The Politics of Shame
Ai Weiwei in conversation with Anthony Downey

From October 2017 to February 2018 the Fotomuseum Antwerp (FOMU) presented the first photo exhibition of Chinese visual artist and political activist Ai Weiwei. Entitled ‘Ai Weiwei - Mirror’, the exhibition included seminal political statements such as Study of Perspective (1996-2011) and the artist’s daily stream of selfies and snapshots on social media. The show also addressed the years that the artist spent under constant surveillance by the Chinese government and his ongoing commitment to presenting work that engages with social and political issues, including the worldwide refugee condition.

In the following conversation, recorded as part of a public event in Antwerp on 25 October, 2017, and transcribed here for the first time, the artist talked to Anthony Downey about his photographic work from the 1980s until today and how those earlier photographs, taken in New York City during the 1980s and early 1990s (but not developed until he returned to Beijing in 1993), in part signal later concerns with activism, image production, and human rights. A central element in Weiwei’s concerns is his use of the internet, specifically in his efforts to hold the Chinese authorities accountable for events surrounding the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. The interview also covered the artist’s more recent works regarding his subsequent imprisonment and constant harassment. The artist talks frankly about the extent to which shame played a part in his motivations here, both his efforts to shame the government, but also their attempts to shame him and, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, his father before him.

Anthony Downey: Your show at FOMU is very much based on photography and I wanted to take you back to New York in the 1980s. You lived in New York from 1981 until 1993, and the 80s in NY were an extraordinary time. It was a time of great potential - a time of great possibility. You took apparently 10,000 photographs, none of which were developed until 1993 when you returned to Beijing. I would like to talk about two things to begin with: what it was like in New York at that time, as it seemed to be an important period for you, and also what it was like to be taking photographs on such a regular basis?

Ai Weiwei: The ‘80s were a moment for possibility, but for me it was a non-possibility in New York. For someone coming from a communist society without speaking any English, as we were educated by Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and with no money, you have to make a living. Of course, students were not allowed to work, and very soon I decided I’d either have to quit school or it will be almost not possible to keep school because I had to work. So, I dropped the school, and I became an illegal alien in the United States because it’s just very difficult to not attend class, as the teacher feels you are not respecting them. This was the reason I lost my scholarship from Parsons and then I just moved on, in New York. But it’s not easy in New York City… For me it is a very lonely city, and there are a few artists, most time they spend on the street and I know a few poets and musicians. I met Allen Ginsberg at that time because I went to a poetry reading, he was living in the house that his mum left him… with a lot of books and it’s just a regular apartment building. So, the ’90s in New York. I spent about ten years there and I had nothing to do. I bought a second-hand camera from the thieves who sell those cameras in the night-time on the street. So, now I can take some photos. But I realised that my life was so meaningless because I had no purpose: I never want to establish anything, and I did not know what I can become. So, I said then maybe to record that meaningless it becomes some kind of meaningful act. I did a lot of photographs which is kind of boring and after a few years it became quite accomplished, but I never really developed it because who is going look at this kind of life? But at that time, you kind of think back, it has some meaning in my life because, you know, in agriculture sometimes you have to plant the seeds before the winter comes, and then it goes through the whole winter, then next spring it comes out and even if it’s not necessarily that, it has to go through that kind of time, before I look back positively.

Anthony Downey: You were in New York for about twelve years and there are 10,000 photographs taken during that time apparently. You returned to Beijing in 1993 - your father was ill - but then you developed those photographs. Looking back now, even though it’s quite some time ago, what was the impression you had when you developed those photographs? Some of the subject-matter of those photographs to a certain extent pre-empts subjects that have become quite important for you.

