

IT'S NOT BEAUTIFUL

An artist takes on the system.

BY EVAN OSNOS

The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei lives and works on the northeast edge of Beijing, in a studio complex that he designed for himself, a hive of eccentric creativity that one friend calls “a cross between a monastery and a crime family.” Airy buildings of brick and concrete surround a courtyard planted with grass and bamboo. Ai and his wife, Lu Qing, also an artist, inhabit one side of the yard, and several dozen assistants occupy the other. The place is organized in a spirit of radical openness: visitors roam unhindered, as does a geriatric cocker spaniel named Danny and a tribe of semi-feral cats that occasionally destroy Ai’s architectural models. Ai wanders among the buildings day and night, making it difficult to discern when he is working and when he is not, a distinction that has eroded further in recent years as the line between his art and his life has become indistinguishable.

One morning in March, Ai was alone in his dining room, eating a bowl of noodles at the head of a wooden table long enough for a medieval banquet. Sunlight streamed through a two-story bank of windows. On the wall to his left was a piece he made in 1993 by altering a government poster about the dangers of fireworks in such a way that a large bandaged hand was now flipping the viewer the bird. “My wife hates this one,” he said.

For Ai, however, the gesture resonates on the level of cosmology. The Museum of Modern Art owns a series of photographs of the Eiffel Tower, the White House, Tiananmen Square, and other places featuring his extended middle finger in the blurry foreground—a profane travel album, of sorts, which he titled “Study of Perspective.” In the *Times*, Holland Cotter wrote that the pictures “give a sense of the versatility of an artist whose role has been the stimulating,

mold-breaking one of scholar-clown.”

At the age of fifty-three, Ai has a capacious belly, close-cropped hair, a meaty, expressive face, and a black-and-white beard that stretches to his chest. The full picture is imposing, until he reveals a sly and whimsical sense of humor. “His beard is his makeup,” his brother, Ai Dan, told me.

In his first two decades as an artist, Ai Weiwei (pronounced “Eye Way-way”) produced an eclectic, if erratic, stream of work: between gambling and trading antiques, he created installations, photographs, furniture, paintings, books, and films—the record of “a fitfully brilliant conceptualist,” as Peter Schjeldahl put it in this magazine. But in the past few years Ai’s unrelenting audacity and imagination have thrust him into a far more prominent role, as China’s leading innovator of provocation. This year, Ai will have fifteen group shows and five solo shows, including, in October, a coveted commission to fill the cathedral-like Turbine Hall, at Britain’s Tate Modern. In announcing the commission, the Tate’s director, Vicente Todolí, said that Ai’s installations rank “among the most socially engaged works of art being made today.”

At times, Ai can seem congenitally incapable of cooperation. He served as an artistic consultant to Herzog & De Meuron, the Swiss firm that designed China’s National Stadium for the 2008 Olympics, in Beijing. But, before the Games began, he disowned the event as a “fake smile” concealing China’s problems. When he is followed by plainclothes state security agents—as happens now and then—he likes to call the cops on them, setting off a Marx Brothers muddle of overlapping police agencies: “an absurdist novel gone bad,” as he puts it.

Recently, Ai was asked to create a piece that could fill the prominent site in Copenhagen usually occupied by Edvard Eriksen’s statue of the Little Mermaid, which was being loaned to Shanghai. Instead of replacing it with a statue, Ai decided to install a live closed-circuit video of the mermaid in her temporary home in China. The Danes thought the oversized surveillance camera that he designed was unattractive. “That’s our real life,” he said. “Everybody is under some kind of surveillance camera. It’s not beautiful.”

A few days before we talked, he had thrown his support behind a group of lesser-known Chinese artists who were protesting plans to demolish their studios in the name of development. Ai’s place was unaffected, but the artists had approached him for advice. He told them, “If you protest and fail to publish anything about it, you might as well have protested inside your own house.” Ai and the other artists staged a march down Chang’an Avenue, in the center of Beijing—an immensely symbolic gesture, because of the street’s proximity to Tiananmen Square. Police blocked them peacefully after a few hundred yards, but their bravado drew attention far beyond the art world. Pu Zhiqiang, a prominent legal activist, told me, “For twenty years, I have thought that protesting on Chang’an Avenue was absolutely off limits. He did it. And what could they do about it?”

Because of his overlapping identities as activist and artist, Ai has come to occupy a peculiar category of his own: a bankable global art star who runs the distinct risk of going to jail. “There are people who say that he is doing some kind of performance art,” Chen Danqing, a Chinese painter and social critic, told me. “But I think he long ago surpassed that definition. He is doing



something more interesting, more ambiguous.” Chen added, “He wants to see how far an individual’s power can go.”

