

# *The Atlantic*



Ai Weiwei's installation, *Law of the Journey*, at the National Gallery in Prague

## **How Should Art Address Human Rights?**

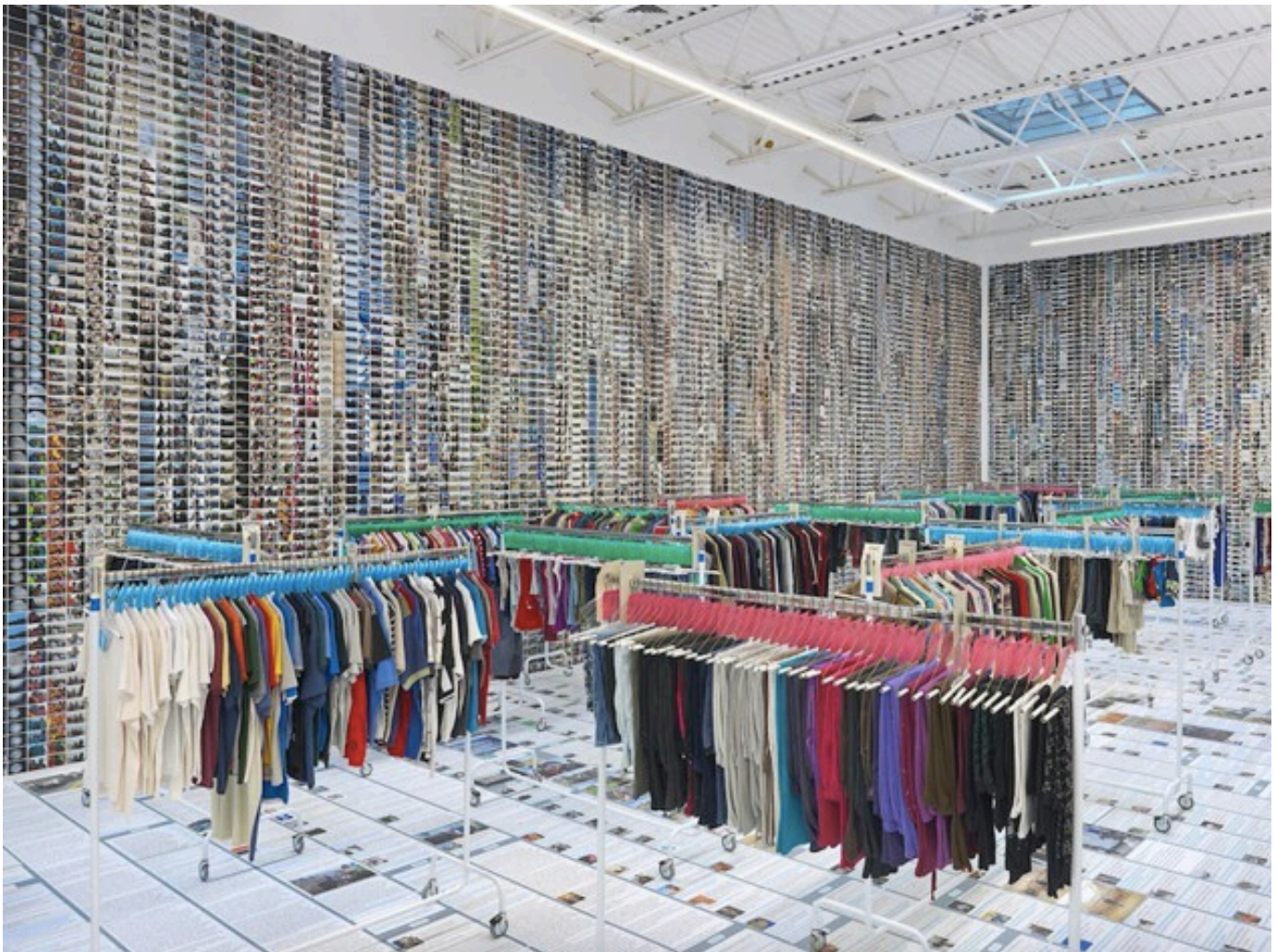
Artists who call attention to victims of conflict and violence must strike a balance between self-expression and respect for their subjects.

Last month marked six years since the start of the Syrian war, which has forced millions of people to flee their homes in one of the largest humanitarian crises in modern history. Perhaps the artist who has most visibly used his work to draw attention to the conflict is Ai Weiwei, whose political activism has earned him a reputation as China's foremost creative dissident. Ai has made works focused on the refugee crisis for years, but lately his projects have taken on a greater sense of urgency. His newest exhibit, *Law of the Journey*, was recently unveiled at the National Gallery in Prague and features a massive inflatable lifeboat with 258 faceless, rubber figures on board—evoking the treacherous journey some refugees make to Europe. Earlier this week, the Public Art Fund announced Ai would build more than 100 fence-themed installations in New York across multiple boroughs, asking the city's inhabitants to reflect on the ideas of barriers, nationhood, and security.

