

SUNDAY FEATURES

SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 2009

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Truth to power

*Ai Weiwei's public discontent is an anomaly in the no-politics world of Chinese contemporary art*BY DAVID FRAZIER
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Earlier this week, around 30 police officers burst into the Sichuan hotel room of one of China's foremost contemporary artists, Ai Weiwei (艾未未). They detained him there for about half a day to prevent him from testifying in the trial of activist Tan Zuoren (譚作人), who was charged with subversion for collecting information related to deaths of school children in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, according to reports.

Ai, who helped design Beijing's Olympic Stadium and whose work now commands solo museum shows in the West, has also become deeply involved in telling the truth about the Sichuan quake. Government corruption and lack of transparency are the focus of his own art project, an effort to compile a list of school children who died. Some believe his list, which now tallies 5,194 names, prompted the government to finally release a student death toll this May, more than a year after the disaster.

For his efforts, Ai's blog has been shut down, his Beijing studio has been put under surveillance, and earlier this year unidentified men, probably from China's National Security Bureau, paid a distressing visit to his mother.

At the same time, Ai's stature in the art world continues to reach new heights. Last month, his first ever solo exhibition, Ai Weiwei: According to What, opened at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum. In October, he will see a larger and fuller retrospective in another solo museum show, Ai Weiwei: So Sorry at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany, which will cover a 2,000m² wing of the museum and its entire facade.

So even as Ai's international reputation continues to bloom to a level few of his Chinese contemporaries can match, he is at the same time, as the world's leading collector of Chinese contemporary art, Uli Sigg, noted in Tokyo last month, taking on a "dissident character."

Moreover, Ai's public discontent is an anomaly in the no-politics world of Chinese contemporary art. Over the last decade, China's booming art scene has produced stars, who have sold works for millions of US dollars at auction and formed a cultural vanguard that has only been rivaled by film in its ability to bring China to the world. Three years ago, Ai, then working on the design of Beijing's "bird's nest" Olympic Stadium with Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron, might have been considered part of the movement's elite and tacitly obsequious coterie.

But in the past year, Ai has launched his earthquake project, mounted a protest against the government-created "Green Dam" Internet filtering spyware that's to be included with every computer sold in China, and repeatedly criticized China's "authoritarian" government in interviews with Western media.

As Ai explained it, his motivation now is "how to build up a possibility to use my skills and my

concerns to relate to the human struggle in China."

"Why are you so concerned about society? That is always the question," he asked rhetorically, speaking as part of an eight-hour interview marathon at the Tokyo opening of Ai Weiwei: According to What. "And my answer is simple: Because you are an artist, you have to associate yourself with freedom of expression."

Now 52, Ai's stout, bearded figure is by turns indomitable and understated. To the art world and media of the West, he has presented himself as a cagey, sharp-tongued and quietly subversive literatus. In China, meanwhile, he has become something of a godfather of the arts, inspiring deep respect among urban youth and culture circles while also known to lord around his influence. Think of him perhaps as a modern day Zhang Fei (張飛), the legendary warrior-general of the Three Kingdoms era, who kneeled humbly before his king but also flogged his underlings. An art world friend once told me of a dinner in Beijing at which Ai suffered an offence, then ordered the restaurant's entire staff to bow before him and apologize.

Ai's artworks meanwhile are intimately related to Chinese consciousness, but can at the same time be apprehended both from the East and from the West. His themes range from a fascination with basic elements of the national character — he creates works out of tea, ancient vases and China's map, among other things — to laments for the ravages of modernization and, lately, outcries over corruption and government malfeasance.

NATIONAL BECOMING

Maps of China are the basis of at least three works on display at the Mori Museum, and even though they can't help but carry with them a sense of political consciousness, they are not about nationalism. Instead, the works are probably best seen in the same light as Jasper Johns' famous paintings of the American flag from the 1950s. Johns, who treated the American flag as a readymade and was more concerned with giving it a painterly surface, similarly witnessed an era of national becoming. One of his paintings, an abstract canvas using collage called *According to What?* actually lends its title to Ai's Tokyo exhibition, and Ai claims inspiration from Johns early in his career.

