

Lunch with the FT: Ai Weiwei

By David Pilling

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The prospect of a lunchtime encounter with Ai Weiwei, China's most famous and most political artist, is, frankly, a bit intimidating. Ai, a hulking presence of a man, has been described by past interviewers as brooding, difficult and silent. He is also known for smashing things and, when he can be persuaded to speak, for lashing out at the authorities in Beijing with a ferocity rarely mustered by exiles, let alone those who dare to live inside China itself. "Study of Perspective" (1995-2003), a series of his work, appears to capture his character. It shows photographs of his outstretched arm in front of famous landmarks – the Forbidden City, the Eiffel Tower, the White House – middle finger raised in defiance.

For the 2008 Olympic Games in China, Ai helped the Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron to design the [Bird's Nest](#), a tangle of steel and concrete that became the country's national stadium. He subsequently attacked the games as a propaganda tool or "pretend smile". His increasingly ferocious run-ins with Chinese authorities over censorship, human

rights and cover-ups of corruption have provoked Beijing to shut down his blogs, rifle his bank records and prise open his [e-mail accounts](#) (G-mail, of course). In Sichuan last August, police – rattled by Ai's investigation into the deaths of children crushed in an earthquake that devastated the province in 2008 – raided his hotel room and beat him. A month after the attack, in Germany, he was rushed to hospital for surgery after doctors found haemorrhaging of the brain. Today Ai complains of memory loss, though with typically caustic irony says he has few memories worth retrieving.

We meet at his hotel in Hong Kong, a city he is visiting to prepare for an exhibition in May with Vito Acconci, an American installation artist. Ai, 53, looks not unlike some great bear, with pot belly, cropped hair and a rush of beard, a Chinese Hagrid. We shake hands and, despite his warrior-like mien, the first thing I am aware of is his gentleness. He hasn't been to Hong Kong in five years, so I have suggested the venue, Zeffirino, a nearby Italian restaurant. After some confusion about where it is – he patiently trots behind me up and down a couple of escalators and along a dead-end corridor – we eventually discover it on the 31st floor of the Regal Hotel.



A waiter ushers us across a swirling purple carpet to a window table and a splendid view of Hong Kong harbour and the pencil-thin high-rises crowding the slopes. The first thing Ai does is to snap pictures – seemingly randomly, from chest level – with his cell phone of the cityscape, the table settings and, rather disconcertingly, of me. “Nice profession,” he says as we study the menu. “You can write *and wine and dine*.” “Yours isn’t bad, either,” I say.

Ai’s artistic career began in obscurity and exile in 1981 when, fleeing the traumatic after-effects of China’s Cultural Revolution, he arrived in New York. He lived there for 12 years on the fringes of the art scene and though he befriended artists such as Allen Ginsberg and dabbled in his own creations, he mostly just survived, doing construction work, cleaning and babysitting. In the 1990s he returned to Beijing to spend time with his dying father, Ai Qing, a renowned poet and one-time close associate of Mao Zedong.

Around the time of his father’s death in 1996, Ai’s career began to blossom. He won notoriety – and a reputation as China’s answer to Andy Warhol – for works such as the unnerving “Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn” (1995), a triptych of photographs in which he is seen casually dropping a 2,000-year-old vase to shatter on the ground. In Beijing, he founded the East Village artists’ community and in Shanghai in 2000 he co-curated an exhibition called *Fuck Off* (the Chinese title was the milder “Uncooperative Approach”) of 46 avant-garde artists. It included an exhibit in which another artist, Zhu Yu, was seen eating what were claimed to be aborted human foetuses. Authorities promptly closed the show down.

For our lunch he, thankfully, sticks to pumpkin soup, risotto and medium-rare lamb chops, although he is hesitant to order a main course if I am going to have only pasta. I relent and choose the soup, lasagne and sea bass. We ask for a glass of Barolo each. As he dips deliciously salty olive bread in the bell pepper sauce, I ask him about the project at Hong Kong’s Para/Site Art Space where he and Acconci will collaborate. “I would never have imagined that today I could become active in art and have a chance to meet Vito,” he says of his journey from the obscurity of New York odd-jobbery. “I was a young man just come from China. I was trying to be part of art history, but then it was impossible.” Of their forthcoming collaboration, he says: “Neither of us have any nostalgia towards the past, but we are both ready to think about today. That is our common ground.”

