

Public Art Works

SEASON 1 - EPISODE #6

ART FOR CHANGE

Nicholas Baume, Ai Weiwei & Bitta Mostofi

TRT 31:53



JEFFREY WRIGHT: Hi everybody. I'm your host, Jeffrey Wright, and welcome to the sixth and final episode of season one of the Public Art Fund podcast Public Art Works, where we use public art as a means of jumpstarting broader conversations about New York City, our history, and our current moment—which is something that lies at the very core of what we think public art should do.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: We are not alone in this. Take a listen...

PUBLIC VOICE 1: Well I think public art can incite social change by bringing people together, starting discussions, debates on topics that otherwise wouldn't be speaking about.

PUBLIC VOICE 2: If you walk by a piece of public art, it might change your mood, or change and it might steer you in a direction of positive social change,

PUBLIC VOICE 3: I think it encourages people to stop, take pause, to take your thinking a bit further.

PUBLIC VOICE 4: It's an outlet, and it's a creative way to tell people about an issue that they might not know about.

PUBLIC VOICE 5: A great way to communicate and send messages to people because you feel, you feel not, not necessarily think.

PUBLIC VOICE 6: I feel like if there's more public art it will just make everybody kind of mellow down a little bit. Because art tends to be a really big stress reliever. And you know, it's something that would really benefit us as a society, especially now.

PUBLIC VOICE 7: I mean I think all art is political to some degree.

PUBLIC VOICE 8: Bringing awareness to, to things that you know people aren't exposed to in their daily life something outside of what you normally see.

PUBLIC VOICE 9: I think public art incites social change by making people feel more connected to the city. And I think it can make people feel closer together because the

experience we all share is that of being a New Yorker.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: See? Public art generates conversation by its very nature. It intersects our parks, our sidewalks, even our rivers. It causes people to stop and think by being beautiful. By being strange or playful or funny or alarming. By giving them an image or an experience they wouldn't otherwise have.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: It can also bring awareness to some of the most important and most troubling issues of our time.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: So let's get right into it.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: This is an excerpt from the 2017 documentary film *Human Flow*, directed by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. What you're hearing is an inflatable raft full of refugees arriving on the shore of the Greek island of Lesbos. Weiwei is embedded with volunteers awaiting their arrival. He helps a young man steady himself on solid ground. He gets him a blanket.

AI WEIWEI: Some hot tea? Where is the hot tea? Here is the tea... Good, good, good.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Weiwei has been observing and documenting the refugee crisis in Europe and beyond for years now. It's become the impetus for much of his recent work, including the citywide exhibition he made in 2017 with Public Art Fund called *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: The exhibition explored both the current refugee crisis and the history of New York as an immigrant city. The most visible of the nearly 300 works created for the exhibition were two monumental sculptures that evoked cages and security barriers.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: One was a silver cage that occupied the entire space under the arch in Washington Square Park. Visitors could pass through an opening cut through the middle, a passageway in the shape of two people embracing.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: The other was installed at Doris C. Freedman Plaza at the base of Central Park, which is named for Public Art Fund's trailblazing founder. It was a round and towering, gilded cage with turnstiles leading to nowhere.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: These might have been the showstoppers, so to speak, but smaller interventions could be found citywide—from fence-like metal canopies that curved over bus stops, to a rope barrier surrounding the Unisphere in Queens, to lamppost banners featuring perforated photographs of immigrants and refugees.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: It's a project and a message that remains potent today as the refugee

crisis has only worsened in Europe and the Middle East and at our own borders here in the United States.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Public Art Fund director and chief curator Nicholas Baume asked Weiwei about the origins of the project in New York last year, as well as some of Weiwei's other work, including *Human Flow*.

NICHOLAS BAUME: So you had become very involved in the refugee crisis. What was that experience like for you?

AI WEIWEI: We all know there's so many refugees forced to leave their home, but we don't know there's 65 million of them. We know a lot of them come to Europe. But only when you're standing on the shore, to see boat carrying all those old people, young kids, pregnant lady, childrens come to the shore, then you're really scared about what really happened. People would give up their home to go to foreign locations with nothing they understand—their language, their religion, their habit, their custom—but just to try to survive. So that is shocking to to see and to experience later how Europe and how the world look at those issues and then how to treat the people with very simple daily need. And how people have been betrayed, or abandoned by not only their own nation but by the world community. So those things are very shocking. Because we have all understanding about civilization, democracy, freedom, human rights, human dignity. And those things, when being challenged and being tested, then you see how far we are we are from a real, you can call it, established society. But you can see how fragile that can be. So, for me, it's try to understand humanity and human nature and global politics.

AI WEIWEI: So we traveled 23 nations, 40 camps, interviewed 600 people. And of course, this is the endless footage but...

NICHOLAS BAUME: So this was, this was the film that you decided to make, *Human Flow*.