So if Johns painted flags, maps and political symbols not out of feelings of national greatness, but because there was a need to deal with a surging popular icon, the same could be said for many of Ai's works, like *Fragments*. The freestanding sculpture is an assemblage of antique furniture and Lincoln Log-like beams that Ai scavenged from Qing era temples being torn down to make way for new urban developments throughout China. Using traditional joinery techniques, he refashioned the cultural shards into a sort of disjointed pavilion. At a glance, it

seems to draw on the aesthetics of minimalism and process art. But from a bird's-eye view — the sculpture is about 3m tall and 10m across — one sees China's outline. The work is at once an elemental testimony to the Chinese character, a statement against the destruction of its cultural legacy, and a vision of how to rebuild.

(Interesting to note, all of Ai's China maps include Taiwan, and in *Fragments*, Taiwan is represented as a pair of fused stools sitting off to the side. Taiwanese artist Michael Lin (林明弘), who shares a gallery with Ai in Switzerland, claimed he half-jokingly tried to buy the free-standing piece for Taiwan in Ai's 1.5m tall rosewood sculpture, *Map of China* (2006), but was refused.)

Ai grew up during the highly repressive years of the Cultural Revolution, the son of the revered poet Ai Qing (艾青). "He was a poet for the nation, very much like Pablo Neruda for Chile," recalled Ai. "His poetry influenced a whole generation of intellectuals to become revolutionaries."

Ai Qing was an early supporter of socialism, who was imprisoned by the Chinese Nationalist Party for three years during the 1930s and in 1941 joined up with the Communist army in Yanan. Once the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, he was able to travel the world through a UNESCO program to bring literary minds of the Third World together and met other luminaries, including Jorge Borges.

But Ai Qing's position as a rising poet laureate could not weather Mao Zedong's (毛澤東) lifelong distaste for intellectuals. When Mao launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, he and around half a million other educated types were punished, "because he couldn't continue to support the party," explained Ai. He went into exile, first to Manchuria, then to Xinjiang, where he spent more than 20 years and raised Weiwei and his other children. "One of the jobs he had was cleaning public toilets. For a man like this, you can imagine what that must have meant," said Ai.

"We never had an exchange of political opinions," recalled Ai. "I think if I was influenced by him, it's that he was a very independent person."

Ai Qing was officially rehabilitated by the Communist Party in 1976 following Mao's death, and he subsequently brought his family back to Beijing. Ai Weiwei became involved in what would become China's first contemporary art movement, the Stars Group, with whom he showed some traditional Chinese ink paintings. Then in 1981, he moved to New York, vowing to never return.

The New York years, Ai sarcastically noted, "was a time of learning how capitalism and imperialism worked."

He also soaked up Western art history, taking Marcel Duchamp as a starting point then tracing

a lineage that ran from Dada to Pop Art and Conceptual Art. His personal ideas of bringing together found objects, or readymades, and Chinese antiques, however, had not yet come into its own. When his father took ill in 1993, he decided to return to China.

"I've never hesitated in making big decisions in a very short time," said Ai. "When I returned to China, I didn't have a US passport, a wife or a university degree. From the Chinese point of view, I was a total failure."

Back in Beijing, Ai plunged into the antique markets, and promptly began turning artifacts into art by defacing or destroying them. He scrawled Coca Cola logos on several 2,000-year-old vases, and one such vase he destroyed altogether in the performance *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995). Western galleries and collectors took notice. At the same time, his architecture and design studio also began to take off.

Antiques, said Ai, "exist as evidence of the cultural tracks we made in the past."

"We need to get out of the old language," he continued, by way of explaining his iconoclast tendencies. "The language of communication will always need to be renewed."

AUGMENTED AMBIT

It was not until relatively recently however that Ai's art began to take on a social dimension. In 2007, for Documenta, one of the most eminent exhibitions in contemporary art, he — with the help of his gallery and sponsors — bought plane tickets for 1,001 Chinese nationals and brought them to Germany as part of a work called *Fairytale*. It was a grand gesture of affirmative action, a statement that an international exhibition should have a truly international audience, not just predominantly Western visitors who could afford the trip.

