

# Ai Weiwei Addresses Human Rights

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Ai Weiwei Circle Fence, 2017

Powder coated mild steel, polypropylene netting Courtesy of the artist Photo: Timothy Schenck, Courtesy Public Art Fund, NY On view as part of the citywide exhibition Good Fences Make Good Neighbors, presented by Public Art Fund October 12, 2017-February 11, 2018

Ai Weiwei's Public Art Fund exhibit employs fences as an extended metaphor for increasing barriers around the world. Three large shapes and over 300 smaller art works — bus station shelters, wall art, and lamp post banners — span the five boroughs. One large work, *Gilded Cage*, is a dome-shaped bird-cage-like soaring structure with about five subway turnstile mini-structures inside. The cage door faces Central Park as its see-through silhouette displays the Plaza Hotel and luxury Fifth Avenue businesses. As we know, even high end companies in Manhattan have entry level jobs for sales clerks and cleaning people. It's unlikely the lower-paid employees can afford to live in Manhattan. This cage's transparency reminds us that street vendors and entry-level employees daily work alongside executives and well-heeled customers and clients.



Ai Weiwei Arch, 2017 Galvanized mild steel and mirror polished

stainless steel Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio/ Frahm & Frahm Photo: Jason Wyche, Courtesy Public Art Fund, NY On view as part of the citywide exhibition Good Fences Make Good Neighbors, presented by Public Art Fund October 12, 2017-February 11, 2018

A second 37-foot tall cage rises under the Washington Square Park arch near where the artist lived for about 12 years starting in 1982. This area has changed over 25 years and no longer has the same numbers of immigrants; the cage here hints that it's harder to get around the restrictions of entry into USA and life in the Village where Ai, along with Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and many other talents, got their start as young artists. The third large structure is a 1000-foot-long circular fence around the Unisphere in Queens. One can sit or play in it, yet as it circles the globe, it reminds us that immigrants worldwide are being fenced in or out. Smaller wire structures that dot the five boroughs are not openly oppressive, and some offer seating or shelter. So fences as a symbol, metaphor, and trope provide a platform for discussion – a beautifully crafted reminder about our disparate neighborhoods and increasing security to travel and even to enter buildings. In some ways, fencing materials exemplify the differences between grand high rises on Fifth Avenue, tenements on the Lower East Side, and family neighborhoods in Queens. We all live in proscribed spaces, and fewer and fewer leave their doors unlocked or open.



Ai Weiwei Gilded Cage, 2017 Mild steel, paint Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio/ Frahm & Frahm Photo: Jason Wyche, Courtesy Public Art Fund, NY On view as part of the citywide exhibition Good Fences Make Good Neighbors, presented by Public Art Fund October 12, 2017-February 11, 2018

The banners with the faces of immigrants are on lamp posts, yet even this symbol of hope is muted. Each immigrant's name is on a sign, but the Public Art Fund information takes up a larger part of the sign. Since the images are pixilated, they are half there and half air, so they are as easy to miss as they are to see. This is a different trope or a way of suggesting presence and absence at the same time. The banners shine a 'light' on immigrants and their plight, but only if the passersby look up and pay attention. And even then, what good will that do? This art project cannot help immigrants directly, but it is positioned to address the issue that immigrants are a global concern in a way that is metaphorical, non-threatening, and engaging.



Ai Weiwei Banner 112, 2017 CNC-cut Polymar truck tarp

Courtesy of the artist Photo: Jason Wyche, Courtesy Public Art Fund, NY On view as part of the citywide exhibition Good Fences Make Good Neighbors, presented by Public Art Fund October 12, 2017-February 11, 2018

Weiwei's other art projects cover a wide range. The artist directly immerses himself in his latest film, *Human Flow*, shot as he visited twenty-four countries where viewers can glimpse the suffering of some of the 65 million displaced people today, many of whom live in unsanitary conditions with inadequate food and shelter. No one would choose this life. This is a global crisis. The United States is involved due to its participation in bombings in Syria and acts of war the public may not know about such as troops in Niger. In his New School talk sponsored by the New York Times, Ai related that his curiosity/concerns as a human being drove him and a crew of over 200 to research and make this film. It has been strongly criticized in Germany where Ai lives in exile when he is not on the road. Ai's prison experiences, his exile from China, and the imprisonment and disappearances of his friends there drive home the plight of many inside and outside the countries where they were born.



Ai Weiwei Harlem Shelter 3, 2017 Galvanized mild steel

Courtesy of the artist Photo: Jason Wyche, Courtesy Public Art Fund, NY On view as part of the citywide exhibition Good Fences Make Good Neighbors, presented by Public Art Fund October 12, 2017-February 11, 2018

Anyone familiar with Ai Weiwei's major exhibitions knows they are labor-intensive, rooted in cultural histories, and extensively researched and crafted. Those four points add up to a fifth:

Ai's arts variously address universal human rights. At the Brooklyn Museum, Ai recreated his incarceration, the tiny dimensions of his cell, and the guards who watched him night and day, leaving him no privacy or dignity. At Miami's Perez Museum (PAM) opening exhibit, Weiwei offered a range of works intermixing past, present, and future moments: from bicycle towers to the names of school children killed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (his protests over their deaths led to his arrest) to his many ways of turning centuries-old crafts into "art." For example, a Han Dynasty vase overpainted with a Coca Cola logo exemplifies how American advertising has perverted Chinese values, how propaganda can wipe out traditions, and how Ai uses a gimmick to draw attention to something old that has been lost. Ai has been widely criticized for imitating a drowned infant on a beach; this crass act no doubt quadrupled the number of people who became aware of the loss of this tiny life.

All of this leads to my and Ai's next point. Ai told a reporter, "My art in principle is about crossing the lines. My privilege is to represent people who are dying, in prison [unable to speak out]." Each time Ai crosses the line, he makes points germane to Chinese, American, and world cultures/histories. His 1980s experiences in New York are just as important as growing up as the son of an exiled and silenced Chinese dissident poet. Ai's approach can be uncomfortable; it oversteps the boundaries of traditional processes, subjects, materials, and genres. For this and other reasons, some dislike or dismiss Ai's art. It is unfamiliar. It is confrontational. It challenges us to do more than stand inside or outside the cage. By [Jan Garden Castro](#)