Ai Weiwei, whose father, Ai Qing, was among China’s foremost literary figures, occupies an awkward niche in the world of Chinese contemporary art: he has never been invited to hold a major exhibition in his own country, and he has tepid relations with his peers. “Galleries and magazines send him things, and he doesn’t even open them,” Zhao Zhao, a younger artist who works as one of Ai’s assistants, said. Chinese art has ballooned in value in recent years—driven by speculators and a generation of new Chinese tycoons—but Ai has remained largely on the fringes, and his work sells at prices that have never matched the heights of his reputation: a pair of giant ceramic basins of freshwater pearls sold for two hundred and nineteen thousand dollars at Sotheby’s last spring, and a three-legged wooden table, bent in the center so that one leg rests high against the wall, sold for a hundred and fifty-three thousand at Christie’s in February. Rather than sign on with a major dealer, who could assure him higher prices, he sells directly to collectors or through small galleries. “I don’t like the system,” he told me.

Ai spends much of his time on the road; he owns an apartment in Manhattan, in Chelsea. But when he is in China his orbit revolves tightly around his studio complex, which has acquired a role in the cultural life of Beijing akin to that of Andy Warhol’s Factory, as a magnet for creative people and patrons. As Philip Tinari, the editor of *Leap*, a Chinese art magazine, put it, “The ritual pilgrimage to the House of Ai” has become a “required stop on every foreign art-world itinerary.”

Ai and his wife have no children. He has an infant son from an extramarital relationship with a woman who worked on one of his films. They live nearby. He never intended to be a father. “She said, ‘Yes, I want to have the baby,’” he told me. “I said, ‘I don’t normally think I should have a baby, but if you insist, of course, it’s your right, and I will bear the full responsibility as a father.’” Ai, who sees his son every day, is enjoying being wrong about fatherhood.

“So-called human intelligence—we shouldn’t overestimate it,” he said. “When an accident happens, that can be nice.”

Ai walked across the studio’s snow-streaked courtyard to the office, where half a dozen young Chinese and foreign assistants were busy at computers. Several were working on what Ai calls his “Citizens’ Investigation” of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, an attempt to document how and why so many children died in poorly constructed schools. Eighty pieces of paper were plastered to one of the office walls—a spreadsheet containing thousands of names and birthdates. Each day, Ai’s office posts to Twitter a list of the students who were born on that day and died in the earthquake. “Today, there are seventeen,” Ai said. “The most of any day yet.”

He slumped into a chair in front of a computer and began to type. Since he discovered Twitter, last spring, he has become one of China’s most active users, with about thirty-six thousand followers. Twitter is blocked in China by the authorities, but it can be reached by signing on through a third-party server overseas, a simple technical step that has enabled Twitter to become a popular tool of communication in China. Ai usually spends at least eight hours a day on Twitter, and I asked him how that had affected the time he devotes to his art. “I think my stance and my way of life *is* my most important art,” he said. “Those other works might be collectible—something you can hang on the wall—but that’s just a conventional perspective. We shouldn’t do things a certain way just because Rembrandt did it that way. If Shakespeare were alive today, he might be writing on Twitter.”

Unsurprisingly, Ai has come under greater government scrutiny of late. He wrote a popular blog for four years, until last spring, when censors blocked it. A few months later, he discovered that his Gmail accounts had been hacked and the settings altered to forward his messages to an unfamiliar address. Ai says that his bank has received official inquiries to review his finances, and, last June, a pair of surveillance cameras appeared on utility poles outside his front gate, focussed on the traffic going in and out—notwithstanding the redundancy of monitoring somebody who already broadcasts the minutiae of his

life. When he tries to make DVDs of his documentaries, duplicating services worry that they will be punished for associating with him. “Not even the porno producers will do it,” Zuoxiao Zuzhou, a rock musician who works on Ai’s media productions, told me.

Ai stood up from the keyboard and announced that it was time to go to the courthouse. Over the past year, his office has sent more than a hundred and fifty letters to government agencies seeking information about earthquake victims and construction problems, under the Freedom of Government Information Law. He has yet to receive a substantive response. Today, he was going to file suit against the Ministry of Civil Affairs, for not responding to his requests. He slid into the passenger seat of a small black sedan, with a driver and a woman named Liu Yanping, who oversees the letter-writing campaign. “According to the policy, they have to respond within fifteen working days,” she said, clutching a sheaf of papers on her lap. I asked Liu if she was a lawyer and she laughed. “For a long time, I was at home raising my child,” she said. “On his blog, Ai Weiwei asked for volunteers, so I wrote him an e-mail. The work looked interesting, and I was curious.” It’s now her full-time job. (Last summer, after she publicized the trial of Tan Zuoren, an earthquake activist, she spent two days in police custody in Sichuan, for “disturbing the social order.”)

We reached the Second Intermediate People’s Court of Beijing, a tall stone-gray tower, with a grand arched entry and a modest office at the back, on the ground floor, for processing new cases. We passed through a metal detector, where two young men in guards’ uniforms were engrossed in a comic book. There was a line of bank-teller-style windows, and, at the one closest to us, a tiny old woman in a pink padded jacket was bellowing into a rectangular opening in the glass. “How could the other side win without any evidence?” she shouted. “Did they bribe the head of the court?” On the opposite side of the glass, two women in uniform were listening with resigned expressions suggesting that she had been at it for a while.

