Cultural Daily

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Meditations on the Master: In Search of Ai Weiwei

Tressa Berman · Wednesday, December 5th, 2018

Meditation 1

As I write, over 4,000 Central American refugees – more than half of them women and girls – are walking to the U.S. border: elders with brittle joints, youth with energetic hope, parents with babies in arms, the strength of mothers milked from tired bones. In response to this humanitarian crisis (only the most recent in a flood of human migration numbering more than 65 million displaced persons in the world), Donald Trump unleashes the military to the US-Mexico border. This foreground brings into focus the images that recur in Ai Weiwei's visually opulent and arresting documentation of the global refugee crisis, as he hones in on wave after overwhelming wave in *Human Flow.*

The present concurrent exhibitions of Ai Weiwei's works in Los Angeles (see Allon Schoner's "Ai Weiwei at the Marciano Art Foundation," *Cultural Weekly*, 10/3/18) prompt me to recount my recent encounter with the artist who was honored with a distinguished artist award this past July at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown during my residency there. As part of the FAWC's Social Justice Week, Ai Weiwei screened *Human Flow,* an astonishing testament of documentary and visual poetry filmed across 25 countries, including the disembarking of Syrian boat refugees in Greece, the crossings of border migrants walking from Iraq, and the internal global refugee camps that span the globe from Palestine to Pakistan. I needed to hear him, to see the masterpiece film, touch in with the master himself, like a Zen student seeking the stick of awakening to what is already there.

In conjunction with the film, Ai re-installed a portion of his sculptural series *Rebar and Case* – a set of objects shaped from the structures that failed to withstand the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in which more than 5,000 schoolchildren died. As backdrop to the sculpturally contorted rebar configurations hung fanciful black and white wallpaper designs, which, when examined more closely, were not so abstract as merely symbolic: a black 'bird' of the middle finger. This might be considered the artist's signature move.

Cao/Humanity. Installation View with "Finger" wallpaper. Courtesy of UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills."

Movement is at the heart of Ai Weiwei's work, traveling from nation to nation (more than 150 trips in the last 3 years), traversing and morphing artistic media – film, architecture, poetry, conceptual gestures, all in seamless connectivity that forms the emblematic core of his body of work: the inter-

being of humanity as it rises up *en masse* and in individual voices, portraits of dignity in suffering. For some, like a Syrian refugee woman encamped in a refugee settlement in Greece, her pain is so grievous that the subject can not face the camera. Instead, we see only her back and shoulders shaking in tremulous despair. We also see Ai's arm reach out to comfort her. In this simple act of compassion, a world is revealed. It is this world of the small gesture that lies inside the grand spectacles of his larger installations, as if strung together one human touch at a time. Perhaps this explains, in part, his engagement with repetition: 49 tons of porcelain sunflower seeds made by 1,600 artisans (*Sunflower* 2010); thousands of antique tea spouts (*Spouts* 2005), more than 9,000 schoolchildren's backpacks covering the facade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich (2009), and for his 2007 *Fairytale,*1,001 people, photographs and objects constructed on site at Documenta 12 in Germany – his present home-in-exile.

My quest to meet the master began with his *Fairytale* installation at Kassel, where I worked in 2007 with the Documenta Education Team. He arranged to bring 1,001 Chinese citizens from all walks of life, including factory workers, students and journalists, into re-created bunkers built in the context of an international art fair. As part of the living installation, Ai reverses the power relations of fieldwork, using people and objects inserted into the "foreign" space of an international art fair. As part of the project, 1,001 wooden chairs sprawled throughout the vast venues of Documenta's exhibition halls and public spaces after the Chinese visitors left, standing in as a diasporic signal of mobile labor and the imagined identity, marking both presence and absence.

I had the opportunity to sit in the ghost chairs and also to use them in a conference reception organized by my conference team. The utility and fragility of the chairs served as residual marks that enabled ongoing conversations about the meanings of abandoned objects, and fulfilled an aspect of my personal quest to sit with the artist in creative dialogue, however fantasized – and in the meditative sense of "to sit with" the disturbances that his works invoke like a *koan* upon our human condition.

Meditation 2

After the six seater plane I took from Boston to Provincetown landed with a terrifying thud, hurtling us forward as the flat tire thumped up and down, up and down, I went directly from the tiny P-Town airport to the Waters Edge Cinema. I was told I might get into the sold-out auditorium when the doors opened for intermission and Ai Weiwei was scheduled for a Q&A following the screening of *Human Flow*. I sat like a monk in waiting in the lobby of the community movie theater, watching the popcorn machine pop one kernel at a time, a form of breath counting, a meme of repetitions. I was waiting for the hopeful intermission rush. I sat for no less than forty minutes, when somewhere between the butter machine and the ice dispenser I felt a presence, and then the approaching sound of many footsteps. Ai Weiwei entered the room with his small entourage.

Ai Weiwei, Zodiac, Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles, 2018

I was wallpaper. I was the proverbial fly. No one saw me. I saw him cross the small lobby and lean by himself on a trash receptacle in the far corner of the room, waiting to be ushered into the auditorium. We were both waiting for the same moment of the doors, but with different intent. It was in this I-Thou moment that I gathered the courage to rise. I went directly to him, as if in a trance that had begun in 2007 sitting in a wooden chair in Kassel. No one stopped me. The coast was clear. His eyes were clear. Clarity spewed into form then got muddled through a jumble of

words that rolled out of my mouth, hearing me say things like “to ask you a couple of questions,” “writing an article,” “visual anthropology,” more blah blah blah. He listened patiently, almost expressionless, with a kind neutrality that did not invite nor push away. Then the master spoke: “Have you seen the film yet?” More jumble, humbled by the truth: “I meant to get here for the first screening, but my plane crash landed.” His eyes, did they twinkle in amazement? The exchange continued. This was not going to be an interview or a conversation. This was a chance encounter with an international icon across a trash bin. We exchanged data points. My home base, Los Angeles, his next artistic stop. “Ah, Los Angeles.” he said. We smiled in mutual recognition of that imaginary, he shook my hand (strong, gentle, sincere), then walked away toward his crew. My search for the master was complete. Sound bytes in hand. *Did you see the film yet? Ah, Los Angeles.*

For current exhibitions see:

“Life Cycle,” Marciano Art Foundation, 4357 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (424) 204-7555, Sept. 28, 2018 — March 3, 2019. www.marcianoartfoundation.org

“Ai Weiwei: Zodiac,” Jeffrey Deitch, 925 N. Orange Drive, Hollywood, (323) 925-3000, Sept. 29, 2018 — Jan. 5, 2019. www.deitch.com

“Cao / Humanity,” UTA Artist Space, 403 Foothill Road, Beverly Hills, (310) 579-9850, Oct. 4 — Dec. 15. www.utaartistspace.com.

(Featured image: Installation view of Ai Weiwei: Life Cycle, September 28, 2018–March 3, 2019, at the Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles. Courtesy the artist and Marciano Art Foundation. Photo by Joshua White/JWPictures.com.)

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