Human Flow

Director: Ai Weiwei
Country: China
Date: 2017

A review by Robbie Collin for the *Daily Telegraph*:

Seven years ago, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei covered the floor of the Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern gallery with 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds. Each one had been individually hand-made by a thousand-strong team of artisans in southeast China: the resulting drift covered a space of almost 11,000 square feet and lay four inches deep.

The work, which was called Sunflower Seeds, put you in a tricky position: to properly understand what it actually was, you had to simultaneously make sense of the seeds' uniformity and uniqueness. Walking into the gallery, you got an easy jolt from the installation's size. But the realisation that followed minutes later – that every seed was its own distinct thing, crafted with time and skill – forced you to reconsider it with fresh amazement.

Human Flow, Ai's documentary on the ongoing global refugee crisis, switches out the seeds for souls. The numbers are so big they're hard to comprehend: half a million people landing on the Greek island of Lesbos last year alone, three million currently encamped in Turkey, 65 million p resently exiled from their homelands worldwide.

But while most documentaries would opt to zero in on a handful of case studies, Human Flow makes a virtue of its vastness, and roves freely between displaced communities – Syrians, Kenyans, Rohingya – in search of both spiky specificity and common ground. It spends no more than a minute or two with any one group, and after someone disappears, they don't come back.

That patchwork construction can make it hard to determine exactly which particular crisis you're in at any given moment. The colours of land, skin and sky are often all you have to go on – which Ai would no doubt argue is part of his wider point. The film is DeMillean in its scope, but also truly radical in its call to compassion: it's The Ten Commandments of dissident art.

Ai himself is here, there and everywhere, as if in Hitchcock cameo mode – grilling kebabs at an encampment one minute, holding a bucket for a woman who's literally scared sick the next. He's a calming, humane presence whose dark outfits, round belly and wiry beard give him the air of a style-conscious garden gnome. Sometimes we see him filming on a smartphone, and the blunt, pixelated footage that results gives certain sequences a jagged urgency – such as the landing of a refugee boat at Lesbos with which the film opens. Ai catches its disgorged passengers huddled around their own smartphones on the dark shore, their faces bathed in blue-grey light.

Some of the shots are sci-fi staggering: a Syrian camp so big it has its own economy, border fences that stretch off

endlessly into the sea, a Lebanese settlement that's grown into a kind of makeshift city, cobwebbed with power cables. Snatches of spoken testimony provide indelible images of their own.

An Iraqi woman from Mosul talks about missiles "falling like rain", while a man standing beside rows of freshly dug graves counts off the identification cards of family members who have perished – five of 17, so far.

Often, Ai leaves his camera running, and the same thing always happens: the frame is slowly colonised by children, who stare directly at the lens, smiling and waving, as children worldwide seem hardwired to do whenever a camera's about. It's cute at first, but the cumulative power of their looks and gestures – each one a little human-to-human appeal for recognition – weighs like a cannonball on your heart.

There is an inevitable sense in which Ai is speaking to the at-least-partially converted – and his contemplative, meandering approach, which resists giving answers full stop, never mind easy ones, may strike some as a little too playful and abstruse, given the gravity of his subject. But many more will be swept up on its currents, overawed by its sights, and galvanised by its rallying call.

From: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/human-flow-review-ai-weiweis-refugee-documentary-weighs-heart/