AI WEIWEI: Yeah but beginning we not even think about film. It's really personal experience for education for myself. But gradually you think the material can use as a film, a structure to it, has some purpose to make a film. And that journey make me have better perspective many, many political issues.

NICHOLAS BAUME: The film was released in New York City the same week that we opened *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*. How did the film and the exhibition relate and how do they differ?

AI WEIWEI: It's such a beautiful coincidence. Film takes two years to make, but released at same moment as the Public Art Fund *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*. The subject matter, the concerns of immigrants and public policy, and refugee conditions, matches each other. And it helps build up this kind of sensitivity, which make both projects not only much more

visible, but deeper in exploring what is behind those projects. I think it's very successfully been done, when it's very symbolically, carefully, carefully integrated with every part of the city, with 300 locations. You know. Some are very noticeable, some are even unnoticeable, which is the beauty of it.

AI WEIWEI: Globally, we are facing dramatic change in every aspect, politically, economically, culturally. It always need new language to define our time. Talking about immigration, refugees, where we come from, how we look at ourselves, how we should care about other people who is unfortunate, in desperate situation, 65 million people lost their homes in past few years. And it will be more people in relate to climate change, relate to other wars and a lot of uncertainties about our time. So a project like this, once again, to questioning our condition both physically and mentally, I think that's a functioning of contemporary art is to put all those important questions into our daily life.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: The audio you're hearing is from a protest that was staged in and around Weiwei's Washington Square Park sculpture on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2018. Activists and some city council members, even, were protesting ICE's detainment of Ravi Ragbir, an immigrant rights activist and executive director of New York's New Sanctuary Coalition, who has been fighting his own deportation for nearly 20 years. A week later, a judge ruled that "the government acted wrongly" and Ragbir was released.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: When it comes to immigrant rights, our city, a staunch sanctuary city, leads by example in other ways too.

BITTA MOSTOFI: I'm Bitta Mostofi I'm the Commissioner for the New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. And really that means that I get to help create programs and policies and initiatives that allow New York City to be a welcoming city to and to ensure that as a city we're being responsive to the needs of our incredibly diverse and incredible community.

BITTA MOSTOFI: We're lucky to be in New York City, I am, to work in a city where nearly 40% of the population is foreign born, and when you add in the children of immigrants, that's, it's actually 60% of our population. And so, if we're actually talking about the history of America and what we mean in terms of serving immigrant populations or who they are, we're just talking about who we are.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Bitta and her team at the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Affairs—MOIA, for short—oversee a broad range of programs and initiatives, from advocacy work and awareness campaigns, to legal counsel, to conducting research on, for instance, the significant human and economic impact that certain draconian immigration policies might have.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Throughout her work, both at the Mayor's office and with non-profits before, Bitta has always understood and advocated for the essential role that art can play

in creating dialogue around these issues with the public. At MOIA, her art-related initiatives have included an artist-in-residence program, theater projects with immigrant youth, and initiatives like the artist Tania Bruguera's *CycleNews*, which worked with an immigrant women's group in Queens to reach out to new and undocumented immigrants here in New York and inform of the range of services MOIA offers.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: For Bitta, an art-inflected approach is at the core of who she is as an activist. It started with her upbringing in Chicago in the 1990s.

BITTA MOSTOFI: I think I was lucky in a way that I started to engage in advocacy and activism through the music scene really, kind of growing up in like a punk scene in Chicago. And it, it was sort of through that experience, the utilization of sort of music and an alternative community to talk about issues that young people were experiencing and to talk frankly about racism and sexism that I saw that art and music in this scenario allowed a kind of free-flow of communication in a way you might otherwise not experience it and created a sense of community from it.

BITTA MOSTOFI: I've always seen the value of being able to challenge what feel like constraints that are artificially created and the ability for art in all its sort of different mediums to penetrate that, and to do so in sometimes subversive ways, sometimes very direct ways, but certainly in ways that strike a chord for people and provoke conversation. And so I've always utilized that kind of way of thinking in my own activism.

BITTA MOSTOFI: I often have said, if we're going to do a protest what is the spectacle? Like, what is the way that you're sparking the conversation? If you're just marching in the street that's not necessarily going to change the narrative about the issue. How can you visually capture people's attention? What can you do that changes a conversation in a way that provokes people to think about it in a new way, or maybe get involved in something that they might not have otherwise done? I really believe that thinking about things creatively in that way is so powerful and so much of moving the dial forward and art allows you to do that in a way that other forms of dialogue or diplomacy might not.