Ai and Liu lined up in front of window No. 1 and, when it was their turn, slid the papers through the opening to a middle-aged man in a tan blazer. He looked glassy-eyed and exhausted. He

read the papers carefully and identified a problem: “You say that you need the Ministry of Civil Affairs to make this information public, but why are you taking an interest in this?”

Ai leaned over to speak into the opening in the window. “Actually, according to the policy,” he said, “everyone has a right to ask for this information—not that you have to agree.” After some back and forth, Ai and Liu consented to write out a description of their goals, and they found seats in a waiting area full of people holding similar sheaves of paper. “They don’t want to accept this,” Ai said, “because, once it is in the legal pipeline, they have to make some kind of judgment.” By the time Ai and Liu reached the window again, an hour had passed. Now they learned that they were using the wrong color ink. Written materials had to be in black, and they had used blue. They sat down again to rewrite them. They got in line again.

“Kafka’s castle,” Ai said to nobody in particular. Two hours stretched into three, and I asked him why he was bothering with this if he did not expect a response. “I want to prove that the system is not working,” he said. “You can’t simply say that the system is not working. You have to work through it.” Twenty minutes before closing time, the man behind the glass finally accepted the filing, and Ai and Liu, satisfied, turned to leave. The old woman was still yelling.

Ai Weiwei always sensed that he was born into the wrong family—or, at least, an inauspicious one. His father, Ai Qing, who trained as a painter, moved to Paris in 1929, at the age of nineteen, to study. There he discovered the realism of Dostoyevsky, Gogol, and Turgenev, who, as he later put it, “pulled away the curtain on the realities of society for me.” His greatest influence, however, was the Belgian modernist poet Émile Verhaeren, whose descriptions of the squalid underside of European cities focussed Ai Qing’s attention on corruption and injustice in his homeland. He returned to China in 1932, but his involvement in leftist circles drew the suspicion of the Nationalist Party and he was imprisoned. Unable to paint in jail, he dedicated himself to poetry and, after his release, joined the Communist Party, where he earned a reputation for clear, accessible verse imbued with

the spirit of the revolution. He was especially impressed with Chairman Mao, for whom he wrote a poem of praise that began, “Wherever Mao Zedong appears/thunderous applause erupts.” In 1956, when he was forty-six, he married for a third time, and the following year his wife, Gao Ying, a young staff member of the writers’ association, had a son.

At the time, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, one of Mao’s purges of intellectuals, was gathering force, and Ai Qing’s devotion to the Party was called into question. He had written a fable, “The Gardener’s Dream,” that highlighted the need to permit a broader range of creative opinions. In it, a gardener who cultivates only Chinese roses realizes that he is “causing discontent among all the other types of flowers.” A fellow-poet, Feng Zhi, attacked Ai Qing, saying that he had fallen “into the quagmire of reactionary formalism.”

Ai Qing was stripped of his titles and ejected from the writers’ association. At night, he would bang his head against the wall and demand, “Do you think I am against the Party?” Meanwhile, Gao Ying recalled in a memoir, “Ai Qing and I,” published in 2007, she and her husband had to name their infant son. The father simply opened the dictionary and dropped his finger onto a character: 威, pronounced “wei,” which means “power.” The irony was too great, given the cir-

cumstances, so he altered the tone slightly to make it into a different “wei,” 未, which means “not yet.” Their son thus became “Not yet, not yet.”

The family was sent to Manchuria and then to the remote western region of Xinjiang, where Ai Qing was assigned the job of cleaning public toilets, thirteen a day. For extra food, the family collected the severed hooves of sheep discarded by butchers, and piglets that had frozen to death. When the Cultural Revolution began, things worsened. Ai Qing’s tormentors poured ink on his face, and children threw stones at him. He and his family were sent to an area known as Little Siberia, on the edge of the Gobi Desert, where they had to live in an underground cavern that had been used as a birthing place for farm animals. They were there for five years.

Ai Weiwei prefers not to talk about his father. He seems to know that the narrative is ripe for manipulation into a cliché, and their relationship was remote. His deepest impressions were of watching his father clean the toilets. “That period in his life was the absolute bottom, the most painful,” Ai Weiwei said. “He attempted suicide several times.”

As a child, Ai Weiwei distracted himself by working with his hands, making ice skates and gunpowder. He had a weakness for mischief and playground politics that led his father to nickname



“If you don’t want the light to keep shining in your eyes, stop asking me how much longer I’m going to read.”



him Cao Cao, after a famously cunning ancient Chinese statesman. Ai's parents could not shield their sons from what Ai Dan called "the pressure and humiliation and hopelessness." Speaking of his brother, he said, "He was a sensitive, fragile child, so he saw and heard more than other people."

Ai Dan, who is five years younger than Weiwei, lives simply, in a courtyard-house that he shares with their mother. He is a writer, though I sensed the weight of Ai Qing's legacy: Ai Dan hasn't finished a piece of writing in years. "The Chinese language is too complicated," he said, with a weak smile. Ai Dan told me that their father never gave up his faith in the Party, and I asked how he had rationalized his suffering. "He believed that those at fault were a few and that those who suffered were many," he replied. "Intellectuals like him believed that their fate was no different from the fate of the nation."

