FOR ONE OF THE WORLD’S highest-profile artists, Ai Weiwei himself could hardly be more difficult to find. His imagery regularly causes internet controversies, and his visage, framed by cropped hair and the scruffy beard of an ancient philosopher, is widely known thanks to innumerable selfies with personalities as diverse as Paris Hilton and Julian Assange. Yet his studio in Berlin, the city where he has lived since 2015, is hidden beneath a former brewery complex called Pfefferberg that escaped bombing in World War II. The only clue to the entrance, obscured by a black metal panel, is tiny white script over a letter slot reading Human Flow UG, the working title of the documentary film Ai is making on the international refugee crisis. When the door is buzzed open, two staircases lie in view, one going up, the other down, as in an M.C. Escher print. Eventually, one of the artist’s production assistants leads bewildered visitors through sepulchral underground chambers with raw brick walls and arched ceilings once used to shelter kegs of beer.

In 2011, the controversial artist was detained in Beijing and his passport was confiscated for four years by the Chinese government. This fall marks his triumphant return to New York City with two new gallery shows.

BY TONY PEROTTET
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NAN GOLDIN
Ai has also expanded the definition of the artist’s role by dealing in politics. His creative use of social media has meant that his opinions on everything from the Sichuan earthquake to the Syrian refugee crisis have reached large audiences. At last count, he has 338,000 followers on Twitter and 254,000 on Facebook and maintains a thriving Facebook account, turning him into an Information Age celebrity. He is known for his hard line on political and social questions, and he criticizes often. Official hostility toward him increased rapidly after the Sichuan earthquake, when Ai began a grass-roots investigation into the collapse of shoddily built schools. His posts on the earthquake so antagonized the government that in 2009, when he traveled to Chengdu, where the earthquake had killed 90,000 people, he was asked to justify an activist term he had served in prison, beaten by police and subsequently suffered a brain hemorrhage. Taking up social media, Ai became the center of an intense debate. He is expected to testify on an activist term he had served in prison, beaten by police and subsequently suffered a brain hemorrhage. Taking up social media, Ai became the center of an intense debate. He is expected to testify on an activist term he had served in prison, beaten by police and subsequently suffered a brain hemorrhage. Taking up social media, Ai became the center of an intense debate.
on doors to get the names of the dead students, their birthdates and their home addresses, despite police harassment. He then posted the details online as an irrefutable memento mori.

“Of course, I was very naive,” he says now. “They shut off my blog. But by then it was too late.” He immediately switched to Twitter, despite initial reservations. (“I said, ‘Oh, no, what can you say in 140 characters?’” Then I realized that in Chinese, with 140 characters you can write a novel! It’s very different from English.”)

His father’s legacy was high in his mind when, after two more years of criticizing the government, he was detained by Chinese police at the Beijing airport in 2011 en route to Hong Kong and Taiwan and taken to a detention center with a black hood over his head. When the hood was removed, Ai told his interrogator that his father had experienced the same situation 80 years earlier when he was arrested by the Nationalists in 1932. “It was the same kind of accusation, the subversion of state power and disrupting public order,” Ai recalls telling his captor. “The interrogator just laughed and said, ‘Times are different.’”

By then, he had a 2-year-old son, Ai Lao, with his current partner, the filmmaker Wang Fen. The effect his imprisonment might have on his son preyed on Ai. “The interrogator told me: ‘You will not see [your son] for the next 30 years. When you get out you will see a boy who won’t even recognize you.’” The idea tortured him. “You are fighting for something you believe in, but at the cost to somebody very vulnerable, which is hard to accept.” Upon his release in June 2011, he posted a photo on Instagram of himself standing on a set of scales, showing that he was regaining some of the 25 pounds he had lost in prison. Even so, Ai decided that he could not risk passing his passport on to his son for the safety of Berlin.

The German capital had long appealed to him thanks to its vibrant art scene and rootless, restless spirit. “Berlin is like a ruin,” he says. “Nobody feels a sense of history; nobody cares where you come from. It’s all a new start.” He had been renovating the cavernous studio in the converted brewery since leasing it in 2009. “It reminded me of my childhood, living underground,” he says of the grottolike space, recalling that in exile in China his family had been forced to live in an “abandoned hole” covered with brushwood, “to show that we were the lowest creatures of the village.” Today the old brewery complex is an evocative refuge. Other renowned artists, including Olafur Eliasson, with whom Ai has collaborated, have studios there—albeit in cheerier, aboveground spaces.

SINCE THE UNEXPECTED RETURN of his passport by the Chinese government in July 2015, Ai has been making up for lost time, mixing visits to exhibitions of his work with journeys to investigate the refugee crisis. It’s a new, peripatetic phase in his life, which he feels blurs his art with politics to advocate against injustice.

His fascination with the refugee crisis began in 2015, when the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq commissioned him to curate an exhibition of some 500 artworks from an Iraqi refugee camp for the Venice Biennale, Traces of Survival. (It has since been released as a book.) But his interest in the crisis has shifted into high gear since the return of his passport. He visited refugee centers in Berlin and on Lesbos, the entry point into Europe for tens of thousands of asylum seekers. He was profoundly affected by seeing boatloads full of refugees landing on the beaches there. “I really didn’t expect to see it in front of me,” he says. “It was shocking.” Seeing the human face of the crisis and its overwhelming scale inspired him to make a documentary, which has sent him on almost constant international travel—to the Idomeni refugee camp, where some 14,000 people were trapped on the closed border between Greece and Macedonia; to the Lebanese camp Ain al-Hilweh, which was established in 1948 and currently shelters around 100,000 refugees; to Jordan, Turkey, Kenya and Bangladesh. “I have to first observe and learn,” he says. “The visits help adjust my own views on the global political situation. I hope what has touched me can also impact others.”

The project seems on the surface a change of direction for Ai, but he regards it as part of a continuum with his life and art. “It has to do with me, every bit of it,” he says. His childhood exile in China was a similar experience of dislocation, he explains, as was his decade trying to adjust to life in New York. “The reason can be economic or political or religious or even environmental, such as famine,” he says, but the result is the same—“to go to an unknown area you never dreamed about and be forced to survive. Every step involves so much pain and anxiety.”

Naturally, controversy has followed his new project. In February, he asked celebrities at a fundraising dinner in Berlin to take selfies while wrapped in refugees’ emergency blankets, which came off to some as a fatuous publicity stunt. He then re-created the famous photo of a drowned Syrian child found on the coast of Turkey, posing as the toddler himself. Some found the image haunting. Others found it crass. But there is no question he is touching a nerve. As Chiu points out, his oeuvre is often difficult to digest: “Ai Weiwei has pushed the limits of what is acceptable in art.”

His return to New York this month will mark another new phase, as he becomes more comfortable with his former home. He was unable to return to see his well-reviewed 2014 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, yet after years of feeling remote from the city, he made a short visit this past June, which began to dissolve his unease. Now a wildly successful artist, he is in talks for a major show at the Park Avenue Armory as well as a project with the Public Art Fund.

“Maybe it’s because my situation has changed,” he says. “I’m much more relaxed now. I have started to see the best part of the city. It’s so passionate about creativity and new ideas, more than anyplace else in the world.”