BITTA MOSTOFI: There's only so much data does for people. I can kind of 'til I'm dry in the throat tell people the economic contributions that immigrants give us and the incredible richness that we have through food and culture in the city and you don't really have to turn one way or another to realize that immigrant communities are in all sectors of our workforce. They're so vital to who we are and to our ability frankly to have the communities and the lives that we do. You can, you can kind of talk about this at length and it just might not penetrate, right? But it's those individual stories, it's the very personal expression of somebody's own journey that tends to strike the chord and change hearts and minds, to be a little cliché here.

BITTA MOSTOFI: And I think Ai Weiwei's ability to put himself out there through his art and to make his art bold in telling both his story but also the story of countless others is extremely important.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: This brings us back to Nicholas and Weiwei, as storytelling is deeply embedded in so much of Weiwei's work. As is his personal narrative—both his upbringing in Post-Maoist China and his 2011 detainment by the Chinese government.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: His struggles continue. Weiwei has been based in Berlin primarily since his passport was returned and he was released. Yet just last summer, his Beijing studio was demolished without warning by Chinese authorities. Here are Nicholas and Weiwei again.

NICHOLAS BAUME: *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors* was your first site-specific public commission in New York City but not your first installation here. When we first met in I think late 2009, in New York, you were here to plan for the installation of the *Zodiac Heads*, which was installed in 2011, as part of a worldwide tour. But you never saw that work here. Why was that?

AI WEIWEI: Well, by 2011 I was kind of like kidnapped by the state police. So I disappeared for 81 days. But of course I don't know I will only disappear for 81 days. They told I would be put away in jail for 13 years. The crime was subversion of state power. It's pretty heavy crime for, for a state like China. I think it's, it's the most dangerous crime you can commit. But to accuse an artist of the crime, I think they also facing a lot of difficulties because of all my activities has openly discussed matters on internet. I don't have a secret plan, I don't even have a clear goal. I just wanted to discuss those matters, you know, in the open platform.

AI WEIWEI: So I spent time, during this detention, I was thinking if that public art, the *Zodiac Heads*, in front of the Plaza Hotel is going to happen or not? You know, I really, in my heart, it's so sweet if you think you're in the detention some of your work still being showing in the public. It seems you have wings outside of the cage. Nobody can stop it. That really gave me a very strong, strong feeling about what a public means, what New York City mean, you know. It's, it's somewhere nobody can cage it. It's just beyond imagination.

NICHOLAS BAUME: I wanted to invite you to do a project here in New York as soon as I started at Public Art Fund. I admired your public work and I knew that you had spent many formative years in New York City. What were your first thoughts about making a project for New York City?

AI WEIWEI: New York City just is not just another city. It's a city which had all my early art education, my first encounter with the Western world. I was growing up in Chairman Mao's time. So it's a city...

NICHOLAS BAUME: Radical change.

AI WEIWEI: Yeah. Yeah. It's so radical. It's like a jump to the moon or something. But at the same time I was one of the immigrants, you know, desperately wanted to be integrated but impossible for me to be as an artist and as a new immigrants here. So I taste every bit of the

city, you know, to try to survive, trying to survive both financially and intellectually.

NICHOLAS BAUME: What was the craziest thing you did to try to survive financially?

AI WEIWEI: I did everything. I was working in the factory, printing factory in the night shift, to correct the tin metal uh plates before it go to the press next morning. I worked in the framing shops near Macy's to delivery all those decorational framings for art directors. I did a construction job. I did street portraits on the West 4th Street in the village, Times Square...

AI WEIWEI: So, of course, by that time, I would never imagine one day I would be doing some public art for the city. This is something you don't dream about, you know. If you dream about you laugh about yourself, it will never happen. But the fate is very strange, it happens, and I gained certain trust. It's very challenging. It's not another project. It's the project, to give some statement about your understanding of the city, the politics. So it's very hard to have a project put all those perspectives together. So it's a real project about real city, real people, and yourself.

NICHOLAS BAUME: An autobiographical thread runs through the exhibition from the 9th street fence, next to where you lived in the 1980s, to *Banner Portrait 69*, which features your father, Ai Ching. Why did you decide to include these personal elements?

AI WEIWEI: My concern about human condition come from my father. As a poet, he studied in Paris, been put in jail by Nationalist party, later been exile by the Communist party. He was one that fought himself in the Communist struggle to establish new nation but they put him in exile for 20 years. So the year I was born, he was exiled. So I grew up with him in this kind of exile camps, kind of semi-military camps. So all those situation maybe prepared me, equipped me, to work as who I am today, you know, to dealing with the more global issues about human rights, human dignity and as relate to art, freedom of expression, and set up new communications. And I talk to people I imagined who could share the same feeling.

NICHOLAS BAUME: The public response to the work was very strong. It became the most Instagrammed Public Art Fund work ever. I saw people make a work from *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors* their homepage image on their social media platforms. They also become sites for protests and marches, including one in support of the release of the detained immigration rights activist Ravi Ragbir. How do you think about activism and public engagement in relation to your work?

