

# GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

AI WEIWEI



Figure 1. In Washington Square Park, the Arch stands as a testament to immigrants and their journeys. Stein, Paul. Ai Weiwei Installation. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons

“BEFORE I BUILT A WALL I’D ASK TO KNOW WHAT I WAS WALLING IN OR WALLING OUT, AND TO WHOM I WAS LIKE TO GIVE OFFENSE.” - THE MENDING WALL, ROBERT FROST

Artist-activist Ai Weiwei’s personal experience with immigration, displacement, and understandings of space is certainly an influence in his work. Ai, today a renowned contemporary artist, grew up amid the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960 and 70s.<sup>1</sup>

Growing up in this highly political environment exposed Ai to several of the hardships of displaced people. At one year old, Ai and his family were sent to a labor camp and were later exiled to Shihezi, Xinjiang, due to his father’s involvement with activism through poetry, who was named an enemy of the state.<sup>1,2</sup>

Ai left for the United States in 1981 to continue his studies, eventually moving to New York City, where he found a deep interest in documenting the everyday lives of fellow New Yorkers and the small intricacies of the city.<sup>1</sup>

Ai dedicates much of his work to bringing light to political plights and humanitarian crises. He has

traveled to refugee camps in multiple locations and has used his work to highlight issues of displacement through war, intolerance, violence and terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

With his work “Good Fences Make Good Neighbors” Ai Weiwei has taken a slightly different take on understandings of immigration and displacement, by highlighting the vitality of otherness, diversity, and community through installations that challenge the physical space and question our notions of what it means to be neighborly.

Erected in 2017, Good Fences Make Good Neighbors confronts the challenges of an ever-evolving world, that is leaning towards nationalistic ideals and anti-immigration policies,<sup>3</sup> as well as a desire to separate humankind with an “us” versus “them” mentality.

The installation consists of three different forms, making a total of over 300 pieces of artwork throughout the city, including

physical structures and sculptural works, 2D banners and graphics.<sup>4</sup> The locations for these works were carefully chosen, as environment and space are a large aspect of discussions of migration. When offered the Rockefeller Center to display his work, Ai Weiwei instead opted for, what he describes as the city, the nuts and bolts that keep the city running and are a part of everyday lives.<sup>5</sup>

Ai Weiwei found this in sites of transit and movement, such as several bus shelters, as well as more subtle locations to bring attention to ideas of privatized spaces, such as atop private buildings throughout the city.<sup>5</sup> Each piece, regardless of its location, aims to bring attention to divisionary standards, whether these be physical or social.

One of the largest and more prominent installments from Good Fences Make Good Neighbors, the Arch installed in Washington Square Park stands directly underneath the famous marble arch. At 40 feet



Figure 2 The fences along The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, add aesthetic and physical disruptions, but perhaps their metaphorical interpretation, barriers to knowledge, is more prevalent. Pickering, Victoria. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons.



Figure 3. At 248 Bowery, a fence on a rooftop is a part of Ai Weiwei’s series

"...WE DO NOT NEED THE WALL:

HE IS ALL PINE AND I AM APPLE ORCHARD.

MY APPLE TREES WILL NEVER GET ACROSS

AND EAT THE CONES UNDER HIS PINES, I TELL HIM.

HE ONLY SAYS, "GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS." - THE MENDING WALL, ROBERT FROST

tall, the cage is still allowing pedestrians to pass through and under the arch freely, however, through a much narrower entryway, that forms the outline of two people, one seemingly helping the other along.<sup>3,6</sup>

This entryway is a copy of another famous art installation, Door of Gradiva by Marcel Duchamp, who himself was an immigrant to the United States.<sup>7,8</sup> The reflective steel material allows those who pass under the cage to their reflections, forcing them to confront their histories and relationships with migrants and movement.

Emphasizing the necessity of the right to movement, as well as the relationship between immigrants and the New York transit system,<sup>8</sup> the bus shelter installations across the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem utilizes metal fencing to send two messages, that might seem opposing, but rather work in union.

The appearance of fencing in by its nature, implicative of restriction, yet this fencing does not obstruct anyone's

movements, and in fact, includes supplementary public seating.<sup>9</sup> Rather than acting as a typical fence would, it instead offers users place. This softens the appearance of what is usually an indication of hostility.

Ai presents a sense of solidarity through highlighting the profound similarities that all people share, through a collection of 200 banners adorning city lamp posts, picturing migrants and displaced peoples from different periods and locations.<sup>4</sup>

The pictures are diverse, including immigrants from Ellis Island to modern-day victims of terrorism and intolerance. The portraits even range in methodology, as some are formal works from Ai's studio while others were taken with a simple cellphone.<sup>8,10</sup> Peoples of several religious and ethnic backgrounds are displayed.

Ai, however, brings each portrait, despite its unique circumstances to a cohesive union with constant formatting and style, calling attention to a singular understanding of

humankind.