But one of Ai's exhibits displayed last fall felt like an especially visceral plea on behalf of refugees. For a few months in 2016, Deitch Projects in New York hosted *Laundromat*, an exquisite installation that featured refugee clothing washed, ironed, and sorted by type on portable garment racks, the kind you'd find at sample sales in the city. *Laundromat* included 2,046 items—hundreds of pounds of clothing—left by migrants in Greece near the Macedonian border, and then mended in Ai's Berlin studio. *Laundromat* was, in many ways, overwhelming: There were tiny onesies and snowsuits, and rows of sneakers. Color photographs from Ai's trips to refugee camps plastered the walls, while news reports about the crisis papered the floor.

Like Ai, a number of artists in America and abroad are focusing on human rights and calling attention to the refugee crisis. But given the prominence of social media and real-time journalism their task becomes more elusive: With Syrians trapped in besieged cities posting farewell videos online and a 7-year old girl tweeting from Aleppo, what can artists add to the testimonials of the victims themselves? Artists can certainly capture crises via their own aesthetic sensibility, and can use their platforms to draw a different kind of awareness to specific tragedies. But in doing so, many artists like Ai have had to figure out how to balance their own perspectives as emotionally invested outsiders with respect for their subjects. Often, the most resonant art they create are works where the excesses of self-expression have been peeled back; in the cases of pieces like *Laundromat*, they allow the evidence of the crisis to connect with viewers as directly as possible.

Or, as Ai put it to me when describing the footwear in *Laundromat*: "The shoes we can identify with [are] the same shoes on our feet." That is, there's an immediate sense of empathy prompted by seeing the cast-off sneakers of people from halfway around the world. "You begin to understand that we all have the same basic needs," Ai told me, "that our sense of humanity and integrity, our desire for warmth and safety, to be well-treated, and respected, are the same." Garments are the last protection of our dignity, he said. Just as Ai gathered tons of twisted rebar from collapsed schools during the Sichuan earthquakes in 2008, and straightened them piece by piece, he described the ritual of cleaning, drying, and ironing each garment for *Laundromat*, "like any parent would wash their own children's clothes."



Ai Weiwei's *Laundromat* (Genevieve Hanson / Courtesy of Jeffrey Deitch Inc., New York.)

Works like *Laundromat* are meant to make viewers stop and look without sensationalizing or normalizing the crisis. On one hand, their creators make careful decisions in order to stay true to their own individual style. On the other hand, their work necessarily has an external gravity that tends to take precedence over surface aesthetics. The artists I spoke to are keenly aware of the hundreds and thousands, if not millions, of people their work represents and advocates for.

Like Ai, the American artist Patricia Cronin has used garments to make work about human-rights violations far from where she lives in New York. She's also sensitive to her role as an outsider creating art about other people's suffering. "I want people to see and care about what's happening in these distant geographic areas through the clothes that women and girls wear every day. Just like the jeans and sweaters we put on every morning," Cronin told me. For her installation *Shrine for Girls*, which debuted at the 2015 Venice Biennale inside a 16th-century church, she piled clothing on each of the venue's three marble altars to symbolize three moments of gendered violence in history. One altar held brightly colored saris and a small photograph of two teenage cousins in India who were raped and lynched the previous May. Another altar held hijabs representing the 276 Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2014. On the last altar was a heap of apron-type uniforms for the tens of thousands of Irish women forced into slave-labor conditions in Catholic Church-run laundries from the 18th-to-late-20th century.



Patricia Cronin's Shrine for Girls (Uttar Pradesh), featuring saris and a photograph. (Mark Blower)



Patricia Cronin's Shrine for Girls (Chibok), featuring hijabs and a photograph. (Mark Blower)

In Cronin's Brooklyn studio, I asked whether she ever feels overwhelmed by speaking for female victims of violence, and she quickly corrected me: Her work does not *give* voice to anyone. Artists cannot speak for their subjects, Cronin explained, and because the women and children in her work have been silenced, they can't speak for themselves or through her. "I think of my *Shrine for Girls* as creating a space for global bereavement," Cronin said. The work was shown last June at the FLAG Art Foundation in New York, and in 2017 Cronin plans to exhibit it across India, Ireland, and Nigeria, using shipping crates (to also address the issue of human trafficking) instead of marble altars.

Artists who confront such urgent problems diligently consider the dignity of their subjects. According to the artist Rania Matar, each of the photographs from her ongoing series *Invisible Children* helps restore a sense of individuality to the refugees she encounters. Matar, who lives in Boston but was born and raised in Lebanon, said that on trips home in 2014, she started seeing young Syrian refugees on Beirut's streets. "Some were nervous talking to me and didn't want to be photographed," Matar told me. "But others were excited to be paid attention to, and after I gained their trust and talked to them, the process became collaborative."

