

The show goes on, minus detained Chinese artist

Ai Weiwei's arrest has propelled him from important artist to human rights symbol



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NEW YORK— Twelve bronze, 800-pound statues representing the mythical figures of the Chinese zodiac was unveiled Wednesday in New York. Missing from the event was the artist, Ai Weiwei, a famously vocal critic of the Chinese government who has not been seen since his arrest in China nearly a month ago.

While Chinese authorities have accused Ai, whose name is pronounced “AYE Way-Way,” of serious crimes, including tax evasion, plagiarism and bigamy, supporters of the 53-year-old artist say his penchant for questioning reality and challenging authority is the real reason for his arrest.

Alison Klayman, a filmmaker who is making a [documentary](#) about Ai, says his artwork and activism constitute “one life.”

“He’s really valuable as a creative person who is free and we can hear from him,” said Klayman, who has known Ai since 2008. “He’s a valuable presence and contribution to the Chinese and also global conversation. To have him not be part of it ... it’s a different world.”

The artwork being shown Wednesday — it was to be unveiled Monday but was postponed after news broke that Osama bin Laden had been killed — is his first major public

sculpture project. In "[Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads](#), Ai focused on a sensitive issue in China: the looting of a famous work of art in the Chinese Emperor’s Summer Palace in the outskirts of Beijing by British and French troops in 1860. The zodiac heads, which were part of a water clock fountain designed in the 18th century by two Jesuit priests from Europe, were taken. Five have never been recovered.

The Chinese government has made recovery of the heads a priority, dispatching 85 lawyers to a Christie's auction in 2009, when one of the heads was put up for auction. Amid the uproar, the piece was withdrawn.

Deeper questions

But for Ai, the son of one China’s most famous modern poets, the heads offered an opportunity to ask deeper questions.

“Who made it, for what reason? And why were the heads lost? Are they truly lost or at the



auction house? Who is buying and for what reason?" he said before his arrest, in comments made to AW Asia, the private foundation that commissioned the sculpture, and Klayman, the filmmaker.

"My work is always dealing with real or fake authenticity, and what's the value? And how the value relates to current political and social understandings and misunderstandings," he noted. "I think (there's) a strong humor there. So I wanted to make a complete set, including the seven original and the missing five."

Ai, who lived in New York from 1983 to 1993, interacting with other up-and-coming artists, also said the city is the ideal location for his work.

"I think to have something in public in New York is a good idea," he said. "New York is the first cosmopolitan city I'm familiar with. It's not one kind of people; it's people (from) everywhere, and a lot of minorities. A lot of Jewish, Chinese, Italians, and Irish, Greeks, everybody. Blacks. So I think it's a perfect place (for Circle of Animals.) It's a zodiac city."

While obviously not the desired outcome of China's government, Ai's arrest on April 3 as he tried to board a flight from Beijing to Hong Kong has propelled him from well-known artist to international symbol of Chinese authoritarianism, his supporters say.

[Beijing art scenecarries on without Ai Weiwei](#)

Before that, Ai was probably the "most important Chinese artist ... to the art world and a little beyond," said Larry Warsh, founder of [AW Asia](#). "Now his name is known everywhere ... and it's sad and it's bittersweet. He's known now because of what's going on in

China and reporting of this, and how the international community now is getting together via petitioning and other means to bring attention to this."

U.S. State Department official Michael Posner, who wrapped up two days of talks in China last week as part of the two nations' ongoing "human rights dialogue," said he received no satisfaction when he asked about Ai.

'No sense of comfort'

"One of the things we expressed, which is just a simple fact, is that the arts community — the Guggenheim Museum, the Tate museum and others — have all of a sudden focused on the deterioration of the human rights situation in China because of Ai Weiwei's global prominence," he said, according to a U.S. government transcript of his comments. "What I would say is, on that case, we certainly did not get an answer that satisfies. There was no sense of comfort from the response or the lack of response."

Telephone calls and an email to the Chinese Embassy in Washington for comment on the artist and his work went unanswered.

Since his return to China, Ai's relationship with the Chinese government has become increasingly turbulent.



Mike Clarke / AFP - Getty Images
Protesters holding photos of Chinese prominent artist Ai Weiwei sit on chairs lined up to make a giant Chinese character reading "imprisoned" in Hong Kong on Monday during a "chair protest" to demand the release of Ai on the eve of his one-month detention.

He consulted on the cornerstone structure of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 — the "Bird's Nest" stadium — though he later disassociated himself from the project, calling it a "fake smile" to hide China's social and political problems.

His live broadcast of government authorities demolishing his Shanghai studio in January 2011, and a series of photographs showing him "giving the finger" in front of some well-known landmarks, such as Tiananmen Square, the Eiffel Tower and the White House, further riled authorities.

A key work that spoke to his activism was "So Sorry," Ai's memorial to the devastating May 2008 earthquake in central Sichuan province that killed more than 69,000 people — including some 5,335 children. He led a citizen's initiative to get the names of the dead youth released by authorities, who had rejected such pleas.

His influence grew steadily through his blog and his use of [Twitter](#), where he now has 82,000 followers and has posted 60,126

tweets — the last on the day he was taken into custody. There he posted details that included his interaction with authorities, including a photo of him in an elevator in Sichuan with police officers in August 2009. Another showed in a hospital bed while being treated for a head injury that he alleges stemmed from a beating by police.

"Tweeting for Ai Weiwei was a medium, and the words were the paint," Warsh said. "His blogs were shutdown prior, but he still managed to tweet and get the message out."

But while Ai has many followers among China's urban and educated young, most Chinese don't know who he is. And those who do likely only know of him from accounts in the pro-government People's Daily and Global Times accusing him of tax evasion, plagiarism and bigamy.

Whether or not he is found guilty of those charges, supporters believe Ai was likely caught up in a crackdown triggered by ongoing anti-government protests and unrest in the Mideast, which some observers say has made Chinese authorities uneasy.



Chinese artist's arrest shows escalating crackdown

'Negative trends'

Posner, the State Department official, noted that in recent months there have been reports of dozens of Chinese, including public interest lawyers, writers, artists and others, who "have been arrested, detained or in some cases disappeared with no regard to legal measures."

"In fact in recent months we've seen a serious back-sliding on human rights and a discussion of these negative trends dominated the human rights dialogue these past two days," he said last week.

Whatever the future holds for him, Ai's show will go on. The New York opening begins a world tour of the sculptures, which will visit London, Los Angeles, Houston, Pittsburgh and Washington. The work was earlier shown at the Sao Paulo Biennale in Brazil in 2010.

That, said Klayman, will keep his story very much in the public eye. But she said she hopes that viewers of his works will remember that the narrative is not "just about him."

"If it's about just him, then you miss the point I think," she said. "You should care about what's happening to ... a lot of people, who are in his situation. Now he's a symbol for that."

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