

Seven

INSIDE
FILM/MUSIC/ART/DANCE/
THEATRE/BOOKS
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Potted art 'Colored Vases', (2006), left; and Weiwei with a bronze head, below

art His activism is his art

Two new exhibitions from the imprisoned Ai Weiwei are poignantly timed



ALASTAIR
SMART

He's probably the most famous artist on Earth right now, but come on, be honest, how many of us could name any more than two of his works? Ever since boldly boycotting the 2008 Beijing Olympics, whose "Bird's Nest" stadium he'd designed, Ai Weiwei has gained a name worldwide as critic-in-chief of China's authoritarian, one-party state.

His impromptu arrest last month and subsequent detention at whereabouts unknown have now turned him into a *cause célèbre*, the best-known of various dissidents locked up as China tries to preempt an Arab Spring-style "jasmine revolution".

Across the free world, Weiwei's release is demanded on editorial pages and at dinner parties – in sum, his fame as a pro-democracy campaigner has long since eclipsed that as an artist.

The opening of his *Sunflower Seeds* installation at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall last year proved this too, preceded as it was by Weiwei's beating from state police for condemning government reaction to the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. He suffered a life-threatening brain haemorrhage, for which

he needed emergency surgery.

But, sorry, enough already of the man. What about his art? Is it even any good? Well, though Weiwei himself came to denounce the Beijing Olympics as a "PR sham" hiding China's "disgusting" political reality, his stadium was a big hit, its twirling trusses suggestive of a bird's nest or woven basket of Chinese yore.

His Tate installation, meanwhile – a beach of 100 million husks, resembling sunflower seeds but actually pieces of individually crafted and painted porcelain – was a marvellous metaphor for stunted growth and the transformation of individual Chinese into a downtrodden mass.

The political irony was lost on no one when Tate later cordoned *Sunflower Seeds* off, over fears the trampled porcelain was giving off a lung-damaging dust. A prophecy of hope, perhaps? Of the masses fighting back?

Weiwei, 54, is a Conceptualist and, mercifully, he avoids the banalities of much contemporary Chinese art – whether the "Cynical Realism" of Yue Minjun's inane grinning faces or the "Political Pop" of Wang Guangyi.

That said, I do tend to find his work rather one-note. His trademark is to refashion Chinese antiquities into works anew, investigating his nation's complex

relationship to the past as it surges maniacally towards the future.

He's painted Neolithic vases in garish colours; he's photographed himself shattering a Han dynasty urn; and he's taken apart pieces of Ming furniture and reassembled them as absurd, odd-angled hybrids, like *Table With Two Legs Up the Wall*.

In short, he creates new through destroying old, a comment on the denial – and indeed destruction – of China's rich cultural history by this and previous governments; on the unseemly rush to replace temples with tower blocks. Weiwei asks at what cost the Cultural



Revolution, and now stratospheric economic growth, have come.

This week Londoners get to sample two new shows of Weiwei's work for themselves. Lisson Gallery will be showing a selection of sculptures from the past five years, while the courtyard at Somerset House will play host to a dozen bronze heads.

Both shows find Weiwei on familiar form. Highlights from Lisson will include the symbolically charged *Coffin* (made from the ironwood of a dismantled Qing dynasty temple) and *Surveillance Camera* (carved out of old marble). Meanwhile, for the Somerset House installation, *Circle of Animals*, he's recreated the huge bronze heads – of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac – which once adorned the gardens of the 18th-century imperial retreat at Yuanming Yuan.

Needless to say, both shows will be overshadowed by the artist's own absence, but – as Weiwei said himself – these days his "activism is [his] art; the two are inseparable". Before his arrest, he spent eight hours a day sharing his grievances on Twitter, describing it as his "new artistic medium".

It's fair to say, perhaps, that Weiwei's life has become a work of art in its own right, a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk*. Certainly, his constant swipes at the government felt, at times, like a prolonged performance piece, goading the authorities to shut him up for good.

The temptation is also there to mythologise his entire life as one long revenge narrative against the state – his father, the Modernist poet Ai Qing, had been exiled by Mao during the Cultural Revolution, dispatched to a Gobi Desert labour camp for a decade with his young family.

The odds are currently stacked right against him, but while there's life there's hope, that an avenging Weiwei may yet see China transformed in the end.

'Ai Weiwei', Lisson Gallery, London NW1 (020 7724 2739) Fri to July 16; 'Circle of Animals', Somerset House, London WC2 (020 7845 4600) Thurs to June 26.
Andrew Graham-Dixon is away