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## ART & DESIGN

# Ai Weiwei and Warhol, Together Again

By ANDREW JACOBS JUNE 3, 2016



Mr. Ai at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

Ai Weiwei; 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph by Chad Batka for The New York Times

PITTSBURGH — One was a wildly successful artist, the son of Slovakian immigrants, whose alabaster complexion and shock of white hair made him instantly recognizable on the streets of Manhattan.

The other was a shy film school student from Beijing who toiled in anonymity, sketching \$20 sidewalk portraits to make the rent on his basement apartment.

And though their paths crossed at more than one downtown art opening in the 1980s, it is safe to say that Ai Weiwei, the young Chinese striver, made little impression on [Andy Warhol](#) as he flitted through the adoring throngs.



The New York Times reporter Andrew Jacobs sits down at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh to talk with the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei about a new exhibit pairing his work with that of Andy Warhol. By ALAN HABURCHAK and ROBIN LINDSAY on June 8, 2016. Photo by Alan Haburchak/The New York Times. Watch in Times Video »



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“I remember going to a gallery opening and hearing people say ‘Andy is here, Andy is here,’ and suddenly I saw him through the crowd,” Mr. Ai recalled this week, walking through “Andy Warhol/Ai Weiwei” at the Warhol Museum here. “It was incredible to be in the same room, but I was a nobody.”

In the 25 years since he abruptly left New York to tend to his ailing father in China, Mr. Ai has become a somebody. Wily provocateur, enemy of the state and media-savvy advocate for the disenfranchised, he is a darling of the global contemporary art world, a bona fide celebrity whose burly, bearded presence invariably draws admiring crowds.

Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei, it turns out, have plenty in common.

Like Warhol, Mr. Ai surrounds himself with stray cats, has a fondness for neon-tinted floral arrangements and takes pleasure in subverting hallowed cultural touchstones.



"Map of China" (Ai) and a Warhol self-portrait.

Ai Weiwei; 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph by Chad Batka for The New York Times

Both men have also made a mint turning everyday objects into sought-after commodities. And Mr. Ai, like Warhol, compulsively records his life and surroundings — Warhol had his tape recorder; Mr. Ai always has his [iPhone](#), which he uses almost hourly to post a deluge of images to [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

But the two men are conjoined by something more significant: They are both unrepentant iconoclasts and gleeful disrupters of art world conventions. Warhol scandalized with his soup cans in 1962; three decades later, Mr. Ai [defiled](#) neolithic Chinese pottery with tutti-frutti-colored paint, and he once famously smashed a Han dynasty urn just for the heck of it.

"The things said about Warhol are intriguingly similar to what was said about Ai Weiwei today — that he desecrated art," said Eric Shiner, director of the museum, which is staging a [dialogue show](#) of the two men's works that runs through August. "Yet in reality, both artists changed, and are changing, how the world understands art and how art penetrates the world."



Ai Weiwei at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.  
Chad Batka for The New York Times

Such commonalities are on full display at the museum. One room juxtaposes Warhol's garishly tinted Mao Zedong with Mr. Ai's own vaguely sardonic portraits of the Great Helmsman; another places Warhol's Coca-Cola paintings alongside a centuries-old Chinese vase that Mr. Ai scrawled with the Coke trademark logo.

As he glimpsed the galleries on Thursday for the first time, Mr. Ai seemed genuinely taken aback by how Warhol had influenced his work, often unconsciously. (Mr. Ai was first exposed to the artist after arriving in New York, when he bought a dog-eared copy of Warhol's ironic quotations at The Strand.)

"It's as if we were brothers," he said, noting the similarities of Warhol's early bird's-eye ink sketches of the Manhattan skyline to his own youthful renderings of Shanghai's rooftops. "Who could imagine that a poor Chinese kid would one day be showing his work alongside Andy's?"



