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Ai Weiwei merges art and politics in AGO show: review

With his new show, *According to What?*, Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei proves why he is the most important artist on the planet.



CATHY CARVER

From top to bottom: Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995/2009; Colored Vases, 2007-2010. Both are on display at the AGO starting Saturday in the Ai Weiwei exhibit, *According to What?*

By: [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts, Published on Wed Aug 14 2013

Ai Weiwei's past four years have gone like this: His studio in Shanghai demolished by government decree; he was beaten to the point of brain hemorrhaging by Chinese security officials; he spent three months in detention on no official charge, and was eventually prosecuted for tax evasion (a dubious charge); he endured a period of house arrest in his Beijing studio where he now sits under 24-hour surveillance, prohibited from leaving the country by the ruling Communist regime.

As such, a show — any show — of the resoundingly famous dissident artist's work comes front-loaded with politically charged expectation. *According to What?*, the broad-ranging retrospective of Ai's work that opens at the [Art Gallery of](#)

[Ontario](#) on Saturday, is no exception to this, but it hardly proves the rule. The globe-trotting exhibition, making its only Canadian stop here, is chock-full of the artist's impassioned dissident activities, but is no less artful because of it.

Ai pushes through his personal cultural filter a gamut of Western contemporary art practice, but where it could easily slip into derivative territory, it instead transforms into something new, unique, and overwhelming moving.

Look no further than *Straight*, a 38-ton installation of thousands of varying lengths of rebar salvaged from school buildings destroyed during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, in which more than 5000 children died. Ai had them salvaged, straightened and installed in a materially gorgeous topography that evokes notions of Minimalist sculpture by the likes of [Carl Andre](#) or [Donald Judd](#). But the freight it carries — innocent lives snuffed out by the thousand, due to unregulated building standards — makes it unlike anything else, in the art world or anywhere else on earth.

It's been said that Ai, with the coupling of his remarkable international profile and knack for enraging his homeland's ruling regime, is the most important artist in the world today. Ai owes this distinction, largely, to his resolute opposition to China's record on human rights. In 2008, for example, he openly denounced the record just as the Beijing Summer Olympics were set to open, using his platform as a consulting architect on the newly-iconic Bird's Nest Olympic stadium to broadcast his disdain at the ruling Communists' shameful attempt to use the Olympics as a propaganda sheen to present a kinder, gentler version of totalitarianism to the world.

He's been delivering the same message ever since, whether on his blog, on Twitter, his weapon of both necessity and choice, where Chinese filters do not apply, and where a global audience of Ai worshippers hang on his steady stream of tidbits of truth from within a carefully-controlled realm of misinformation.

Ai, who is 56, was always political. As a child, he remembers his father, Ai Qing, a renowned poet and academic, running afoul of the ruling regime and being forced to scrub toilets to make a meagre living to support his family. In the '80s, he decamped for the U.S., eventually landing up in New York, where he had a major awakening to Western art, namely conceptualism and its roots in [Dada](#).

[Marcel Duchamp](#), its pater familias, was a particular inspiration. In a suite of black-and-white photographs from Ai's New York years in *According to What?*, one is of a coat hanger bent into the shape of Duchamp's profile, half-filled with sunflower seeds. It was a direct homage to Duchamp's own 1957 collage work *Self-Portrait in Profile*, infused with Ai's personal take: cheap and plentiful, sunflower seeds are a common snack in China. Inside that, though, is the ever-present state-sanctioned mythology: Lore has it that Chairman Mao, the leader of the 1949 Communist revolution, was the sun, and the Chinese people, like sunflowers, were ever-turning to absorb his munificent glory.

When Ai returned to China in 1993 to care for his ailing father, it was in the aftermath of a moment of intense control and restriction. The '80s had been a period of rare openness in artistic expression, following on leader Deng Xiaoping's policy of opening up, economically at least, to the Western world. In June 1989, that changed, as the regime met peaceful student protest in Tiananmen Square with troops and tanks, resulting in untold dead. A little freedom can be a dangerous thing, they learned, and that was the end of that.

