

AI WEIWEI

BARE LIFE



Mark-1 (Little Boy)
Nuclear
USA
1945

B83
Nuclear
USA

Mark-1 (Fat Man)
Nuclear
USA
1945

CBU-105
Cluster
USA
2000

KAB-1500L
Guided
Russia
1979

GBU-27/B
LGB
USA
1987

M110-T14 (Grand Slam)
GP
UK
1945

M-117
GP
USA
1950s

Buk-M1
SAM
Russia
1980

RBK-500
AO-2.5 RTM
Cluster
Russia
1987

SC-250
GP HE
German
1936

M-34
Chemical (Sarin)
USA
1950s

Mark-81
GP
USA
1950s

Mark-77
Mod5
Incendiary
USA
XXXX

Mark-82
(Snake Eye)
LD GP
USA
1964

BETAB-500 ShP
Concrete Piercing
Russia
XXXX

ODAB
FAE
Russia
1995

About This Guide

This guide is designed as a multidisciplinary companion for educators bringing their students to see *Ai Weiwei: Bare Life*, on view at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum from September 28, 2019, to January 5, 2020. Our intent is to offer a range of learning objectives, gallery discussion topics, and post-visit suggestions to stimulate the learning process, encourage dialogue, and help make meaning of the art presented. This exhibition is recommended for middle and high school groups. Teachers should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students.

About the Artist and Exhibition

Ai Weiwei, born in Beijing in 1957, is one of the world's most renowned contemporary artists and activists. He spent most of the 1980s and early 1990s in the United States, exploring artistic practices in conceptual art and photography and addressing social issues that have remained central to his art throughout the years. Upon his return to China in 1993, Ai dedicated himself to building art communities. He gained increasing recognition as he participated in the design of the "Bird's Nest" stadium for the Beijing Summer Olympics and won the Chinese Contemporary Art Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2008. That same year Ai emerged as an outspoken human rights activist and a prominent government critic, conducting investigations of the corruption scandal following the massive 2008 Sichuan earthquake. He was arrested by the government in 2010 and 2011 and remained under surveillance at an undisclosed location until 2015. He now lives and works in exile in Berlin and Cambridge.

Ai Weiwei: Bare Life brings together a broad selection of sculptures, installations, photographs, and videos, including some of Ai's most iconic works created over the last two decades. Some newly conceived large-scale and site-specific projects are exhibited in the US for the first time. The exhibition is divided into two sections, "Bare Life" and "Rupture." The themes and aesthetic forms of the artworks on view are deeply connected to the artist's concern for universal human rights and his exploration of Chinese culture, past and present.

Interdisciplinary Connections

Architecture, Art, Art History, Asian Studies, Chinese Culture and History, Cultural Studies, Design, Ethics, Film Studies, Global Studies, Graphic Design, Illustration, Installation Art, International Studies, Mixed Media, Philosophy, Photography, Political Science, Social Studies, Video

Learning Objectives

Students will discuss the role of contemporary art in generating relevant and often challenging conversations, particularly pertaining to global human rights issues.

Students will examine how Ai brings the past into the present and consider what that means.

Students will develop visual literacy and critical thinking skills through analysis and interpretation, identifying artistic choices and formal qualities of art.

Students will explore contemporary artistic practices such as the use of large-scale installations, readymades, assemblages, and video.

Before You Visit

Suggested topics to research and discuss before visiting the exhibition

Artist's Inspiration

Several modern artists inspired Ai's use of common objects from everyday life, especially Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and Andy Warhol (1928–1987). Learn more about these two artists and the artistic movements related to them. How did they contribute to the development of contemporary art? What are some of the characteristics of their artwork? What parallels can be drawn between Ai's work and theirs?

Note: There will be a small selection of Duchamp's artworks on view in the Gertrude Bernoudy Gallery on the second floor.

People's Republic of China

Ai utilizes many traditional Chinese cultural elements when creating artworks, requiring knowledge of Chinese history to fully understand their meanings. What are the major dynasties of ancient China? When was the People's Republic of China founded? Who was Chairman Mao Zedong? What happened during the **Cultural Revolution**? What are some current human rights problems in China?