By the time Ai Qing and his family were allowed to return to Beijing, in 1976, many readers had assumed that he was dead. He resumed writing, and he never lost his instinct for resistance. When student demonstrators filled Tiananmen Square in 1989, Ai Qing, then seventy-nine and in a wheelchair, asked to be pushed out to the square. With other intellectuals, he signed a statement declaring, "Freedom, democracy, and the rule of law are not things that will someday simply be granted to the people from above. All truth-seeking freedom-loving people must strive to achieve what the constitution promises." He died in 1996.

Ai graduated from high school the year the family returned to Beijing. He had already awakened to art, and a translator friend of the family gave him banned books on Degas and van Gogh, which he circulated like talismans among his friends. (He also received a book about

Jasper Johns, but the images of maps and flags baffled him, and it went "straight into the garbage.") To practice sketching, Ai visited train stations and zoos, where he could find subjects who would sit still for nothing. He enrolled at the Beijing Film Academy, not because of any interest in film but because it was one of few options. He found it stifling and doctrinaire, and he gravitated instead to a group of avant-garde artists known as the Stars, who challenged state control of the arts and marched beneath the slogan "We Demand Political Democracy and Artistic Freedom." He also participated in an incipient political movement called Democracy Wall, in which activists produced magazines and posters calling for reform.

But their activism was circumscribed. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping put an end to Democracy Wall; its central figure, Wei Jingsheng, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, on charges of leaking state secrets. "I felt I can no longer live in this country," Ai said. His girlfriend at the time was moving to Philadelphia to go to school, and, in February, 1981, he joined her.

In America, Ai studied English and enrolled at Parsons School of Design, in New York. He was intoxicated by the energy of the East Village, which, to him, felt "like a volcano with smoke always billowing out of the top." He found a cheap basement apartment near East Seventh Street and Second Avenue, and spent his weekends haunting the galleries, roaming the city like "a mud-fish burrowing wherever there is muck," as his brother put it in "New York Notes," a short book that he wrote after a visit.

Parsons was a poor fit. Ai excelled in the studio but hated art history: "Whoever Picasso's lovers were, I had no interest." He dropped out and did odd jobs—housekeeper, gardener, babysitter, construction worker—and dedicated himself mainly to playing blackjack in Atlantic City. He also earned money as a sidewalk portrait painter, avoiding customers who were immigrants, like him, because they tried to bargain down the price.

Joan Lebold Cohen, a historian of Chinese art who knew many Chinese artists in New York at the time, recalls visiting Ai's building. "The whole place reeked of urine," she said. "His apartment was a

single room, no furniture, just a bed on the floor, and a television. And he was riveted to the television.” She went on, “It was, I think, the Iran-Contra hearings. And he was so excited about the idea that the government would go through this cleansing, this agony, this ripping itself apart. He just couldn’t believe that this was all done publicly.”

Eventually, Ai’s English became fairly fluent, and other Chinese artists began seeking him out for help in navigating the cultural quarters of New York. His apartment became a famous footnote in Chinese art history—a way station where many of China’s future stars camped out, including the filmmakers Chen Kaige and Feng Xiaogang, and the composer Tan Dun, who arrived in New York at the end of 1985. “He started to introduce me, not just geographically but also spiritually,” Tan told me recently. “I would ask Weiwei, ‘I want to see John Cage. I want to see Laurie Anderson.’ And he would always try to find some way to help me.”

Ai was painting at a furious pace, but he had no buyers, so every time he moved he would throw away his paintings and start over. Soon he abandoned painting and began exploring the possibilities in objects. He took a violin from a friend, pried off the neck and strings, and replaced them with the handle of a shovel. (The friend was not pleased.) When Ai’s mother sent him a pair of leather shoes—a prized possession in Beijing—he sliced them and stitched them together to create a single shoe with a toe at each end, which he called “One Man Shoe.” In 1988, Ethan Cohen, Joan’s son, put the violin, the shoe, and other pieces into Ai’s first solo show, which *Artspeak* called “a neo-Dadaist knockout.”

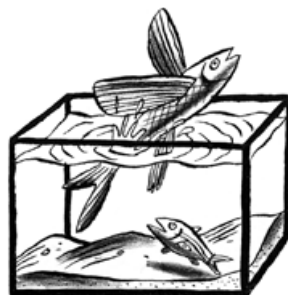
At a poetry reading at St. Mark’s In-the-Bowery, Ai met Allen Ginsberg, who had come to know Ai’s father on a trip to Beijing. He began spending time with Ginsberg. “He read his poems to me,” Ai said. “One of the ones he wrote for his mom”—“White Shroud”—“and I didn’t quite understand it, but he loved reading it.” Ai was accumulating influences. The first book he read in English was “The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again).” (“It was easy to understand; it was written in Twitter language.”) But nobody affected him as deeply as Duchamp, whose subversion of orthodoxy

was thrilling to Chinese artists raised on academic realism. One of Ai’s earliest pieces was a wire clothes hanger bent into the shape of Duchamp’s profile.