Ai, however, found some liberties in the sometimes-oblique realm of contemporary art. Some artists found some modicum of success in gently satirizing Communism's evolving priorities. [Wang Gunagyi](#) did (and still does) paintings in the heroic Socialist Realist propaganda poster style, infused with Western brand logos like Porsche and Pepsi. [Yue Minjun](#), one of the country's most successful exports, established a brand

identity for himself for his ubiquitous self-portrait in a frenzied, lock-jawed grin, doing gymnastics in a Chinese military uniform, say, or posed in front of an atom-bomb detonated mushroom cloud.

Those same artists cashed in, and then cashed out, going on to multi-million dollar success in the ensuing years, selling a simplified, sardonic send-up of Communism to a Western market eager to gobble up a cut-and-dried form of artistic dissent. That they did so with the regime's blessing is a telling fact: As Communism evolved into the 21st century, selling a notion of tolerance was simply good marketing. Never mind the critiques found here were outdatedly harmless, making artists like Minjun and Guangyi unintentional court jesters for a regime happy to cartoonify an ugly past while masking an uglier present.

Ai, by now schooled in Western conceptualism, produced provocations that were at first more oblique, then more dangerous. Like many artists in the '90s, Ai explored the ruling party's headlong rush to modernize, often at the cost of history.

One work at the AGO, from 1995, shows a triptych of photographs of Ai dropping a Han Dynasty urn, allowing it to smash on the ground, speaks for itself. In front of it, a clutch of Han vases, dipped in colourful paint, make the same, if more nuanced, point: History glossed over, commodified, and made more friendly and less complicated is nonetheless history erased.

Several pieces here speak to that erasure: *Map of China*, a nearly six-foot tall wooden sculpture, is impossibly perfect and polished, hand-crafted using traditional wood joinery — but master craftsmen, in the mass-produced, factory-driven engine of China's exploding economy, are fast being made obsolete. Add in that the wood used to make it was salvaged from a Qing Dynasty temple razed, like so many historic buildings in China, to make way for the new, and the layers deepen. The same is true of *He Xie*, an installation of more than 3,000 porcelain river crabs Ai had individually hand-painted at his Shanghai studio just before it was destroyed. It's no coincidence that *He Xie*, the literal term for the crabs, shares, in its Mandarin pronunciation, the Communist party's slogan for "harmonization," a euphemism for censorship. The act, in 2010, earned Ai his first stint of house arrest.

The most potent chapter in Ai's personal and creative history — because there is no separation between the two — comes with the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Incensed at the death toll, particularly of school children, whose rickety schools were toppled like so many houses of cards due to lax building standards, Ai traveled to the site to find backpacks and shoes, notepads and pencil cases strewn throughout the wreckage (his photographs, on display, show as much).

In direct defiance of official accounts of the incident, Ai began a campaign, online and in person, to enumerate the dead, first raising the government's ire. He then used his international profile to exhibit his artistic take on the tragedy: More than 5,000 backpacks — one for each of the children killed — installed in a huge grid at an exhibition in Germany; another backpack installation, present here, of a snake, serves as a smaller requiem.

His interest is not merely symbolic. Ai's team went door to door, taking names and tallying up the dead. This is what earned him a beating, a brain hemorrhage, and, in the round-up of dissidents in 2010 that followed the toppling of various regimes in 2010's Arab Spring, a trip to prison, where he was subjected to various tortures. Defiant in the face of even this, Ai worked with a team to put his treatment while incarcerated on display for the world to see at this year's Venice Biennale in a series of large-scale dioramas.

In *According to What?*, an entire wall is devoted to a simple list, in black and white, of the names of all the children who died — or all, at least, that Ai was able to count.

It's reminiscent of any war memorial you've ever seen, surely, but it's accompanied by a flatly-intoned audio recording of the names being read, one by one, out loud. The effect is quietly chilling; nearby, the rusted iron landscape of *Straight* lies in eerily gorgeous

memoriam. Personal, political, poetic, and on-point, Ai's priorities are aesthetic, humanist, topical and timeless all at once.

It all begs a chicken-or-egg query: Is Ai the most important artist on the planet because of his politicization, or in spite of it? The answer, simply, is yes.

According to What? opens Saturday, Aug. 17 and runs to Oct. 27, 2013.
www.ago.net/aiweiwei