



Participant Media

In "Human Flow," Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei follows two women left homeless outside war-ravaged Mosul, Iraq.

The flow of refugees

Activist Chinese artist Ai Weiwei switches media to produce film

By Charles Desmarais

Ai Weiwei, the 60-year-old Chinese artist who has long been an activist thorn in the side of his country's political leadership, has acquired international celebrity largely by making a career of honoring others. His 2014 San Francisco exhibition, "@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz," which focused on incarceration policies around the world, drew nearly 900,000 visitors in its seven-month run.

Now, Ai has produced an epic documentary film, nearly 2½ hours long, drawing sympathetic attention to the circumstances of some 65 million refugees across the globe. "Human

Ai continues on E3



Amazon Studios

Director Ai Weiwei (left) and an unidentified refugee in "Human Flow," opening in the Bay Area Oct. 20.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Ai Weiwei's film view of refugees

Ai from page E1

Flow" opens in San Francisco on Friday, Oct. 20.

The Chronicle spoke with Ai Weiwei in San Francisco before the screening. This interview has been edited for length.

Q. What's the question that no one has asked you, but that you wish someone had asked about this film?

A. I think the question would be, we're living in the 21st century. And I think that as humans we are already, maybe, at the most prosperous or have the highest self-confidence. And also, quite possibly, we already see the end is coming. ...

We all live on this planet. Planet Earth. And that planet is so singled out from the rest of the planets. We know that (another planet) is cold or it's hot, or it is not a condition that has life or species like us.

But we are not so appreciative. We are not even just celebrating life itself. It creates so much difference, it is so difficult for (other) human beings. And it leaves them in unthinkable conditions. It is very crude and it shows how primitive we can be.

So, that is very hard to accept, actually. We really have to speak out, yell out, for certain ideas or ideologies.

Q. How long have you worked on this film?

A. If you are talking about (when) I had a consciousness to make this film, it's about a year. But the postproduction takes about half a year, and the distribution and promotion take another half.

In this period of time, we already did about 20 museum shows ... I mean, big shows, that take the whole museum. And of course I did hundreds of interviews.

Q. Why do you do all that? You don't need more fame. You don't need more money.

A. I don't need anything. I just want to burn myself out. It's life; you better use it. It's the way we celebrate our life. ...

I have to get out of myself, get myself into unfamiliar situations. That is the way of learning, that is the way of experiencing yourself, and it's a challenge. It sounds stupid, but in that way I feel life itself. Fresh.

Q. You were the director; you did a number of the interviews. ... What would you say your most important role was in this?

A. How I function in this film, first, is the understanding about what we are doing. And the scale of the film. And possible language of how to structure this film ... because you have to define the language.

We know we all tell the same story: It's about human tragedy.

It is on the news all the time. But how to come out with a film that still has its own integrity and which argues (for) its own existence?

Q. I'm going to make an assumption, which may be wrong, that you don't have a lot of experience at filmmaking.

A. I never had experience with this kind of commercial type. But I do have a lot of experience in architecture, which is very much like film. Everything is concept, design, fabrication and furnishing.

As someone very experienced in journalism, in China, I ended up doing a lot of films to put on the Internet: investigations, quick response. I did at least 20 documentaries and put them on the Internet. The next day, millions of people watch it in China. That is why Internet is so dangerous ... because that kind of truth-telling really challenges everybody's nerves when they watch it. So, yeah, I am quite experienced about how to achieve a visual language to reach the audience.

Q. It's long, the film.

A. It's long, but it is too short for this kind of story. ...

Doing this film gave me a chance to get knowledge. My knowledge about refugees or human flow was from zero. Because China was a society, where I grew up, of frozen human beings.

Restrictions are characteristic of this kind of authoritarian society. They always tell you you cannot do this, you cannot do that. People take it as part of

Human Flow

Documentary. Starring Israa Abboud, Hiba Abed, Rami Abu Sodos. Directed by Ai Weiwei. (PG-13. 140 minutes.)

nature. Like, today is rainy, tomorrow is cloudy. Now it can be a sunny day. This is the general condition; everybody understands that.

Among this 65 million, people have been forced to leave their home. That means if they don't leave they will die. The casualties will not be just a few hundred thousand, it will be 60-some million people, just dead. Because it is not just their house being bombed; the whole city disappeared. Those images, you would never believe. Only in Hollywood movies, and they still cannot capture that kind of thing, you know.

But we see it before breakfast, or when we drive to work, and we forget about it because we have other agendas to do. It is very interesting how our human emotions and logic are designed. It is like a huge computer: emotion, rationality, logic. It purposely can be cut off from one another. It protects us not to get crazy or mad.

Q. I thought refugees were poverty-stricken. But then you have the scene where there's the generator running, and everybody has got their smartphones plugged in. Are most of the refugees middle class?

A. If you are talking about refugees from Syria, they are middle class. They can pay thousands of dollars for smugglers, and they

have a vision about where they want to go. Many of them are engineers, doctors, lawyers, professionals. The first one I interviewed, I still remember. A young guy from Afghanistan, speaks seven languages. So he became a translator for the film, working with my studio for a year just translating everything.

But for certain places, if you look at what happened in Myanmar and Bangladesh, those people — before they lost their home (now it is a half-million), I don't think they had ever been educated. Or African people. ... If you go to their tents, it is ridiculous. The inside and outside is the same. They are living there for generations but there is nothing inside. Outside is just sand and the wind. It is nothing.

Q. Do you have hope?

A. Personally? Or for humanity? That is very different, right?

Personally, I enjoy every moment. I still have consciousness. I meet people and talk about whatever we can talk about. It is such a joy.

But, as humanity, I worry about this a lot. Because I think that we are not fully appreciating who we are. Not even understand the fragile condition of our existence. That is a tragedy, because life is so precious and such a miracle.

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