Ai began taking photographs, and sold breaking-news pictures to the *Times*. He documented protests in Tompkins Square Park, and had his first run-ins with the police. “Being threatened is addictive,” he later told China’s *Southern Weekend* newspaper. “When those in power are infatuated with you, you feel valued.” Then he tried his own hand at protest. When news reached New York of the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, Ai went on a hunger strike for several days. (After Tiananmen, he received a U.S. green card.)

The market for Chinese contemporary art, however, was bleak. Joan Cohen recalled, “One curator I approached said to me, ‘We don’t show Third World art.’” When Cohen contacted the Guggenheim, she says, “not only would the curator not see me but his secretary wouldn’t see me.” Ethan Cohen struggled to find collectors for Ai’s work: “I twisted their arms and said, ‘You’ve got to put up five hundred dollars to buy Weiwei’s hanger.’” When, in April of 1993, Ai got word that his father was ill, he returned to Beijing.

Ai moved into his parents’ courtyard, and artists often dropped by to hear about the New York scene. One day in 1994, the visitors included Lu Qing, a soft-spoken artist born in Shenyang, who was seven years younger than Ai. That year, she appeared in one of Ai’s most widely recognized works: a black-and-white photograph in which she is standing amid tourists in Tiananmen Square, lifting her skirt to reveal her legs and underwear. (The timing—June, 1994—was a nod to the fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen demonstrations.) Ai never planned on marriage—“the final resting place of the wretch,” as he put it to his brother—but, after he and Lu Qing had been together for three years, Lu Qing



wanted a commitment. “So I said, ‘O.K., let’s get married,’” Ai recalled. “For me, it’s just a promise. I mean, what is marriage, right?” On a trip to New York, they gathered some friends as witnesses. “We went to New York City Hall and registered there.”

At the time, in the early nineties, the Chinese avant-garde was atomized and uninspired. “The whole scene had stagnated,” Feng Boyi, an independent curator and critic, recalled. Feng and Ai wanted to ignite interest, but they didn’t have the money or permission for a show. So, together with Xu Bing and Zeng Xiaojun—artists living in New York—they decided to publish a book of images and essays. It was a subversive idea to print anything without official approval, and no publisher in Beijing would take the risk, so they found a printer in the southern city of Shenzhen, who produced two thousand copies of what became known as the “Black Cover Book” (1994). They gave it away to artists, critics, and others. They followed it with a “White Cover Book” and a “Gray Cover Book,” a trilogy that became highly influential among the artists of their generation. In his writings, Ai took aim not only at China’s suppression of creativity but at another sensitive target as well: fellow-artists who “fail to deliver independent criticism” and find refuge in a “philistine style of pragmatism and opportunism.”

By 1995, Ai had attracted some powerful patrons. Uli Sigg, the Swiss Ambassador to Beijing, who was amassing a vast collection of contemporary Chinese art, became an avid booster and introduced him to, among others, Harald Szeemann, the curator of the 1999 Venice Biennale. In 2000, Ai and Feng Boyi organized a show as a counterpoint to the Shanghai Biennale. The show—which they called “Non-Coöperative Approach” in Chinese, and “Fuck Off” in English—was calibrated for maximum antagonism: the most controversial piece was a photograph of the artist Zhu Yu eating what was identified as a dead baby.

With an emerging international reputation, Ai sensed that it was probably time to move out of his mother’s house. He leased some vegetable fields in the village of Caochangdi, beside the Fifth Ring Road, on the fringe of Beijing, and sketched out a studio complex in an afternoon. Construction took sixty days, at a

cost of about forty thousand dollars. Ai had no training as an architect, but after designing his studio he received a flurry of commissions for buildings and public-art installations. He launched one of China's most influential architecture practices, which he named FAKE Design. In Chinese, the name is pronounced a lot like "fuck," though it is also a nod to Ai's enduring fascination with questions of authenticity. "I know nothing about architecture," he liked to say.

The architect Sir Norman Foster, a collector of Ai's art and an admirer of his buildings, told me that Ai's style was "individualistic and wonderfully effective." The buildings, he said, "in some ways remind me of the early works in brick of Alvar Aalto in Finland, and I say that as a compliment." By Ai's count, the firm built sixty projects in eight years. Then, in 2007, he abruptly announced that he was getting out of the architecture business. "Architecture needs great care and a lot of detail," he told me. "If we can't take full responsibility, then we'll drop it."