Human Rights and the Refugee Crisis

One major theme the exhibition explores is the issue of human rights violations. What are human rights? Who created this concept? Are human rights universal? What are some examples of human rights violations? Currently there are more than seventy million refugees displaced from their homelands. What are some of the difficulties refugees face? Can these be considered human rights violations? What are some of the social and political factors causing the refugee crisis? What are some of the ways people are trying to help? If you wanted to help, what might you do?

Tips for Looking at Works of Art

Spend one minute looking silently at the artwork before discussing.

Invite students to describe what they see.

Ask students to analyze the artwork, linking observations and description to assist student analysis.

Photo by Virginia Harold.





Saligman Family Atrium

Bombs (2019)

This **site-specific** wallpaper shows an array of bombs made from World War I to the present by countries including Germany, Russia, and the United States. This looming visual history of weaponry shows that even though the design of weapons has changed over time, their threat persists and even has grown. Ai Weiwei is an outspoken critic of nuclear warfare. In 2017 he voiced his support of the United Nations' Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the first legally binding agreement to prohibit nuclear weapons with the intention of eliminating them completely.

Discussion Questions

How does Ai visually represent images of bombs? Does the style remind you of other kinds of images you have seen? What information is included with the images? How does the scale and placement of the wallpaper shape our response? What does this artwork tell us about the history of warfare? How does warfare impact human rights?

Barney A. Ebsworth Gallery

Section One: "Bare Life"

The title of the exhibition and of this section is taken from the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who has investigated the concept of bare, unprotected life and its manifestations in human history. This section is designed to inspire connections among bare life, the rising impact of the global refugee crisis, and Ai's examination of human rights violations in China after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.



Forever Bicycles (2012)

This monumental **installation** of 720 bicycles is designed by Ai Weiwei to fit the Kemper Art Museum's gallery space. Ai's transformation of bicycles into a sculpture references the iconic work *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) by the French conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp, who established the concept of the **readymade** as art. The sculpture's title refers to the popular Chinese bicycle brand Forever (Yongjiu). The dynamic sculpture suggests movement through the repetition of wheels, spokes, and frames.

Discussion Questions

Using your cell phone in the gallery, compare the bicycle sculpture by Duchamp with Ai's *Forever Bicycles*. What do they have in common? How are they different? What is the relationship between the gallery space and the artwork? What is the relationship between the artwork and us as viewers? What are some of your associations with bicycles? How do you interpret the artwork's title? Consider the theme of movement as it relates to human rights. In what ways is movement a right? In what ways does forced movement violate human rights?