Ai Weiwei: Life is magical in a way, so it’s better to take some photos… and it’ll sound very silly why you should take photos of your real life that is just a copy of life. But then very often we don’t really understand our own life. It improves - and I hate to look at the photos - but twenty years later people think oh my God, those are traces of what you did at that time which do reflect what you are doing today. Recently I had a show in New York City called ‘Good Fences Make Good Neighbours’. The project under the Washington Square Arch generated a lot of discussion, as the neighbours were against it. The reason they were against it is because for the past ninety years they used the arch for their Christmas tree - and the project destroyed that tradition. I really have sympathy for that, but is that a very sound argument? I assume art can be a little bit more interesting than a Christmas tree. Forgive me, I’m not in that tradition. So, with all the procedures and meetings, finally I got the chance to put the
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-Ai Weiwei: Again, I’d say that life is like a nightmare. When I grew up my father was somebody fifteen years or so apart from me. I knew he was a poet, but I know better now that he was also not allowed to be a poet. I will never understand why he was forbidden to write words [by the Chinese authorities]. So, the first twenty years I spent with him in a very remote camp in north-west China. The times were very difficult. We had to live underground underground and it was very dark, no light and we dig out a house of sorts which may be twelve square metres or a little bit more. We had bushes above us, and to live under that has some very interesting aspects, because in the winter in the Gobi Desert winter could be as cold as under 40 degrees. And in summer can be above 30 to 40 degrees. So, it’s 70-80 degrees apart. But living underground means in the summer it’s a little bit colder and in winter it’s not as cold. That’s the condition, and he - he would clean the public toilet and our school-mates would run after him. Those little kids would just throw stones at him or curse him. Basically, he was almost sixty years old and he never really had physical work because he was always a poet. Even as a refugee, he was still a poet - he was always trying to find a job as editor or a teacher. He never really worked physically. But for such hard labour, to be taking care of cleaning the public toilet for many years, he couldn’t even rest for one day for the simple reason that people don’t rest when they go to the toilet, so he couldn’t take off. If he rests for a day, the next day the job will simply be doubled - who will help him? It’s not possible. That was a punishment, a physical punishment. I think in this kind of society - or almost any kind of society - I think they are dealing with people who are intelligent, intellectuals, as they can never really give them a lesson by making an argument. So the punishment is always very physical, very harsh, and it makes it unbearable for you. At the time, I didn’t understand anything. I thought he is an enemy of the State and an enemy of the people, and the sum of that was that I thought we were kind of a bad root in a way. They often say that our blood has some kind of problem and they call us the kind of children that should be re-educated. It means that you are originally bad and you need education. That is why I hate education. As basically the idea of education is that you are not as good as you should be, so you have to be educated. I never simply really agreed with that idea. That’s why I never educated my son. I never thought that I could be influenced by my father - I am deeply influenced by my son, but I never thought I could be influenced by my father because he was, in their eyes, an enemy of the State. It’s such a dangerous name to be called by in revolutionary China. But he is my father, he was my father - I had no other place to go. I had to stay with him, just keep a little bit of a distance. He would have never, never asked me to become an artist or a writer, because in his generation about half a million writers were punished, sent to labour camps. Even in China where they have almost one billion people, 500,000 intellectuals probably already includes everyone - even professors, or even intelligent students in the schools, all could be called writers. So, I grew up in that kind of life. So, I was hardly influenced by my father, except that I helped him burn his books - as he had a lot of books of poetry. I helped him and we had to burn them. Also books about art. He studied in Paris in the 1930s - modern art mostly. So, we had to burn the books, page by page, because otherwise they will not burn. And if you want to burn a book, you have to do it completely, make every page disappear. And that’s basically the influence of my father. I know he loved all those books and he would tell me stories about his early times, the time he spent with Neruda. He was influenced by Rimbaud and de La Mare, Mayakovksy, Hikmet, the Turkish artist, and Lorca, the Spanish poet... but we couldn’t really openly talk about it, because all those things are anti-Revolutionary for the Chinese Communist Party. It was a very harsh time. So now I really understand that I am completely and quite influenced by him because I deeply believe that all those people are sectarians - they hate art, they really hate poetry; they will not accept art to exist because art always reflects the kind of liberty of something, and so the censorship is always there. Still today, in China, censorship is strong. There are certain vocabularies you cannot use on the internet. You cannot even see a movie or watch TV only because the vocabulary can reflect another meaning. So, you can see how deeply dictators believed that art can threaten their existence.

Anthony Downey: You returned to Beijing, and I don’t want to be too chronological but Beijing had obviously changed dramatically since you had lived there. Deng Xiaoping was
in power, the economic revival had happened, and so forth, alongside the economic move from what was effectively a single-market to a mixed market. When you returned to Beijing, how did you find it? Was it difficult? Because it seems that it also opened up a new period in your work where you felt more comfortable taking photographs - specifically photographs such as June, 1994, 1994, which is another pivotal work. It looks throw-away, it looks incidental, but it's an extremely important photograph in the progression of your work.

