the triptych impact its relationship to the durational performance of dropping the urn?

13.

What critique is Ai making in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995)? Consider the ethics of dropping an ancient artifact. What is gained through this act? What is lost?

14.

Compare *Selfies* to *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. What are selfies? Is there a sense in which those are a performance, too?

15.

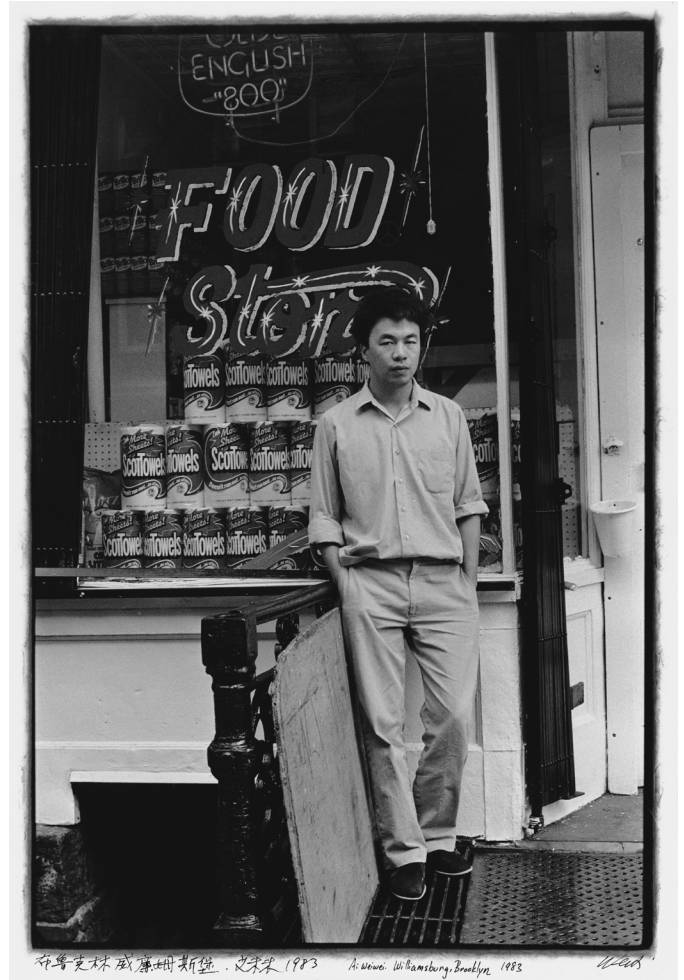
Look at the totality of the *Relating to Refugees 2015-2016* installation, then at the individual pictures. How have the images been sequenced and edited? How do most Americans know about the global refugee crisis with migrants fleeing war and oppression? What role does photography play in the narratives and reportage that is disseminated about refugees? Are Ai's photographs alike or different from reports in the mainstream media?

16.

Does the sheer volume of images in *Relating to Refugees 2015-2016* make you feel more sympathetic to the people and situations depicted? Or is your reaction the opposite: there are so many images, you become desensitized?

17.

Do you think photography can be used as an effective form of activism in the global refugee crisis and other comparable situations? How? What role do you think social media has played?



Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1983, from *New York Photographs 1983-1993*



From *Selfies*, 2012-2016

# #AiWeiwei

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## Extended Resources

Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei's blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*, (The MIT Press, 2011).

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Stuart Allan & Einar Thorsen, *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2009)

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Ai Weiwei and Larry Warsh, *Weiwei-isms*, (Princeton University Press, 2012).

Ai Weiwei, Yung Ho Chang, Uli Sigg and Peter Pakesch, *Art and Cultural Policy in China: A Conversation Between Ai Weiwei, Uli Sigg and Yung Ho Chang, moderated by Peter Pakesch*, (Springer Vienna Architecture, 2009).

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