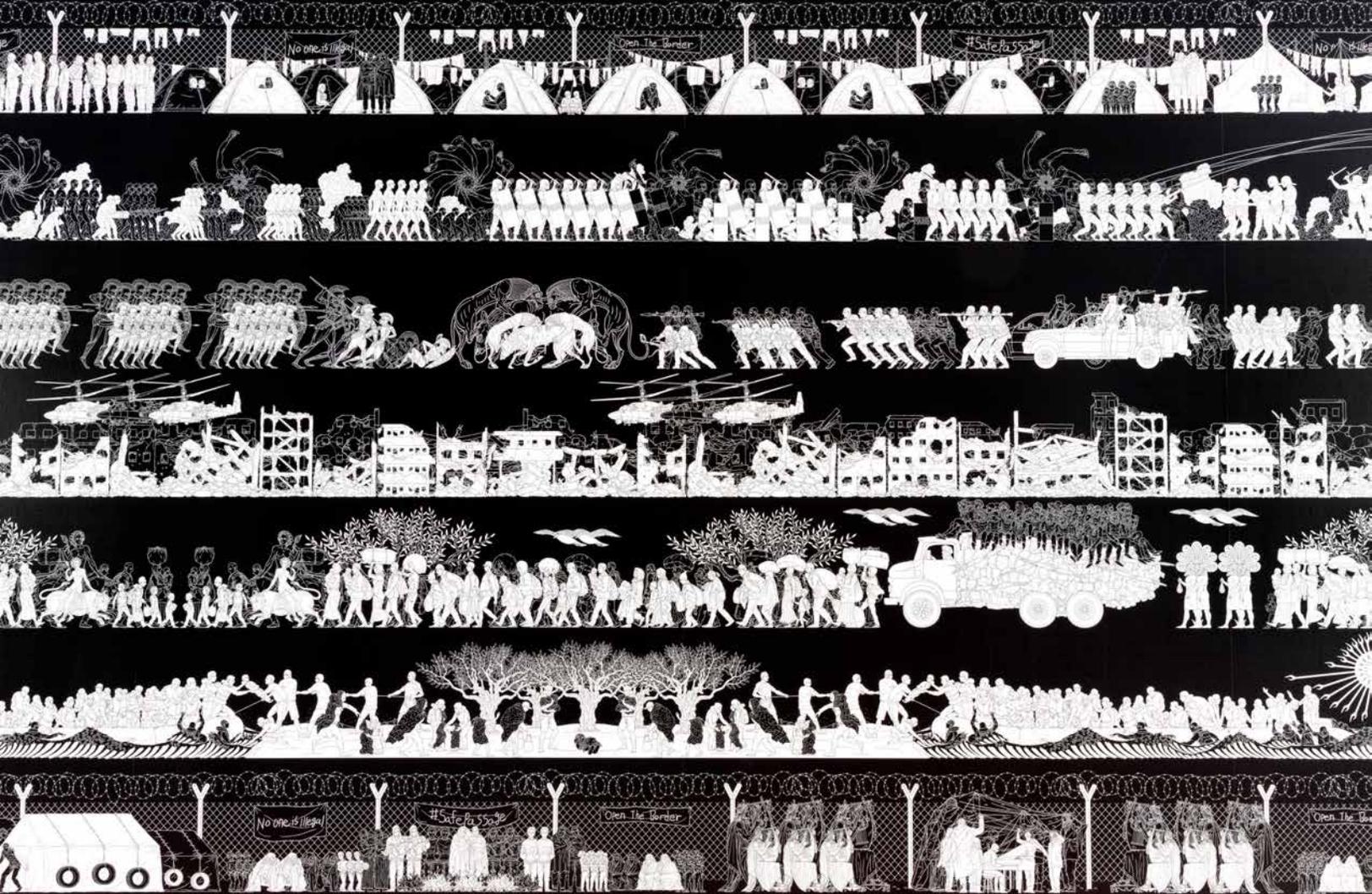
***Rebar and Case* (2014)**

On May 12, 2008, a devastating earthquake struck China's Sichuan Province, causing school buildings to collapse and an estimated ninety thousand deaths, including more than five thousand schoolchildren. The poor quality of the school buildings' construction was widely criticized and was attributed by many to corruption of government officials. After the Chinese government refused to release the names of the students killed, Ai formed the Citizens' Investigation group to collect a list of victims. Volunteers interviewed survivors and parents of victims and made inquiries with the police and other governmental offices. Ai published the compiled list of names on the internet, but it was quickly taken down by authorities.

This work consists of eight uniquely shaped boxes made of *huali* wood, each with a thin sculpture of white marble nestled in black foam. *Huali* is a rare and valuable hardwood that was used to make furniture in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. The white marble sculptures are modeled after bent rebar found in the ruins after the earthquake. Marble is often associated with strength and prosperity, although it is also fragile and brittle; it is commonly used in commemorative objects like tombs and monuments. By replicating rebar in this material, and by placing the sculptures on or in these coffin-like boxes, Ai alludes to the limited capacity of even steel bars to resist seismic forces as well as to the fragility of the human skeleton.

Discussion Questions

Why did the artist choose these materials to produce this work? Beyond coffins and rebar, what other kinds of objects does the artwork bring to mind? How does the installation contribute to your understanding of the Sichuan earthquake? What are some instances of natural disasters, namely in the United States, where politics played a role? How have these been memorialized?



Odyssey (2016)

Since 2015 Ai Weiwei has observed and documented the suffering of millions of displaced people, visualizing the global crisis of refugees through art and videos. In this mural-size wallpaper, Ai relates the current refugee crisis to the ancient Greek epic *Odyssey*, suggesting that humans have a long-standing experience of migration and suffering. The title focuses the story on the journey of the refugee, a journey that remains ongoing as suggested by the images that continue off of the edge of the wallpaper.