**Ai Weiwei:** To talk about 1993 I have to talk about 1981, before I left Beijing. On the way to the airport my mum was really worried - this boy that doesn't know a word of English and has no money - has around $300 in the pocket. I told her “Don’t worry, you know I am going home now”. So, I tried to make her laugh, but she couldn’t laugh. I said, “You know in ten years you will see another Picasso”. Now, you can see how naive I am. Of course, twelve years later I came back to China, in 1993. I could never imagine I would go back to China. In twelve years I never even had a moment that I thought I would like to go back to China. Of course, everybody was challenged as Deng Xiaoping opened up markets, and China modernised. But I never had an illusion that China would change. I went back to China and a lot of roads were fixed, a lot of buildings, and they looked quite modern. But some things never changed. And that's true until today. From 1993 till today another twenty years has past. And it never really changed in many ways. It never trusted its own people. After sixty-eight years in power they never let the people to vote, not even once, not in any matter. They have a one-party system. The judicial system belongs to the party, the army belongs to the party, the media all belong to the party: there is no single independent media. Every word, every line has to be checked, you know? So, coming back from the United States I was quite independent, liberal and - as later my interrogators thought - I was “brainwashed through Hollywood movies”. This was the sentence they used. And it's very hard for me to find my home. It's not my home. I would never call China my home because those things never changed. But it's very funny, it is my home - my mum is there, my dad is there, all my, you know, relatives are there. So, I became a stranger at my home. And I started to make a few photos, of people - to take those photos as evidence of my attitude or my response to that time. And every June you know, June 4th or around that time, I would go to Tiananmen Square to do some kind of protest, just to be there. This Square, after 1989, after the army crushed the student's movement, has more underground police than tourists. So, the only thing I can do is take a few photos. Of course, you would never imagine those photos ever could be published because I never considered myself as an artist anymore, because I had no chance in the United States, and again I would have no chance in China. And I started to publish some underground books, trying to do this kind of editing curatorship, to ask people to print down what's happening among the artists, the kind of conceptual activities, so as to leave some kind of evidence for the future. So, I published three books: White Book, Black Book and Grey Book, annually, and then later I curated an art show in the year 2000 called “Fuck Off” and forty or fifty artists participated. That's the short history of that time.

**Anthony Downey:** In that photo - June, 1994, 1994 - your then wife lifts her dress, and obviously it's a wee bit scandalous, but the photograph is not titled after your then wife, it's named after June and the June 4th incident in Tiananmen Square and directly references the fifth-year anniversary of the massacre that happened there in 1989. But it also seems to reference a lot more. Mao Tse-Tung's tomb is in that Square too. This is a site where people would go - Chinese and Westerners - to have their photograph taken. This is also a site that has a history to it, a very specific history to it. It's also one of the most heavily surveilled sites in China, if not the world. And it seems to me that there's quite a lot of playfulness in that image, which you use a lot in your photography - a humorous, playful, parodic approach which doesn’t lack seriousness but enables you to do things that perhaps you wouldn’t be able to get away with otherwise. I am also thinking in 1995 of the photograph Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995, which was one of the first works of yours that I became aware of. And I’m just wondering what level that playfulness plays in your work, specifically the photography from that period?

**Ai Weiwei:** I think there’s some kind of playfulness or humour. Or mostly you find a moment of contradiction and you cannot cope with the contradiction it generates. Some kind of interest - an argument in the photo itself or in the image itself. So, in China they are full of this kind of moment. China has a long history, but it also has a very brutal contemporary history and all those elements coexist at the same time and my life has been through the most harsh things that happened in the twentieth century - communism, feudalism, and capitalism. All happening in the same life and I've been exiled and escaped, then went back to but couldn’t find a self-identity or identity. I
Anthony Downey: It seems, though, at a certain point, that making photographs becomes more politicised - more overtly political - and I want to shift here to works in Study of Perspectives. Obviously you could suggest that there is a politics to that, giving the middle finger to cultural sites, including your own studio. I note that one of the images has you giving the finger to Mr. Trump’s hotel casinos in Atlantic City before Mr Trump became as infamous as he is today. But then they start to become more politically-driven, Weiwei, if I may say, and I’m thinking of Fairytale, 2007, in particular, which was a mass exhibition staged in Kassel in 2007 as part of documenta 12, and you photographed every single one thousand and one people - Chinese people - whom you had planned to move from China, the mainland, to Kassel as part of that show. Kassel is also the home of the brothers Grimm who wrote fairy tales. I’m sure there’s a connection there? Could you talk a little bit about that movement in Fairytale and the Study of Perspectives, 1995-2011? Because things start to get a bit more edgy. I think you start on a path which, at a certain point, it must have crossed your mind that the Chinese government were going to hold you to account, physically if not legally.