Turning back to art, he played with the boundaries of what constituted art work at all. For his contribution to Documenta 12, in 2007, he proposed an expedition that would bring a thousand and one average Chinese citizens to Kassel, Germany, to view the festival—an "invasion," as he put it. (He called it "Fairytale," in reference to Kassel's being the home of the Brothers Grimm.) It was social sculpture on a Chinese scale, and the logistics would have staggered Joseph Beuys, the German conceptualist who held that "everyone is an artist." Most of the Chinese applicants had never had a passport. "Some were from minority groups in which women didn't have a formal name," Ai said, "so we had to make up a name to get a passport." He raised money from foundations and others for the air travel, and his office designed every detail of the expedition, down to matching suitcases, bracelets, and dormitory-style living spaces outfitted with a thousand and one restored wooden chairs from the Qing Dynasty. The piece had a special resonance in China, where validation from the West, including visas, once carried near-mythic value. "For the past hundred years, we've always been waiting for the Americans or the Europeans or whomever to call our names," Chen Danqing told me. "*You. Come.*"

In 2005, the Chinese Web site Sina invited Ai to host a blog. He wasn't interested. "There was a computer in my office, but I had never touched it," he said. Sina promised to teach him, and Ai realized that the blog "had a lot of good possibilities." At first, he used it in an odd way—posting dozens, sometimes hundreds, of snapshots each day, depicting his visitors, his cats, his wanderings. He was putting his life under surveillance, though he did not always bother to mention that to his guests. When a delegation from MOMA's International Council stopped by his studio, he stashed so many cameras and microphones around the complex that they picked up the bus driver grumbling, "Fuck! It takes them so long just to go to an artist's studio."

The blog gave Ai a far wider audience than he had ever encountered, and soon he was commenting on subjects ranging beyond art. In March, 2006, he wrote of a country called "C," ruled by "chunky and brainless gluttons" who "spend two hundred billion yuan on drinking and dining and an equal amount on the military budget every year." He fixed on one sensitive issue after another. His assistant Zhao Zhao said, "He'd be reading the news and he'd say, 'How can this be?' And then the next day, and the day after that, he'd still be saying the same thing." He skewered a high-profile government project imbued with patriotic pride: a new railroad to Tibet, which, he wrote, would "unavoidably accelerate the disappearance of a culture." He subverted the usual Chinese mode of dissent: favoring bluntness and spectacle over metaphor and anonymity. He shamed the system with his own transparency. In the view of the Beijing-based critic and curator Karen Smith, the author of a book on Ai Weiwei published last year, Ai was turning his blog into a public space as vibrant as "any church or grand piazza was in High Renaissance Italy."

Ten months after the huge earthquake in Sichuan, the Chinese government said that it still did not know how many students had died in collapsed schools, much less their names. In language that was unusually harsh even for him, Ai wrote of the officials in charge of the disaster area, "They hide the facts in the name of maintaining stability. They intimidate, they jail, they persecute par-

ents who demand the truth, and they brazenly stomp on the constitution and the basic rights of man."

In December of 2008, he launched his campaign to collect as many students' names as possible. He signed up volunteers and sent them to Sichuan to investigate. They collected fifty-two hundred and twelve names, and cross-checked them with parents, insurance companies, and other sources. (The government later released its own list, of fifty-three hundred and thirty-five names.) On May 27, 2009, police visited Ai and his mother to ask him about his activities. He responded with an open letter online: "Deleting my blog I tolerated. Tapping my phone I tolerated. Surveillance of my residence I tolerated. But charging into my house and threatening me in front of my seventy-six-year-old mother I cannot tolerate. You don't understand human rights, but do you know anything about the constitution?" The next day, his blog was shut down.

A couple of months later, Ai was in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, to attend the trial of Tan Zuoren, the earthquake activist, who had been accused of inciting subversion of the state. At 3 A.M. on August 12th, while Ai was asleep in his hotel, police knocked on the door and ordered him to open it. He replied that he had no way to know if they were who they said they were, and he picked up the phone to dial the police. (He also turned on an audio recorder to capture the scene.) Before his call could go through, the police broke down the door. A struggle ensued, and he was punched in the face, above the right cheekbone. "It was three or four people," he told me. "They were just dragging me. They tore my shirt and hit my head."

The police took him and eleven of his volunteers and assistants to another hotel, and detained them there until the end of the day, when Tan's trial was over. Ai and his staff, as usual, videotaped their detention, and he edited the footage into a documentary, which he posted online.

Four weeks later, Ai, in Munich to install a show, felt a persistent headache and weakness in his left arm. He went to a doctor, who discovered a subdural hematoma—a pool of blood on the right side of his brain—caused by blunt trauma. The doctor considered it life-threatening and performed surgery that night. From

SKETCHBOOK BY BARRY BLITT

The Whisper Campaign Against Elena Kagan Debunked!

his hospital bed as he recovered, Ai posted to Twitter copies of his brain scans and the doctor's statements. (Seven months later, Ai says that he has recovered, except that he tires easily and has trouble summoning words.) Then he went ahead with the biggest exhibition of his career: a vast installation that blanketed an exterior wall of the Munich Haus der Kunst with a mosaic of nine thousand bright-colored custom-made children's backpacks. In giant Chinese characters, the bags spelled out a statement from the mother of a child killed in the quake: "She lived happily on this earth for seven years."

As Ai's life and work have become more politicized, he has fallen farther out of step with peers in the Chinese art world. I asked Feng Boyi, the curator and critic who worked with Ai on the "Fuck Off" show, to describe how other intellectuals regard Ai. "Some really admire him, especially young people outside of art circles," Feng told me. But among some artists another view prevails. "They attack him," Feng said. "They say he simply wants to make a fuss. They don't acknowledge his approach."