Odyssey's narrative of migration is organized in horizontal registers that depict six stages of the journey: war, ruins in the wake of war, the journey on land, the crossing of the sea, refugee and migrant camps, and demonstrations and protests. Ai uses contemporary images from social media and journalism, as well as from his documentary *Human Flow* (2017), but also includes visual references to ancient Greek and Egyptian art, Renaissance sculptures, and Japanese woodblock prints, emphasizing the universal nature of human movement.

Discussion Questions

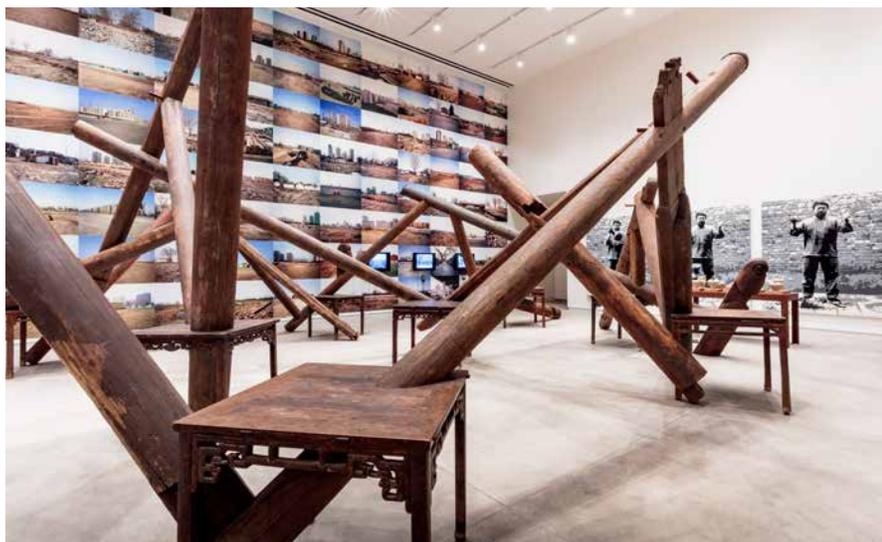
How is art from different cultures combined in this wallpaper? Do you see the refugee crisis differently in the context of Ai's artwork than as reported in the news? How does Ai represent the figure of the refugee? Do contemporary artists have a responsibility to address political issues in their work? What role does social media play in the creation and dissemination of contemporary art?

Garen Gallery

Section Two: “Rupture”

The second part of the exhibition, “Rupture,” explores ideas from the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt’s influential writings on modernity’s break from tradition. It features artworks that reveal Ai Weiwei’s creative experimentation with China’s cultural legacy, from the Qi dynasty (550–577) to the rapid globalization and economic reforms in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Note: The layout of this gallery is not conducive to large groups. We suggest that students work in small groups for this part of the visit.



Through (2007–8)

In this monumental installation, huge pillars and beams crisscross the gallery diagonally, intersecting at junctures and penetrating tables made in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to form a complex network of interdependent parts. The artist employed Chinese craftsmen to build this installation, applying traditional wood joinery techniques without any nails or screws. When asked about his inspiration for the work, Ai replied, “I had been thinking about the feeling of unease people have facing huge structures.”¹

The material for this work comes from abandoned temples throughout China, as many ancient buildings have been demolished to make way for urban expansion, their architectural details often sold by antique dealers for decoration. *Through* may be seen as referencing the destruction and neglect of cultural heritage during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, which advocated for “destruction before construction.” Traditional beliefs and customs were considered outdated and in need of being eliminated. In many of Ai Weiwei’s works, like *Through*, he reuses remnants from such destruction to create new forms and meanings, (re)introducing historical culture into contemporary art.

Discussion Questions

In *Through*, what is the interaction among history, material, space, and audience? What do its structure and scale communicate to the viewer? Why is confronting your country’s history important and challenging? The art-making process and choice of materials in this work reflect traditional Chinese culture. If you were to look at the installation without reading the visitor guide description, could you determine what is going on in the structure? Discuss the importance of context in understanding art.



Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 2015. Lego bricks, triptych, 94½ × 78¾ × 1¾ in. (240 × 200 × 3 cm) each.

***Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (2015)**

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn is one of Ai Weiwei's most iconic works. It is based on three photographs taken in 1995 that document the artist's performance of dropping an unglazed **urn** from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The Han dynasty is considered to be a decisive period in the history of Chinese civilization. Ai's **iconoclastic** act of breaking a Han antiquity is equivalent to abandoning the complete inheritance of the Chinese culture. In that sense it could be seen as either affirming the policies of the Cultural Revolution or as a provocative critique, or possibly both. For Ai, destroying the past is also a means of re-creating it. His work demonstrates a complex relationship between destruction and creation, which is a common practice in modern art history.

Ai used these images in two formats: as a triptych of photographs, and as a re-creation of the photographs using thousands of small Lego pieces, the version on view here. The assemblage of small plastic bricks into a unified image visualizes both collectivism and individualism. The pixel-like black, white, and gray pieces also suggest contemporary digital technology, which the artist uses in much of his work.

Discussion Questions

Ai challenged tradition with his dropping of a 2,000-year-old urn. Is this art, or is this a form of **vandalism**? How does his use of Legos influence your reaction to the work? Are traditions important and, if so, why? Should some traditions be challenged? How does this work relate to the concept of the ready-made?

In the Classroom or at Home

Suggested activities to extend your visit to the Museum

Motifs and Images of Refugees

Contemporary society is inundated with images on a daily basis. See how many images you can collect in one week on the topic of refugees. Discuss the motifs and images as a class and then make a wallpaper incorporating words and images from the discussion, with Ai's *Odyssey* as an example. Discuss the role of art and language in the expression of human rights violations and the value of such expression.

Film Screening

Watch *Human Flow* (Ai Weiwei, 2017, PG-13), a documentary in which Ai visited twenty-three countries where refugees found temporary shelter. Do you notice any difference between documentary films you have seen outside of the exhibition and the documentary films on view in the "Bare Life" section?

Vocabulary

Cultural Revolution the political, economic, and social upheaval that occurred from 1966 to 1976 in the People's Republic of China, initiated by Chairman Mao Zedong to strengthen his position

iconoclasm the belief in the importance of the destruction of images or monuments, often for religious or political reasons

installation art an artistic genre of three-dimensional works that are often site-specific and designed to transform the perception of a space or employ space as an element in the perception of art

readymade a term first used by Marcel Duchamp to describe ordinary, mass-produced items that have been removed from their original context or function and presented as works of art

register in sculpture and painting, one horizontal row in a series, often arranged one above the other, to form a visual narrative

site-specific intentionally designed and created to exist in a particular space

urn a earthenware vase, often with a narrow neck above a round body and foot pedestal, for ceremonial, funerary, or domestic use

vandalism the deliberate destruction of or damage to public or private property

Still from *Human Flow* (2017).



Additional Resources

Exhibition catalog

Eckmann, Sabine, ed. *Ai Weiwei: Bare Life*. St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2019.

Books

Ai, Weiwei. *Humanity*, ed. Larry Walsh. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Arendt, Hannah. "We Refugees." In *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman, 264–74. New York: Schocken Books.

Holzwarth, Hans Werner, ed. *Ai Weiwei*. Cologne: Taschen, 2016.

Online

<http://www.aiweiwei.com/index.html>

About the artist

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/ai-weiwei-beginners-guide>

Social media

https://twitter.com/aiww?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

<https://www.instagram.com/aiww/>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/diaocha/featured>

Videos and documentaries by the artist

Caonima Style: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LAefTzSwWY>

Chaoyang Park: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSXfWaQmnwA>

The Crab House: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLIlpejptwc>

Disturbing the Peace: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD_Em5xHUKg

Little Girl's Cheeks: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuK5pSfZ1LA>

Other recommended videos and documentaries

<https://www.documentary.org/blog/watch-and-share-these-five-documentaries-world-refugee-day>

<https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/7-videos-guaranteed-to-change-the-way-you-see-refugees/>

Educational resources on refugees

Sawyer, Kem Knapp, ed. *Flight from Syria: Refugee Stories*. St. Louis: Pulitzer Center, 2015.

The UN Refugee Agency

<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-about-refugees.html>

Georgetown University, Teaching about Refugees

<https://blogs.common.georgetown.edu/rochelledavis/refugee-video-project/>

Teaching Tolerance, "We Refugees"

http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT_We%20Refugees.pdf

Unless otherwise noted, all images are installation views of *Ai Weiwei: Bare Life*, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, September 28, 2019–January 5, 2020; photos by Joshua White / JWPictures.com.