Ai Weiwei: Well I think you know my life better than myself! I really have to follow your instruction. And, that is true: you can easily examine somebody from their traces. I think that’s the best way. From 2004, I was taking one photo of my left hand and I have a middle finger sticking out. The series is called A Study of Perspectives. In the beginning it was towards some kind of institutions or mostly institutions, which could be political institutions or symbolic monuments. It’s just like any tourist’s gaze. Anybody, any scenery, would reflect some kind attention or attract some kind of attention or a kind of interest from the tourist, and I realise I am a bored tourist of life. But I also have to make a mark I am there, you know, so I take that. I gave it a name later, much later. I’ve suddenly been recognised as an artist many, many years later, so I call it a Study of Perspectives because that makes it a little bit scholarly, more acceptable. But it’s really very rude or rough, or made up kind of careless images, created out of nonsense. I never believed that it was art but it becomes art anyway. I know if you repeat many many times people will think that that could be art because otherwise why this guy keeps repeating that. You can see the attitude of those images - they are not really very passive but rather a kind of bored images. A lot of them are out of focus, especially the ones taken with the left-hand. Later images from digital cameras could be framed better. And then later I wanted to really gradually become active again in the art world, and two things happened. One is the internet and I got on the internet. A state-owned internet company called SASAC. They said we will have to open a blog because at that time I’d done a lot of interviews in fashion magazines and so on. Because I already practised architecture for quite some time I’d become very well-known in the architecture world in mainland China. Nobody knew - almost nobody knew - I’m an artist but they all knew I’m an architect and I’m allowed to talk about myself or design or new life philosophy or study. So, they said you can open a blog, you’re a perfect person to do that. I said I never touched a computer, I don’t know how to type. They said we’ll give you an assistant. They helped me set up my blog and I think they did something really wrong, horribly wrong, because I immediately fall in love with the blog - I will not do anything else, just keep writing, you know the daily average I would write three blogs a day, and the next morning I would find that blog has been visited by maybe 200,000 people, which is not such a big number in China but I was already very satisfied. I thought, hmm, it’s better than having a newspaper. So, I became extremely popular which encouraged me to create my revolution… You can write on the blog every day. So I started to experience that, and at that time China was still not very alert or didn’t know how to react to this because China wanted to become a modern society - they wanted to have their own internet and they also sense that’s very dangerous but still didn’t know how. Now they have a great Firewall which can shut off anybody at any second. It’s not a problem for China anymore. But I had about three or four years of totally wild life on the blog. I did write over 250,000 words. It could be the sum
of work that many writers spend their lifetime writing. I gave up architecture. I gave up art, basically. I did a lot of shows but I never really paid attention to making those works. But by 2007 a friend of mine introduced me to a documenta curator, to say this is Ai Weiwei and he was an artist but his work may be interesting. So they included me in documenta in 2007. I said right this is a chance to come forward because I never really see myself as an artist but this is documenta. So I told myself I’m not going to do anything which is sculptural or painting but I would just bring 1,001 Chinese people to Kassel and call it *Fairytale*, 2007. And so on the internet I could select those people easily and very efficiently, because in China it’s very hard to even get a passport at that time. But I successfully made the applications and convinced the German ambassador to give a hundred of them a visa. When you plan anything in China, it’s very difficult. They would ask if you are working, your banking account, and many people that I invited are farmers or a minority from very poor areas. They never deposited a penny. But the German ambassador, after I explained him about my work, he said I could give you the green light and everyone got their visa. I became also quite well-known in China and then in Germany. China thinks “people can really fly to Germany”, which is really a miracle. And you know today it’s not possible. You have to do everything very fancy at an early time because later it’s not possible. I managed to do that, and in Germany, in that little town in Kassel, they never see two Chinese walking at the same time in their lifetime. When they saw 1,001 people it’s like a little earthquake that they are having. But also those 1,000 people, almost nobody understands contemporary art. They just take photos, take selfies, all those types of things. I enjoyed that moment and it became a big event for documenta that year. I feel sorry for the rest of the artists - 150 of them - almost nobody mentioned them. They all talked about the 1,001 Chinese.