Ai Weiwei's "Grapes" and Andy Warhol's "Flowers" in the show "Andy Warhol/Ai Weiwei."  
Ai Weiwei; 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph by Chad Batka for The New York Times

The past few days have been especially emotional for Mr. Ai, who has not been here in eight years. He spent several years in internal exile after the Chinese authorities jailed him for 81 days on spurious charges of tax evasion and then refused to relinquish his passport.

Last July, [the police finally relented](#), and Mr. Ai promptly decamped to Berlin, joining his partner and their 7-year-old son, who live there. In addition to lecturing at Berlin's University of the Arts — a position he was offered just before his arrest — he has spent the past year working at a feverish pace.

His studio, which occupies an old brewery in what once was East Berlin, has become a frenetic hub, staffed by an international coterie of assistants — not unlike Warhol's Factory. Mr. Ai also opened a studio on the Greek island of Lesbos, where he plans to build a memorial to the thousands of refugees who have died crossing the Mediterranean. And every month, it seems, there is a new exhibition of his work — in Australia, England, Austria, and in New York.



Andy Warhol's "Elvis 11 Times" and Ai Weiwei's "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn."

Ai Weiwei; 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph by Chad Batka for The New York Times

Mr. Ai has spent much of the year immersed in the migrant crisis. He has handed out solar-powered lamps to children in refugee camps, delivered a white grand piano to a traumatized Syrian pianist and photographed the freshly arrived as they scrambled off boats in Lesbos.

Last month, he traveled to the West Bank and Gaza for a documentary film he is making about refugees around the world.

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Mr. Ai, 58, appeared exhausted by the travel, but said he wouldn't have it any other way. "You have to work when the light bulb is bright," he said, pointing to his head, "because over time, it will dim."



"Neolithic Pottery With Coca-Cola Logo" (Ai) and Warhol's "Coca-Cola."

Ai Weiwei; 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph by Chad Batka for The New York Times

His work has not been without controversy. In February, he was widely skewered after he posed for a photograph lying on a pebble beach — an image meant to evoke the photo of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who drowned off the coast of Turkey. A few weeks later, during a Berlin Film Festival gala, he directed celebrity guests to don the metallic thermal blankets that volunteers give to arriving immigrants. Berlin's culture minister called the gesture "obscene."

Mr. Ai, unsurprisingly, is unfazed by the uproar. "Art is supposed to make people feel uncomfortable, to change the way they look at the world," he said. "I've been receiving criticism my whole life, but if you're going to throw a punch, it should be a real punch, not this kind of mediocre criticism."

His work may occasionally tack to the incendiary, but in person Mr. Ai is a calm, self-effacing presence — seemingly little changed from his days as the

hungry East Village artist who threw away his paintings each time he was forced to change apartments.

Dressed in a black T-shirt and cheap cloth shoes, he speaks just a notch above a whisper. As workers made last-minute tweaks to the gallery lighting, Mr. Ai was transfixed by the wall of photos he took during his New York years: images of the 1988 riots in Tompkins Square Park; a snapshot of Allen Ginsberg urinating; and numerous portraits of a reed-thin and naked Mr. Ai posing like the Venus de Milo.

“No one was interested in showing the work of a Chinese artist back then,” he said, shaking his head, and turning to a wall of photographs documenting Warhol’s 1982 trip to China.

Even as Mr. Ai revels in his newfound freedom, he is mindful that the life of an exiled dissident has its drawbacks. Living in Europe, he said, has diminished his voice as a human rights advocate in China. Unlike most persecuted activists who have been given the chance to leave, Mr. Ai refuses to seek asylum.

Next week, he will return to Beijing for a visit, a journey that fills him with trepidation. Mr. Ai says he wants to see family and friends, but he also wants to demonstrate to the Chinese authorities that he has not abandoned his homeland. “Things there are dreadful right now,” he said, referring to the unremitting government crackdown that has jailed pro-democracy activists, human rights lawyers and journalists, some of them his friends.

But he seemed somewhat conflicted about his role — an exiled government critic or someone who willingly, and perhaps foolishly, steps back into the dragon’s maw. “It’s not honest for a real Chinese fighter to be outside,” he mused. “You’re just throwing stones.”