To his detractors, Ai is too quick to satisfy Western expectations of "the dissident," too willing to condense the complexity of today's China into black-and-white absolutes that attract foreign sympathies. The fact that Ai exhibits mostly abroad fuels the criticism that he is happier allowing foreigners to project their moral longings onto him than engaging with China's ambiguities. (At one point, so many commentators online were speculating that he had renounced his Chinese citizenship that Ai felt compelled to post images of his Chinese passport.)

After the artists' march on Chang'an Avenue, an artist named Yu Gao posted a widely read rebuke that called Ai a "traitor," whose flamboyant gesture of protest had "destroyed the platform for discussion" with the government. "Whoever wants to pass himself off as a hero, protecting people's rights, go ahead, but it is just the mask of a clown," she wrote.

The intensity of that critique reflected the sensitivity of the question at the heart of Ai's project: forcing Chinese intellectuals to examine their role in a nation that is not yet free but is no longer a classic closed society. The relationship between Chinese artists and



She was born in Kenya.
Untrue!



She Tasers birds and mice.
Not so!



She claims to be able to see the Russian
Tea Room from her apartment.
No way!



She lists her favorite Beatle as "Justin Bieber."
Not even!



she's an almost constant, naked
presence on Chatroulette.
Uh-uh!

the regime has changed dramatically in the past decade. For much of the nineties, authorities did their part to fulfill clichés of art and authoritarianism: arresting performance artists for appearing in the nude, shutting down experimental shows, and bulldozing underground artists' villages.

But profitability has shuffled priorities on all sides. By 2006, paintings by leading artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun, and Chen Yifei were selling at auction for more than a million dollars apiece, and in 2007 auction houses in mainland China and Hong Kong leaped to third place in the world in sales revenue, behind America and the United Kingdom. Government censors still interfere—satirical portraits of Mao, for instance, are not allowed in mainstream galleries—but the state has discovered that the best way to deprive Chinese art of its rebellious energy is to embrace it:

after years of threatening to demolish Factory 798, a former military electronics plant that had been turned into a cluster of galleries and studios, the Beijing municipal government designated it a cultural landmark. It is now a tourist-friendly “creative industry area.”

To understand the critique of Ai's position, I visited Xu Bing, who rose to prominence in the eighties, when he produced some highly controversial work, including “A Book from the Sky,” a set of hand-printed books and scrolls composed entirely of fake pictograms—a critique of China's hidebound literary culture. Xu moved to America and thrived, earning a MacArthur award and commanding high prices for his art. At one point, he and Ai were close friends—he took over Ai's apartment in the East Village when Ai left, and he had worked on the “Covers” trilogy of books—but they have grown apart.

Two years ago, Xu startled the Chinese art world by shedding his outsider status and returning to Beijing to become the vice-president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the nation's top official art school. I asked Xu what he made of Ai's political activities. “He has held on to certain ideals, like democracy and freedom, that made a deep impression on him—things inherited from the Cold War era,” Xu said. “These things are not without value—they have value—and in today's China he has his function. It is meaningful and necessary. But when I came back to China I thought that China is very different than it was when he came back to China. This place, in fact, still has a lot of problems, like the disparity between rich and poor, and migrant-labor issues, and on and on. But it really has solved many problems. China's economy is developing so quickly. I'm interested in *why* that has happened.

“My school has meetings constantly,” he went on. They are a fact of life in a state-run organization. “The meetings, you discover, are really boring and useless. Sometimes, in meetings, I write literary essays, and people think I'm taking notes, that I'm especially dedicated. But sometimes I think about the fact that China is holding meetings every day, and even though these meetings are meaningless China has still developed so fast. How has this happened? There must be some reason. This is what interests me.” He added, “We can't hold on to a Cold War attitude, particularly in today's China, because China today and China during the Cold War are worlds apart.”

Before I left, Xu said, “Not everyone can be like Ai Weiwei, because then China wouldn't be able to develop, right? But if China doesn't permit a man like Ai Weiwei, well, then it has a problem.” Indeed, the degree to which China ultimately allows Ai to continue will be the true measure of how far China has—or has not—moved toward an open society. So far, it seems, he has been insulated by his famous family name, his own celebrity, and, despite his antics, a subtle sense of what is truly off limits. (He has never, for instance, promoted any political challenge to the primacy of the Communist Party.) As the liberal legal activist Pu Zhiqiang put it, “He knows full well what can be done and what can't be done. Both he and I are trying to widen the space for



“Iron Man—why didn't I think of that?”

legal rights to the absolute limits. I am not willing to be an enemy of the government, and I don't believe Ai is, either."

A few weeks after the visit to the courthouse, Ai flew to Chengdu, the city where he was punched and detained last year, to visit a bronze foundry that was fabricating a series of sculptures for him. He was travelling with an entourage that was large even by his standards; it included his assistant Zhao Zhao, who was videotaping his every move, and three other videographers, from separate documentary projects.