**Anthony Downey:** Kassel is a small town, for anybody that’s not been there, and 1,001 Chinese suddenly arriving is definitely going to make a stir. Weiwei, I want to shoot forward because you’ve talked about - in interviews that I’ve read, at least - how your incarceration changed everything. It made you what you are today. But arguably, if I may, it wasn’t your incarceration that started this shift but the event of 12 May 2008 - specifically the Sichuan earthquake where 70,000 people died. Of those 70,000, 5,000 were schoolchildren who were tragically caught in buildings that were inadequately and illegally built - the so-called 'Tofu dregs' buildings. These buildings were not fit for purpose. They were the result of corruption. More than 5,000 school children died and a further 70 to 90,000 people died, while 4.8 million people were displaced and made homeless. You went to Sichuan in the immediate aftermath of that. I think Tan Zuoren had already started a Citizen's Report Bureau by then, which you were aware of and for which he was later given four years in prison. Could you talk a little bit about it, because I think - personally, if I may - that Sichuan changed everything for you? At that point being an artist is not enough. It simply isn’t enough to respond to what’s happening in that moment. Could you talk a little bit about the impact of that? Because that impact has definitely informed some of your more recent work, but equally the work that comes out of that, and specifically of the earthquake photographs.

**Ai Weiwei:** The Sichuan earthquake happened in 2008, which is the year China would hold its own Olympics - an Olympics that China made a great effort, for decades, to gain more recognition through. I know they think it’s the best opportunity to establish a modern conversation between China and the West and they want to try and even speak the same language, and they even invited a foreign architect to design their main stadium. For China this is already almost impossible act. Several buildings being designed by foreign architects. One is Rem Koolhaas’ building for CCQG, which is the State-owned media group. Back home, it’s the Communist Party’s hard-core propaganda machine. Now there is a stadium - a National Stadium that reflects national pride, and I happened to be involved with one of the architects involved in the competition - Herzog and de Meuron, architects from Basel in Switzerland. They called me, and since they’ve never been in China they know I love architecture and also understand contemporary western culture, and so they invited me to be part of the design team. I had to fly to Basel, where we made the schematic design in a very quick fashion. Then after that design meeting Jacques Herzog told me "Weiwei we won the competition". I completely don’t understand why we won the competition. There’s another thirteen groups - they are all invited from the West - but Jacques is very confident that we had made a conceptual design that no other company would do. And among these thirteen designers probably ten of them would come from the same kind of concept, but we stood out. So I really thought let’s see, but as a result when it comes out, yes, I realised we really made a big difference from the others and we won the competition. So that’s a year that China was really busy preparing for this celebration, but at the same time right before the opening of the Olympics May 12th, as you mentioned, probably one of the biggest earthquakes that ever happened in contemporary times. Over 70,000 or 80,000 people disappeared, mostly farmers, and in a very remote, poor area. But among them there were about 5,000 students. When something like this happens I feel as if I have suddenly been stoned - I am speechless. People would ask me, *Weiwei you normally would write two or three articles a day, why in the past week you didn’t write anything - what’s wrong with you?* Because people were really frustrated. But I became speechless because I simply realised I don’t have the vocabulary to talk about a situation like this. I am not equipped and I don’t have enough words. So I said I have to go to the place. I brought my assistant with me and with his camera we went to those ruins and did the research and did the interviews. Then we realised what had really happened. Then that was not enough. I kept asking questions- who are those children who lost their life? And of course the State will never answer us. We made about 200 phone calls to state government officials, to every level,
college departments, education departments, civil departments, just trying to find how many people are dead, how many students were dead. They said 'It's secret, you are not allowed to ask for the numbers.' 'Who are you, are you a spy from the West?' 'What are you really trying to do?' Why do you have to ask us all these questions?' I said okay, if you don’t answer me I will do a citizen investigation, I will send people to the local area. I thought this is very simple so I used my social media power to invite volunteers to take part in the investigation. Over one hundred people answered in one day, so I selected them. I ask them the questions - Did they know how to deal with the police? Did they know the local dialect? Are they eating spicy food? Are you afraid to be alone in the darkness or to walk on the street having no light? I tried to prepare those young people who wanted to get involved. And so we selected a few thousand people who I thought are okay to do this. I knew it's going to be a problem. So, we gradually sent people in but immediately we would get a report back that - after they find out some names - they were seize by the police. They would confiscate all the equipment and delete the photos and send them back. But we said if you send them back we will send more. We always talked about it on my blog. Each day we were putting them on the names that found on the blog. So, after those kind of struggles, our people were being arrested, some of them about thirty to forty times. But we finally had all 5,200 students’ names, their birthdays, their parents’ names, the name of the school they belonged to and which class. So those were all published on my blog until the day the government felt this is unbearable and shut off all my blogs. That is really a very historical moment for me because since then I have disappeared from the Chinese internet, and nobody there can type my name. If they type my name the words would come out like sensitive words that are being used or illegal words - the whole database disappeared online.