The banners are made from black vinyl, with the negative spaces cut out, creating the image of the subject in the positive.<sup>10</sup> While the banners are distinctive from one another, as each displays a unique person with distinct backgrounds, they form a united front with one another, and hopefully, with its viewers.

New York City has a long and unique history with immigration, and as the rest of the United States becomes increasingly mixed, xenophobia, racism and intolerance emerge in our politics and culture.

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors sheds on our differences, while emphasizing the deep similarities between us all. Issues of territory and place are brought into question through installations in the everyday nodes of New Yorker life, forcing viewers to look the state of the county in the eye.



Figure 4. At 1,000 feet, the Circle Fence surrounds The Unisphere, erected in 1964 for the World's Fair. S, Shelly. IMG\_3916.

Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons



## ACTIVITIES

- [01] Gather in a group with your peers a few feet apart, perhaps sitting in a circle. Play a regular round or two of the game of telephone. Then, expand the circle to arm's length apart. Play another round or two of the game telephone. Continue to expand the circle further and further, until you are as far apart as possible. Note how this changes your communication style, efficiency, and success in the game.
- [02] Draw a map of your household or childhood household. Dictate who in this household has "ownership" of what places. How is this decided? Are some areas shared while others are not? Note who "owns" the most space and who "owns" the least. Do this with another space you share with others, such as an office, dorm room, or even larger scales like a campus.
- [03] Gather objects with different levels of thickness and sturdiness, such as a sheet of paper, a brick, a phone case, a piece of cardboard, a jar, or cloth. On a large sheet of paper, in a group, dictate what is your land with a marker. Then randomly assign objects to each group member that will act as the walls. Some of these walls will be easier to break, such as paper, while some will be impossible, such as the brick. Next, go through the following scenarios and each land will try to act accordingly. Take note of when "strong" walls have an advantage and when they do not, as well as when "weak" walls have the advantage.
- a) A flood spreads throughout the land. How well does your wall protect your people? If getting messy is on option, pouring water and seeing how the walls react in terms of protection would be interesting!
- b) Your country is attacked by an enemy. They try to knock down your wall with 3 blows. How well does your wall hold up? Perhaps having 3 chances to physically jab down the wall with one's finger or a pencil could be an option
- c) Your country needs to evacuate quickly due to a storm. How easily can you get to your neighbors? Again, how easily can your wall be broken through to get to the other side?

Figure 5. Located at the entrance of Central Park, Ai's Guiding Cage obstructs pedestrians pathway, acting as a means of repressive architecture. Roeder, Phil. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons

# ACTIVITIES

[04] Split into groups organized by color. Try to get an equal amount in each group. Each group will be associated with a color of choice. Using finger paint in these colors, have each member dip their hands in the color of their group. Then, together, all groups will help to build a small city with playdough, clay, Legos, popsicle sticks, or whatever material they may choose. Note: everyone is working together to build the city. Make sure that throughout the process, participants keep their hands wet with paint, so it will leave impressions on whatever they touch.

Once the building is complete, take a look at your city with your whole group. Take note of where the fingerprints of different color groups show up. If there is evidence of different color groups working together (blue fingerprints next to red fingerprints on a Lego building), note when and where this happened. Pay attention to where color groups seemed to be working in isolation and with others. This is a visual map of the work you have contributed to building the city in which you all now share.

[05] Following Activity 5, randomly select a color group that participated. Decide that all parts of the city with evidence of their interaction should be taken down. Dismantle all parts with these color fingerprints on them. Observe how this changes the city structure. Does this mess up any plans? What is taken away by this loss? Continue to do this with one of two other groups. Note how the city has changed.



Figure 6. Ar 48 East 7 Street, a fence spans across a small alleyway. Pickering, Victoria. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons

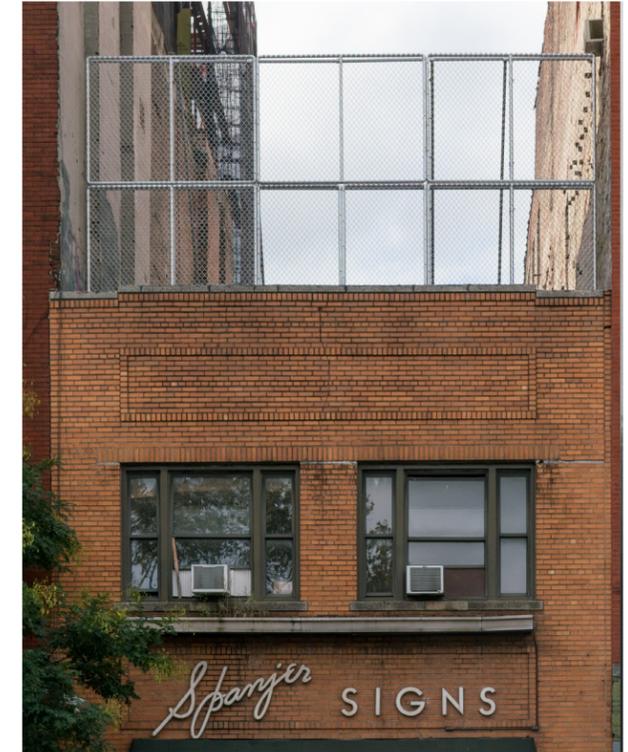


Figure 7. A fence blocks off the rooftop of a local store. Pickering, Victoria. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons.