Returning to Chengdu carried a certain symbolism, and throughout the day Ai posted updates to Twitter about the trip. After the foundry visit, he went to the site of a school that had collapsed in the earthquake, then drove to a cemetery where students were said to be buried, but a guard told him it was closed. Whether it was his caravan or his Twitter messages that drew attention, by midafternoon we were being conspicuously tailed by a black Volkswagen hatchback, driven by a lone man with a comb-over. At one point, Ai pulled his car over and ran back to the Volkswagen, which sped away. Ai Tweeted about that, too. "He fled helter-skelter," he wrote.

All afternoon, Ai had been inviting people, via Twitter, to join him for dinner at a local restaurant that featured pigs' trotters in broth, a Chengdu specialty. Sure enough, his fans began showing up in twos and threes, a lively crowd of mostly young professionals, including lawyers, Web designers, and journalists. The restaurant eventually ran out of seats, so it set up folding tables and plastic stools out front, and soon Ai's group stretched along the sidewalk. It was a digital free-for-all, with everyone at the tables snapping photographs and sending updates to Twitter from cell phones. It was easy to forget that Twitter is officially blocked in China.

I sat next to a soft-spoken lawyer who introduced herself by her Twitter handle: maplered. I asked her why she had come. "Ai Weiwei is constantly seeking more open information," she said. "He works for society. I admire him. I should learn from him."

A plainclothes security agent was videotaping the dinner gathering from across the street, and I asked the lawyer if she was worried about being seen with Ai.

"Of course you are afraid," she said. "You are afraid that one day you'll get in trouble, but you can't let this fear stop you from doing what should be done to form a normal society. What we want is normalcy, just a normal society in which we can express sorrow and mourn death, where those who do wrong are punished, and those who do good for society are encouraged, not jailed."

At one point, Ai stepped away from the table for some fresh air, and I asked him about the criticism that he is out of touch with China's real gains, that he is pushing too far and too fast. He shook his head. He gestured toward the restaurant full of people. "They are people sharing the same kinds of values," he said. "It's not like I made these up. And they're very grateful for the cause I've been working on." As Ai sees it, the undeniable improvements in Chinese life do not relieve intellectuals of the responsibility to agitate—on the contrary, they make the need more urgent than ever, because most of society will be satisfied enough by the accretion of opportunity to mortgage the prospect of a truly open society. "I think a lot of people—especially artists and intellectuals—just try to make excuses," he said.

Some of his supporters worry that he has lost sight of the risks, that he could end up in jail or be prevented from returning from an overseas trip, and I mentioned this. "I don't really care," he said. "I think it's very much because of my father—he faced the worst of these social enemies all his life. So I don't think too much about this."

On his last morning in Chengdu, Ai made a final stop: the police station on Xi'an Road, where he wanted to file an official complaint about being hit by the officers last year. He wasn't sure how the police would respond. The police station was a small courtyard office, painted blue and white, with a line of police bicycles out front. Ai, accompanied by a lawyer, among others, approached the front desk, and an officer asked what he wanted. "I was detained and beaten in the Hotel Anyi," Ai said. "I've come to file a complaint."

The officer looked puzzled. "Who was beaten?" he asked.

"I was," Ai repeated. His presence caused a small commotion behind the desk, as officers tried to figure out how to handle the large man with the entourage. It was an or-

derly scene, and Ai pulled out his phone and entered an update into Twitter: "Raised the issue, being received reasonably and kindly." After some back and forth, Ai and his lawyer were led to a small office down the hall with bare white walls and a computer, and a pair of police officers began to take down his complaint.

By this point, all four of the videographers with Ai that day had followed him into the police station and were recording the questioning. Three of the cameras were squeezed into the room at odd angles, while the fourth poked its lens in through the window. Then a third police officer arrived, with his own video camera, and began taping Ai and his entourage. Finally, he was joined by another police officer, carrying yet another video camera, and he, too, began to tape. Looking at the scene, I realized that Ai had inverted the usual logic of art and politics: instead of enlisting art in the service of his protest, he had enlisted the apparatus of authoritarianism into his art. Dissidents, like artists, need an audience, though I couldn't tell if that meant I was the press or a prop, or both.

The officer at the computer turned to Ai and began his questions: "What is your work unit?"

"I don't have one," Ai said. "I am an artist." He thought for a moment and added, "Freelance."

After a while, the police shooed everyone out of the room except Ai and his lawyer, and told the videographers to stop taping. A pair of officers asked to see my passport and then told me to delete the contents of my handheld audio recorder. I resisted a bit, but not much; there were four video recordings to choose from, and, besides, American police would probably not have been pleased with me taping inside a station, either.

Another hour passed, and the door to the police office reopened. Ai stepped out and grinned. "Finished!" he announced. The police had accepted his complaint. He lifted his arms from his sides and did a small happy dance—something between a bow and a penguin attempting to take flight. He grabbed his phone and thumbed out an update to Twitter. "Moved forward a little bit today," he wrote. In the parking lot, the cameras resumed taping. ♦