Anthony Downey: Because everything changes after that? In 2009, SandWeb closed you down and you eventually become a persona non grata in China. But something interesting happens in that process - specifically in relation to Sichuan - and I want to talk to you about something - the notion of shame. It seemed that the Chinese government attempted, in their clampdown on the parents of those children, to shame them into not asking questions. But in effect your blog, the relentless efforts made to list every single child, attempted, using digital means, social media, to shame the Chinese government. And shame in China means something very specific - the loss of face in and of itself is almost incomprehensible if you’re a member of the Communist Party, for example. Was it your intention to shame them? Was shame part of the motivation to make them admit responsibility, and at the very least list and intention to shame them? Was shame part of the motivation to a member of the Communist Party, for example. Was it your digital means, social media, to shame the Chinese government.

Anthony Downey: I want to suggest something crucial in why they did fail, and I do see shame as a key thing here. Shaming a government, literally shaming, rather than taking up a weapon or, you know, inciting revolt, shame is quite an important thing, and how you use it is crucial. Perhaps one of the reasons why you were able not to give in to what must have been extraordinary pressure, eighty-one days in jail under constant watch, is that perhaps - and you might disagree with me here - that what the Chinese government were trying to do with you, they had already tried with your father - that is, they tried to induce shame in him during the cultural revolution and they were trying to do that to you too. There’s a wonderful story that I read from you some time ago. Despite the fact that your father was assigned the lowest job, cleaning the public urinals, he nevertheless ‘took a poet’s pride in cleaning those urinals’. And I get that, to take a poet’s pride in something is quite extraordinary actually because he did it relentlessly and he did it right, which perhaps to a certain extent - and you might again disagree with me - you didn’t feel shame, you felt pride in his endeavour and attitude and were able, many years later, to actually resist that shaming device which is a key component in the People’s Republic of China, specifically when it comes to dissidents. I don’t know whether you made that connection - perhaps I’m over-interpreting it - but do you think there was a connection between what happened to your father and what happened to you?

Ai Weiwei: You are the first person I spoke to that really gets that vocabulary of shame which is a very important word in China. Because we are living in a fatalist society, the whole Confucian culture there is about the idea you are relating to - the idea of honour or the idea of shame. Basically, that’s it, my argument is related to that. I think that by digging out the facts you put this kind of authority on trial, on public trial, but that trial is only to morally question their legitimacy in being in power - and I was quite naive in doing so I think. That’s the only way to expose the truth, and to make any argument we have to base it on certain truths, and if that truth can never be revealed the argument simply doesn’t exist. But later when they arrested me they also used that technique. They said, they accused me of having two wives or that I had married twice - which was not true. They would say that I committed a big crime. ‘You don't pay your taxes’ they said, which is a very ridiculous accusation, but still they try to use shame as tactics to destroy my reputation. They openly told me ‘Weiwei, is it considered a crime in the West if you don’t pay the tax?’ I said yes, it’s a very serious matter because it’s like you are stealing property from the common pocket. But of course in China it’s different. I asked them ‘Do you believe that people will trust you and believe your accusations against me?’ And they said ‘Weiwei, 90% of people will trust us’ and he is very honest in that. That’s the way it plays out if you control the media. You’re the authority, your voice will be heard. Even that is manipulated but still you can trick the 90% of people into believing in you. But of course not today, in my case they actually failed. And they also realise that.

Anthony Downey: I want you to suggest something crucial in why they did fail, and I do see shame as a key thing here. Shaming a government, literally shaming, rather than taking up a weapon or, you know, inciting revolt, shame is quite an important thing, and how you use it is crucial. Perhaps one of the reasons why you were able not to give in to what must have been extraordinary pressure, eighty-one days in jail under constant watch, is that perhaps - and you might disagree with me here - that what the Chinese government were trying to do with you, they had already tried with your father - that is, they tried to induce shame in him during the cultural revolution and they were trying to do that to you too. There’s a wonderful story that I read from you some time ago. Despite the fact that your father was assigned the lowest job, cleaning the public urinals, he nevertheless ‘took a poet’s pride in cleaning those urinals’. And I get that, to take a poet’s pride in something is quite extraordinary actually because he did it relentlessly and he did it right, which perhaps to a certain extent - and you might again disagree with me - you didn’t feel shame, you felt pride in his endeavour and attitude and were able, many years later, to actually resist that shaming device which is a key component in the People’s Republic of China, specifically when it comes to dissidents. I don’t know whether you made that connection - perhaps I’m over-interpreting it - but do you think there was a connection between what happened to your father and what happened to you?