Figure 8. Pickering, Victoria. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons.



Figure 9. Pickering, Victoria. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons.

# FRAMING QUESTIONS

1. Locate and read "Mending Wall" by Robert Frost. Analyze the poem and try to point out its significant themes. Ask one another, and yourselves, what your personal "mending wall" with others is. What is the relationship between Ai Weiwei's work and this poem?
2. Consider different forms of restriction and border making. These can include but are not limited to, fences, walls, gates, and cages. What are the differences between these forms of border making? When would you choose one type over the other? What are the implications of these choices?
3. Research how walls have been used throughout history to stake out territorial claims or provide defense. Identify well known walls and lesser known walls. Consider what the cultural effects were at the time and today and note if they are still standing and/or in use. Think about any political controversy over walls, and how

that make relate to controversy of today. Look at if the walls were considered successes or failures.

4. Have students describe the history and ancestry of their familial ties as far back as they have knowledge. Some students make me able to trace back their family's lines father than others. Identify why this might be and confront the discrepancies.
5. Experiment with acts of empathy. Students may privately or publicly recall moments in which they helped a stranger, or a stranger helped them. Name the emotions and feelings that came with this interaction. Consider how this act of kindness could be beneficial to more than the student and stranger, but rather to the greater good.

6. Research immigrants who have made significant technological, cultural, political or social change. Hypothesis what things may have looked like without their contribution. Identify other immigrants, who perhaps have more personal significance. Note how their influence is important as well. Document the existence of everyday immigrants as integral units of society and personal lives.
7. Find photographs of migrant detention camps. Note the use of fences in the camps. Access how fences hold multiple meanings and serve multiple purposes in detention camps. Identify where common occurrences have happened in history, how they have played out, and the cultural impact. Research the camp conditions, and compare them with one's own living conditions. Look at pictures to guess how much room each person has to themselves. Recognize how much privacy is afforded. Identify understandings of space and ownership.



Figure 11. Highberg, Nels. NYC -- Ai Weiwei -- October 2017. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 Baume, Nicholas. *Ai Weiwei: Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*. New York: Public Art Fund, 2019.
- 2 Lentz, Alex, and Melanie L. Buffington. "Art Politics = Activism: The Work of Ai Weiwei." *Art Education* 73, no. 1 (September 2019): 52–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2019.1672487>.
- 3 "UAP with AiWeiwei." UAP Urban Art Projects. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.uapcompany.com/studio/aiweiwei-good-fences-make-good-neighbors-arch>.
- 4 Feinstein, Laura. "Ai Weiwei's Art Reaches New York's Streets." *CityLab*, October 17, 2017. <https://www.citylab.com/design/2017/10/ai-weiweis-art-reaches-new-yorks-streets/542844/>.
- 5 "Ai Weiwei Erects 'Good Fences Make Good Neighbors' across New York City's Urban Sprawl." *designboom*, June 11, 2018. <https://www.designboom.com/art/ai-weiwei-fences-make-good-neighbors-public-art-fund-10-10-2017/>.
- 6 Goodman, Jonathan. "Ai Weiwei: Good Fences Make Good Neighbors." *Sculpture Nature*, November 7, 2017. <https://www.sculpturenature.com/en/ai-weiwei-good-fences-make-good-neighbors-new-york-public-art/>.
- 7 Fund, Public Art. "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors." *Public Art Fund : Washington Square Arch*. Accessed May 3, 2020. [https://www.publicartfund.org/ai\\_weiwei\\_good\\_fences\\_make\\_good\\_neighbors/artworks/structures/washington\\_square\\_arch.html](https://www.publicartfund.org/ai_weiwei_good_fences_make_good_neighbors/artworks/structures/washington_square_arch.html).
- 8 "Ai Weiwei: Good Fences Make Good Neighbors." *Public Art Fund*. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/ai-weiwei-good-fences-make-good-neighbors/>.
- 9 Loos, Ted. "Ai Weiwei, Once and Future New Yorker, Barnstorms Through the Boroughs." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/arts/ai-weiwei-good-fences-make-good-neighbors-new-york.html>.
- 10 Fund, Public Art. "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors." *Public Art Fund : BX13*. Accessed May 3, 2020. [https://www.publicartfund.org/ai\\_weiwei\\_good\\_fences\\_make\\_good\\_neighbors/artworks/lampposts/bx13.html](https://www.publicartfund.org/ai_weiwei_good_fences_make_good_neighbors/artworks/lampposts/bx13.html).

Amy A. Gonzalez



Figure 10. Although pedestrians can past under the arch, is is a narrow path. Pickering, Victoria. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Photograph. <https://www.flickr.com/>. Creative Commons