Matar shoots her portraits on the same block where she meets each refugee—for example, a young girl of 10 or 12 selling chewing gum, flowers, or Kleenex. Without the focus of her lens, the children can be all-too-easy to miss, or dismiss. "They seem to blend with the graffiti on the walls in front of where they're standing," she said, explaining the title of her project. "Just like an added new layer of ripped billboard advertising, as invisible and as anonymous." Matar said she always lets the children pose without direction, so the image better reflects their personality. And while she doesn't consider herself an activist, Matar donates a percentage of the prints' profits to a Syrian refugee organization.

Of the 4.5 million people living in Lebanon, roughly one million are displaced Syrians. Against the backdrop of Lebanon's weak economy and domestic political tensions, Matar told me, the country is struggling to integrate the large refugee population. When we spoke in December, Matar was unsure how *Invisible Children* would be received in Lebanon in January. "People are too close to the problem there," she said at the time. But after her Beirut opening, she described the positive reactions she received and how many people there she believes did see "the humanity of the work."



Six-year-old Tamer poses in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2015. (Rania Matar)

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Some observers may find something inherently queasy in the idea of artists capitalizing on human-rights crises, whether financially or via a boost to their reputations. It's a discomfort Cronin confronts head on, embracing the layers of her work, and her identity as an artist with an activist bent—who does, indeed, want to sell what she has created. In a 2015 interview, Cronin explained: "With *Shrine for Girls*, are they really just a pile of girls' clothes? Yes. It is really a shrine? Yes ... Is it

for sale? Yes. And does 10 percent of my profits go to three non-profit organizations connected to the tragic events? Yes.” Ai has been heralded for his empathy-laced activism, but he’s also a global brand, whose suite of 12 bronze Zodiac animal head sculptures sold for 3.4 million pounds at a Phillips London auction, nearly two years ago.

Further, critics and viewers don’t always respond warmly to works about human rights and refugees. As one of the world’s biggest contemporary artists, Ai has courted plenty of controversy, with one notable recent incident standing out. On September 2, 2015, the body of the three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach after his family’s inflatable boat capsized; a horrifying picture of him lying on the sand made international headlines and became a defining photograph of a growing crisis. But mere months later, Ai restaged Kurdi’s death, placing himself in the child’s place on a pebbled beach in Lesbos, where the artist had a studio for his refugee-related projects. The disdain came swiftly, with writers calling the move “crass” or otherwise declaring the reenactment “should not exist.”

Art or not, critics felt there was a right way—and a wrong way—to react publicly to a human disaster. Regarding the Alan image, “I think the so-called criticism I have received has no merit,” Ai told me over email. “Where does this anger come from? They can’t accept this reality? When people try to guard certain topics, it only shows the weakness of their minds and their own moral standings.”

Cronin, for one, seems to be attempting a balance between being deferential to the subject and provocative to the viewer. “I’m an artist over here,” she said, “but I want you to look over *there* at the women and girls who deserve all of your attention.” She added that she hopes when viewers see *Shrine for Girls*, her persona has exited the room. Still, an artist can be physically present in a work while shifting the focus to her subjects. Ana Teresa Fernández’s *Erasure*—currently part of the Denver Art Museum’s *Mi Tierra* exhibit—includes a video performance based on the 2014 disappearance of 43 male college students from a small Mexican town, who were seemingly abducted by local authorities for staging protests. Fernández has described the hour-long process of covering herself entirely, using several gallons of black paint, as a commemoration to the students whose lives were, in her words, “obliterated by the Mexican government.”

Like Ai’s photo of himself as Kurdi, *Erasure* seeks to put the artist in the victim’s place but through a more metaphorical and subtle approach. Fernández is also closer to the situation she’s critiquing: A native of Mexico, she comes from a politically active family, and her grandfather was jailed several times for attending protests. Indeed, there are plenty of artists with greater proximity—both geographically and culturally—to the issues their work responds to. Over the past few years, there have been various smaller-scale shows by Syrian artists reflecting on their personal experience of the war. This week, an exhibit of artworks by refugee children opened at the Nader Art Museum in Florida to show viewers what millions of Syrians have endured the last six years.

Other curators across the country are taking an even broader approach to humanitarian art. The Museum of Modern Art recently featured an exhibition titled *Insecurities* that examined past, present, and future refugee crises via various forms of emergency shelter. Through photos, installations, and recovered artifacts, *Insecurities* showed viewers the fragile living conditions refugees and other displaced persons endure—calling to mind Ai’s and Cronin’s worn garments. “No word but ‘disgrace’ can describe our passivity in the face of the current displacement of more than 65 million people,” *The New Yorker* wrote of the exhibition.

Ultimately, the question at the root of these kinds of works is: What is the role of art in fostering ongoing dialogue about disaster, conflict, and suffering? Some, like Ai choose to be overt artist-activists, while others like Matar and Fernandez shy away from such labels. These creators often express a sense of desperation, knowing that time is running out, if it hasn't already, for some of their subjects. Still, their works convey an abiding hope in humanity that can be missing from Twitter feeds and news reports about atrocities. Whether through racks of refugee clothing in Manhattan, a mound of saris on a Venetian altar, or children's portraits on the streets of Beirut, the best pieces of art suggest the world doesn't have to be this way.

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