Ai Weiwei: Yes, I think you are very sensitive and very correct on that matter. But I recognised it much, much later, when I really consciously thought about it. My father worked in that
job which is the most unthinkable job in any kind of labour because they think it’s not enough to punish him physically but you have to shame him. So each day he would go to those latrines and it’s almost impossible to figure out how to clean those kinds of places, but after one or two hours struggle, he would make the room very clean, you know he would use his shovel, so he would cut off all those corners very precise and go and put this dry sand on top of those, how do you call that dis…?

Anthony Downey: Disinfectant?

Ai Weiwei: Yes. And, it’s very difficult because there’s no water and almost no toilet paper. People just use the grass or sometimes use cotton or a cigarette packet.

Anthony Downey: But never the Communist Party newspaper.

Ai Weiwei: No, no, because you can’t use the newspaper because every line mentions Chairman Mao’s name. To a degree it is a very, very ironic, but you have to be most serious in dealing with those issues. So my father made those toilets so clean, his job made this look like a sculpture. He really did a good job and the people started to be very proud of this guy - walking into his clean toilets, in those kind of very rough, very rural areas, were more like walking to a church. But still the next day will be a big mess again because there is no roof, if it’s raining or it’s snowing, it’s part of nature, and it would be a mess again. So, day after day, I realised that nobody can destroy this guy because he is so proud of whatever he’s doing. He has this kind of method of doing things. It’s just nobody can penetrate him. Its only very later that I realised that and how important it was for me.

Anthony Downey: That’s understandable. I want to move it on from shame, but maybe we’ll return to it. I want to talk about calculated risk, the notion of calculated risk, because I think it’s played a big part in your life and I think it’s played a big part in your work from 2009 onwards when you knew you’re being under surveillance, you knew you are being threatened. You are placed under house arrest in 2010. In 2011, you are in prison for 81 days. You are then accused of crimes against the State. You’re accused of tax evasion, and your passport is taken away. And yet you continue working. And this notion of calculated risk I think is quite important to your work, as a simple piece of research will reveal the following. Apart from the State. You’re accused of tax evasion, and your passport is taken away. And yet you continue working. And this notion of calculated risk I think is quite important to your work, as a simple piece of research will reveal the following. Apart from the

Ai Weiwei: It’s very interesting when you talk about this calculated risk. Blackjack playing requires that you understand the game - that means you understand the potential loss, what you can lose really. I mean whatever you’re doing can end in loss and you know you have to have something to play otherwise you are completely lost. As long as you do still have some stacks then you can get back, it’s not a problem, it’s a matter of how you rationally analyse the cards. Whether the odds are against you or can be, in theory, up for you, but you have to be very disciplined, you have to be very concentrated, extremely concentrated. We know if you are extremely concentrated it really generates your potential of winning in every aspect in your life. You know most of the time our potentials are not being fully used because we don’t have enough concentration.

We lose concentration and that means the potential of you as someone who plays or has the potential within the game is not fully being recognised. I’ll not talk about those games anymore because I already lost the magic, because I simply don’t need to make money anymore… But in the real life, when I deal with extremely complicated political situations and the situation is very dangerous, if you concentrate on the cards you have in your hand, you still can make the best out of it and that means you really have some kind of possibility of revenge. I do not really argue about large principles, but rather deal with the matters, such as surveillance. So, I said okay, you like surveillance if you have to put twenty-five survey cameras around my compound - that means you really have a strong interest in me, so let me put a surveillance camera right above my bed or my working table in my office, which they are shy to do, because they try and scare me. It is intimidating to say you are being watched. So I said let me set up this. I set up a camera right above my bed, and I started to broadcast it online. After I think two or three days, seventy hours or something, the State police called me, they begged me and said ‘Weiwei please shut down your camera!’ because over a million people are watching it. They start to grab the image which I’ve made picking my nose, or how the nude body moves in sleep, and I carried on doing this kind of thing because it’s really hard - even if you do nothing very spectacular, it’s very shameful to see those images on the internet. But they sincerely said ‘Please, shut it down!’.