Ai began directly and openly criticizing China's political situation around the same time, about a year before the 2008 Olympics. He decried the upsurge of "shitty nationalism" and regularly referred to the Olympic Stadium he'd helped design as a "toilet bowl." Art critic Philip Tinari has traced his outspokenness to a 2007 interview with the *Guardian*, in which Ai trashed the games. Speaking of the Olympics opening ceremonies and those who'd designed them, including Steven Spielberg and his former classmate at the Beijing Film Academy Zhang Yimou (張藝謀), Ai was quoted as saying, "All the shitty directors in the world are involved. It's disgusting. I don't like anyone who shamelessly abuses their profession, who makes no moral judgment. It is mindless."

In the Tokyo interviews, Ai kept up his critique, declaiming against China's one-party system, authoritarian government, lack of individual rights and a controlled media. "It's really a very complicated issue here," he said.

"A state wants to be a world-class power, at top economic performance, but at the same time wants to maintain a non-democratic society and in every field it's very corrupt."

But he has also picked his battles wisely, choosing issues with widespread popular support in China, like the Sichuan earthquake. Months after the disaster, the government's failure to announce an official death toll pushed Ai to organize his own citizen's investigation. He sent dozens of volunteers into the earthquake zone, who have to date collected 5,194 names of dead school children. Ai published the list on his blog, which he claimed was getting 10,000 hits a day, before it was shut down by the Chinese government. (A US-hosted version can still be seen at <http://blog.aiweiwei.com>.) In May of this year, China's government, possibly under pressure from Ai's project, admitted to the deaths of 5,335 school children, but published no names. At that time, Ai was quoted as saying, "To me, numbers are not enough, because the names are related to which schools collapsed." For him, this remains a problem of shoddy construction and corruption.

"This is the most successful of my works, but the one least understood by the art world," claimed Ai. "But it doesn't matter, because I will never be satisfied if my works just remain in museums."

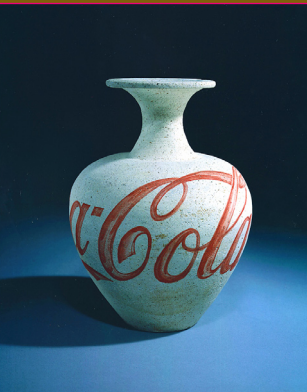
Ai has, however, translated the work into sculpture. In Tokyo, he created a memorial to the children out of around 1,000 school-kid backpacks snapped together into the form of a snake, *Snake Ceiling* (2009). In Munich, he will cover the facade of the Haus der Kunst with over 9,000 such backpacks.

"I often think what I'm saying is for the people who never had a chance to be heard," said Ai, who emphasizes humanitarian concerns over politics.

Mami Kataoka, chief curator at the Mori Art Museum, agrees. "I always think what he's doing is not too political," she said. "Weiwei doesn't think the Chinese government is his enemy or something. He's just fighting for something every human being should have."

At times, Ai has been very clever in his fight. To deal with the surveillance of his studio earlier this summer, Ai first tried a direct confrontation with the secret police, marching out and kicking their car door. But when that didn't work, he phoned the local police to complain, and when a local uniformed officer arrived, Ai chuckled, recounting the tale, "It turned out that [the plainclothes cop] was his brother."

"If you criticize a system with tremendous problems, there's a lot of space you can use," he said. But he was not wholly optimistic, continuing, "Even though you win a battle, that does not mean you can win the war."



Top: Ai Weiwei, center, poses next to demonstrators during a protest against China's controversial Green Dam Internet filtering system. From left to right: *Map of China*; *Fragments*; *Snake Ceiling*; *Coca-Cola Vase*; and posted on the wall of Ai Weiwei's studio are the names of children who died in the Sichuan earthquake in May of last year.

PHOTOS: AGENCIES AND COURTESY OF FINE STUDIO AND MORI ART MUSEUM