AI WEIWEI: Almost every of my expressions has some aesthetic and moral and philosophical discussions, which has to relate to politics and our real life. I think our real life, no matter how difficult, it's meaningful because we only have one life and it's beautiful, because we have to appreciate the life itself. So the fight is always necessary, especially at this time when the global power structure becomes so strong. So it causes the individual to exercise its own rights in democratic society and non-democratic society. We have to announce who we are

and we have to tell people what we're standing for. And only those rights being protected guarantee our rights in art, in freedom, and of being ourselves, which is not easy. It takes great responsibility. So that's why I think the so-called activism are so important at this moment.

NICHOLAS BAUME: And I think that's why your work resonates so strongly with, with so many people who want to express those feelings.

AI WEIWEI: Yeah. People see me as some kind of example, someone successfully, or so far, extend his own individual power into a mass or public affairs. And it's not easy to, to put up a fight with a kind of efficiency and to be heard. We are individuals but we only become individuals because we share same kind foundation, which I strongly believe that foundation public property. And if we don't protect that property we never can be successful as individual.

NICHOLAS BAUME: You celebrated a number of individuals in the exhibition. We think about the banners, thinking about the bus shelter images as well. Those were two elements of the exhibition that really spread out throughout all of the neighborhoods in the city. The lamppost banners featured images of four different groups of immigrants and refugees, 19th century Ellis Island immigrants to the United States, historically significant refugees from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to Nina Simone and the Dalai Lama, as well as contemporary refugee portraits from the Sharia Camp in Iraq and those from your iPhone taken at a variety of refugee camps around the world. Why was it important to include these portraits combining past and present, famous and unknown?

AI WEIWEI: I think whatever the ideology we fight for, or whatever meaning we're talking about, it always comes back to benefit an individual. And it's always trying to recognize an individual as an individual. It takes a lot, a lot of different fight, you know. In history people have been through so much. People who have contribute so much to our society, they were suffering, and they were facing life and death challenges. I think most of them have disappeared with no voice and been forgotten, but the one has been remembered or has the chance to even have an image are the very rare survivors and their voice resembles our ideology and our intelligence and it has strong dignity in humanity. So it's time to, to put their face into our normal daily environment, you know? It's most powerful part, you know, to use human image and those image so much relate to our life.

NICHOLAS BAUME: I thought it was fascinating that you used so many different layers: the formal aesthetic object, that might just be a beautiful thing that you're attracted to and want to experience; the immersive experience, actually interacting, passing through something, having that very visceral, bodily experience; as well as these powerful images or powerful faces. The project as a whole really worked on all of these different levels, which created such a wonderful synergy as, as a whole.

AI WEIWEI: I want to use all my experience, my knowledge, and my training and my understanding about what today's communications is about to, to build into a single project, which I'm very lucky to have the possibility to make it as real.

NICHOLAS BAUME: Is the project finished, Weiwei?

AI WEIWEI: I think the projects will never finish and I think the communication goes on and we're still doing new ways in communicating and spread out the message and the effort. As long as we're still working in art, we're still concerned about very basic human rights, freedom of speech, the project continues.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: There's a broader significance, too, when a statement like this comes from an artist who was born in exile and who forged a career as an ambitious young immigrant living in New York City. I'll let Bitta tell you why.

BITTA MOSTOFI: We are, especially at this moment in time, sort of being hammered again and again with one narrative about immigrants and immigration, and that narrative is very negative. You rarely see a positive narrative about immigrants and immigration in the news. It's either the very extreme, they're all kind of criminals, or very kind of vulnerable and helpless, right? Crying, and so forth. And I think the reality is that most immigration and most migration falls squarely in the middle of that, right? Not really one of those extremes or another. Immigrants are remarkable in their resilience. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to journey to a different place that maybe has a completely different language where you're separated from your family to start a new life. Many people choose to do that here because of this spirit and notion of, of an American dream and a possibility of what you can accomplish through hard work and dedication. That opportunity can await here for anybody, regardless of where you come from.

BITTA MOSTOFI: And that is one of the most beautiful things about our country. And in a way we're sort of fighting for the soul of our country and whether or not we really believe that is who we are or not. And I think the success of an artist like Ai Weiwei who came to New York City himself on this journey, he talks about his love for New York and it really helping shape who he is, both as a person and as an artist. And his success, I think, is a prime example of what's possible when we're able to sort of embrace and encourage and acknowledge the value in immigration and in the ability for people to grow and excel when they have these other experiences.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Thank you all so much for listening to this first season of Public Art Fund's Public Art Works. For more information on Weiwei's Public Art Fund exhibition, please visit us online at publicartfund.org. His documentary, *Human Flow*, is currently streaming on Amazon. For more information on Bitta and her work with MOIA, please visit nyc.gov/immigrants.

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