I said ‘Is that an order or is that just trying to convince me’? They said ‘This is a State order,’ so I said okay. I thought you wanted to really know me, I said. I always use their tactics to push it a little bit further, to make them feel that it is impossible to deal with this guy. And after they took my passport, I said okay let me just put a bicycle in front of my door. Every day I will put new fresh flowers into the basket of that bicycle and I take one photo and I put it on the internet. I repeat this exactly, almost to the same second - 9 o’clock in the morning - and after 600 days they returned my passport. They said ‘Here’s your passport, please stop that!’ So, it’s just fun that art still can use as a bargaining tool. It’s very strange, because the people in this kind of power they don’t really understand art, but they think that art is some kind of mystical activity. So, why is this guy, an artist, dancing Gangnam style with one million people
watch him? Anything that becomes ridiculous. When I held my leg as if it was a gun [which started the so-called “leg gung” craze on the internet], and then somebody hold their leg as a weapon to shoot, they realise this man can really generate some kind of revolution by doing ridiculous things… They think that whatever they do, it’s not ridiculous. When I take selfies, it’s just to show your existence, show you’re the being, you’ve been there or you’re still doing those things. For me I think it’s very powerful.

Anthony Downey: It also seems that we’ve embarked upon a new period in your work, dare I say, that has always been present. We could go back and look at the Tompkins Square photographs. We could go back and look at the black man holding the photograph - all those images from ’84, ’85, and ’86. And looking at your new film, Human Flow, 2017, which involved filming in twenty-three countries and forty refugee camps, to produce a panorama of what is today the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. More specifically it represents the condition of the refugee. It’s not a refugee crisis, and you’ve been very clear about this. To call it a refugee crisis would suggest that the problem is with refugees. It’s a humanitarian crisis and it’s probably a crisis in the West liberal democracy and how it deals with this humanitarian disaster. So I just wanted to ask you a question that’s perhaps ultimately unanswerable - Is being an artist enough at this stage to address these issues? Because you’ve already deftly and very cleverly managed to mix art and activism. But it seems to me you’re almost fulfilling your father’s wish that you didn’t become an artist, because you seem to be attempting to reinvent what potentially art can do in relation to these cataclysmic events. So is being an artist enough for you today Ai Weiwei or is there something else to come, is there something else already happening?

Ai Weiwei: It sounds as if I have some kind of conspiracy, but I really don’t know that much about being an artist or being an activist. I act the way I do by some kind of intuition and some kind of curiosity. I think of those things, the signs of life, and I talk about how we recognise our life and how we, through our curiosity, discover ourselves and we find a new possibility of being ourselves… I never really found out, until now, and I’m still very confused… So I’m very happy that I got involved, my sensitivity got me involved, to take action in this so-called ‘refugee crisis’. I learnt so much through the past year and a half. I made the film and it’s very much like you are trying to hold up a mirror, or it could be a broken mirror, already shattered, to what you see before you. But still, even a broken mirror still reflects some kind of reality. Through that we still recognise ourselves. That’s the purpose of the film - to have something to reflect ourselves in. It’s not about the refugee, about our humanity, about us - it’s really about how a society functions and how we look humanity as one. Can we really accept this situation exists? If we do accept that human dignity or humanity is being crushed or being ignored, being totally damaged like this, then who are we? How do we think about ourselves, or today’s life and our future, and what are we going to leave to our children or generations to come? These are the questions that I think everybody cannot afford not to ask.

Anthony Downey: The mirror is also a key source of inducing shame in someone. Shame, I’m sure you well know, is when people try to literally split you in two to make you ashamed of something that you’ve done, to distance you from that act. Some people can cope with shame much better and it seems the western world increasingly can deal with shame much better these days.

Ai Weiwei: Yes, that would seem to be the case.
From 27 October 2017 until 18 February 2018, FOMU presented the first solo exhibition of Chinese visual artist and political activist Ai Weiwei in Belgium. With his radical visual critique of human rights violations, abuse of power, and the unchecked state control of the Chinese government in particular he’s one of the world’s most important contemporary artists. Designed by the artist himself, the exhibition at FOMU presents a thought-provoking overview of Ai Weiwei’s photographic work from the 1990s until today.