

Interview

ART

Ai Weiwei

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For the past decade, the art world seems increasingly preoccupied with finding and coronating an heir to Andy Warhol's legacy. That distinction has, over time, gone to everyone from the reigning Pop masters of the shiny and commercial, to the young, grungy downtown painters of the unshiny and commercial. But perhaps the artist who most embodies Warhol's wit, prodigious artistic maneuverings, spirited distortions and amplifications of the cultural status quo, and his rare agility at gathering people together in openness and defiance might very well not be found in New York City or in the United States or even in the Western hemisphere. He is Ai Weiwei, and not since Warhol has one artist brought so much revolutionary activity to the act of art-making. If Warhol's activity targeted gender codes and brilliantly conflated the elite with the masses, 56-year-old Ai Weiwei's cogent multimedia productions thrust the individual out of the multitude and personal freedom out of the state machine.

Ai Weiwei, the son himself of a dissident artist, the Chinese poet Ai Qing, grew up in remote northwestern China, excommunicated from the internal affairs of Beijing due to his father's political exile. He reached New York City at age 25 and quickly took to the Manhattan art and social scene as if it were his native soil. In the nine years he lived in the East Village, he crossed paths with counterculture luminaries such as Keith Haring and Allen Ginsberg, studied the radical impact of modernists like Warhol, and began producing his early works—among them, black-and-white photographs of urban life and a telling portrait of the ready-making-master Duchamp out of a bent coat hanger and sunflower seeds. During his extended time in the West tending creative seeds, his homeland was spouting—and quashing—its own political seeds, in particular, the spring 1989 youth demonstrations for increased personal liberties in Tiananmen Square that ended in staunch military intervention and hundreds, if not thousands, outside of the square dead. (In some ways, it has only been Ai Weiwei's work—and figure—that has visually supplanted the iconic image of the unknown man standing in front of four tanks on Chang'an Avenue as the symbol of civilian resistance to Chinese authority in Western consciousness.) Ai was in America during that key conflict, but its fallout—a tightening of security measures and a silencing of dissenting opinion—would eventually serve as a canvas for him to apply his strokes. Ai returned to China in 1993, at the age of 36, three years before his father died, but it would be another decade before his visual productions resurfaced on the global stage with keen conceptual and political precision.

Today, Ai works and lives in his walled compound in the Chaoyang District of Beijing. Persimmon and pine trees and bamboo fill the courtyard, lush green ivy climbs the walls, and

many cats—a few shaved like lions—stalk the grass or lie in the sun. Ai built the studio for himself in the late '90s—his first foray into architecture that would lead to his collaboration with Herzog & de Meuron on the "Bird's Nest" stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Inside the compound walls, Ai's activities seem both industrious and monastic. It is from here that he works on the plans for several projects—sculptures, installations, large-scale outdoor ventures approaching Land Art, films, tweets. But for a man who may be the most famous and relevant artist working right now, it is a very small corner of the world he is allotted with too little immunity, if any at all. Across the street from the studio is a common white surveillance camera (decorated with a traditional red Chinese lantern) aimed directly at his door (such cameras are found all over Beijing). Like many Chinese citizens, Ai has been routinely thwarted in his use of social media. In recent years, Twitter has been his most salient tool of global exchange. Ai is not allowed to travel outside of China—not by some official proclamation after a trial, but like most forms of governmental decision approaching terror, by some vague intermediary verdict for an indeterminate time with no recourse of contestation.

Ai has long utilized homegrown Chinese artifacts, practices, and forms in his productions, whether shattering a Han Dynasty urn on the floor, creating assemblages of bicycles into elaborate geometric formations, or bringing 1,001 Chinese citizens, most of whom had never previously left the country, to Kassel, Germany, for Documenta. But it wasn't long after the construction of the "Bird's Nest" that Ai's unabashed freedom of expression started to turn the unflattered ears of the Chinese government. His vocal outcries against incidents such as the displacement of migrant communities for the Olympic Games, the hushed-up death toll connected with suspect building practices in the devastating 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, and the imprisonment of writer Liu Xiaobo begat a campaign of censorship and strict—sometimes bodily injurious—containment. When the state decided to tear down the artist's studio in Shanghai in 2010 as punishment for his refusal to keep quiet, Ai responded by organizing a party for its demolition (on the menu were crabs, a loaded reference to the Chinese word meaning "harmonious" that is a homonym for "river crabs"). Just as, half a century ago, Warhol took the idea of American freedom and extended it in his films and canvases to show just how free individuals could be ("You want full freedom, I give you Candy Darling"), Ai Weiwei took the state's demand for harmonious conformity and one-upped it ("I will acknowledge your decision to punish me to the point that I will actually host a party for your destructive reprimand"). In 2011, as Ai was at the airport about to board a flight bound for Hong Kong, he was arrested and held indefinitely in prison on the speculatively trumped-up charges of tax evasion. Following a global clamor for his release, he was freed after 81 days, fined (15 million yuan, about \$2.4 million), and was made aware that he could be re-arrested at any time. This is where the story leaves the Warholian and begins to enter Orwellian.



China doesn't have any books on the student culture revolution because they consider that antirevolutionary.

—Ai Weiwei