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Ai Weiwei Is Suing Volkswagen for Using His Installation of Refugee Life Jackets in an Advertisement

The artist says he is taking the company to court as a last resort.

Sarah Cascone, May 21, 2019



Ai Weiwei, *Soleil Levant* (2017). Photo by David Stjernholm courtesy of the Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.

Ai Weiwei is taking Volkswagen to court in Denmark for copyright infringement after a Volkswagen advertisement published in 2017 used an installation of his work as a backdrop.

The ad, which features an orange car, is set in front of his work *Soleil Levant* (2017), an installation of 3,500 discarded, bright orange life jackets used by migrants who fled persecution and landed in Lesbos, Greece. The work was created for World Refugee Day and was presented on the facade of the Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Copenhagen.

“I was not credited as the artist, and my artwork image was... cropped without permission,” Ai wrote on Instagram in March. “The infringing material was circulated to over 200,000 people, giving the false impression that I had authorized Volkswagen to use my artwork in its ad.” He added: “I was astonished by Volkswagen’s brazen violations of my intellectual property and moral rights.”

As the Chinese artist prepared to head to Copenhagen for the trial, which is scheduled to begin Wednesday, he posted a selfie giving the middle finger to Volkswagen on Instagram.



The artist claimed to have resorted to the lawsuit after more than a year of “fruitless negotiation,” during which the company “only engaged in arrogant gestures to trivialize their guilt and dismiss the matter.”

Ai is also criticizing Volkswagen for what he sees as hypocrisy as it looks to increase its market share in China, while allegedly turning a blind eye toward the nation’s human rights abuses.



Ai Weiwei, *Soleil Levant* (2017). Photo by David Stjernholm courtesy of the Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.

The artist cited a story in the *Hong Kong Free Press*, which said that “the German carmaker is so deeply invested in China that two reliable sources confirm that prominent figures associated with Volkswagen informally lobbied the German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, not to bring up China’s program of mass internment of

Muslims and other ideological enemies in Xinjiang when he visited his counterpart Wang Yi in Nov. 2018.”

“Should the public not be informed about these facts at the same time when VW forcibly co-opts refugees’ life jackets—the most poignant symbols of human suffering and hope—as color-compliant props in its newest VW Polo ad?” Ai asked on [Instagram](#).

A representative of the company told Danish news agency [Ritzau](#) that the use of Ai’s artwork was just a “coincidence” after a day spent photographing the car in “beautiful locations” around Copenhagen.

Ai isn’t buying it. “Such corporate bullying plunders the fruit of others’ labor, intimidates individuals attempting to enforce their rights, and shows contempt for humanitarian and ethical behavior,” he wrote.

As of press time, representatives for Volkswagen had not responded to artnet News’s request for comment.