As our soup – a vivid orange colour worthy of splattering on canvas – arrives, I ask him about his distaste for nostalgia. His Paris-educated father was denounced during the anti-rightist movement of the late 1950s when Ai was just one year old, and sent into internal exile with his family to Manchuria and the deserts of Xinjiang. During the Cultural Revolution, Ai’s father spent years cleaning toilets as part of the campaign against bourgeois intellectuals. “Of course, I had to help my father burn all the books and destroy all the artefacts,” he says, pausing, with a piece of focaccia hovering above his soup. “Anything related to humanity was destroyed,” he adds, stressing the word “humanity”, the quality he feels most lacking in modern China.

Rather than wallow in nostalgia, he wants to ransack the past and strike out into the future. Enthusing about the potential of the internet to connect people and unleash a spirit of inquiry, he says: “We are in a new world, and this new world offers the opportunity for us to reconnect our knowledge and to start anew.” But, I wonder, didn’t his childhood experience during the Cultural Revolution teach him to treasure history, not to splatter it with paint or to cover it with the Coca-Cola logo? (As an artist he has done both to Ming vases.) “*We are* learning from the past,” he says emphatically. “You have to know it to destroy it. You only can destroy something by being an expert in it. An ordinary person can’t destroy a bridge. Only a structural engineer can do that.”

Even I can smash a vase, I say, alluding to his 1995 work. “Well, you never did it,” he retorts. “People just can’t release their hands and let gravity do the work. I never hesitated.”

As our soup is removed and a risotto and a spinach lasagne take its place, I ask how he would describe his art. He has called himself “my own readymade”, a reference to the found objects of Marcel Duchamp. I take him to mean that his own lifestyle – his defiance, his campaigning – is to be considered his art. “That

question makes me almost speechless,” he replies after some chewing. “Because I wonder how much do I know about it, even though it was me that did it? What part is conscious and is that consciousness important? And what part has come out only because of the public’s sentiment? And is that important?”

There is little distinction, he says, between his art and his political activity. Last year, he covered the exterior wall of Munich’s Haus der Kunst art museum with 9,000 children’s backpacks to mourn the victims of the [Sichuan earthquake](#), many crushed by flimsy classrooms built on the cheap by corrupt contractors. Using the internet, Ai rallied an army of sleuths who discovered that most children had died in just 20 schools that crumbled while others were left standing. He arranged the backpacks into Chinese characters spelling out the words of a grieving mother: “She lived happily for seven years in this world.”

Searching for the names of the Sichuan quake-victims, he says, was a way of “making a lot of people in China start to understand what kind of time and situation they are in. It suggests a meaning which is much bigger than the effort.” Then, in a bold comparison with Chinese calligraphy, he says: “This kind of gesture is just like strokes on a white paper.”

In October, it is likely he will seek to replicate such gestures when he answers a commission to fill the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, following in the footsteps of Louise Bourgeois’ giant spider and Carsten Höller’s helter-skelters. He is not permitted to say what will be inside but says it is a dream to work on such a project in the UK.

My lasagne is good and the small portions – and intriguing conversation – make me glad there is another course coming. Ai’s chops arrive, crossed delicately over one another and served with a luridly green mint sauce. “Would you like one?” he says sweetly, motioning his fork.

The blurring of Ai’s art and activism has made it harder for the authorities to deal with him. He says the attack on him in Sichuan was probably the result of local confusion, not a Beijing clampdown. He doubts his international reputation or his father’s name can shield him. “I don’t think anybody can protect me. There is no line drawn,” he says, conceding the possibility that he may be tempted to push the authorities to – or beyond – their limit. “You play like a gambler,” he says. “You may be on a winning streak. You may think: ‘This is a winning table’. And you may fantasise that you can win for ever.”

As he finishes his chops, I ask him about his faith in the internet. The “digital” activism of his “middle-finger” years has given way to digital activity of another kind as he frantically blogs and tweets. I ask whether the lesson of China – where state censors have erected what has been described as “the Great Firewall”, where Twitter and Facebook are blocked, and which [Google felt obliged to leave](#) – is that the web is easily neutered. Isn’t it as much of a distraction as a rallying point? “That’s true. But we have to educate a whole generation of young people,” he says. “That is more important than just changing the [political] structure. It organises and teaches people how to deal with this kind of society, to be responsible, to anticipate.”

He is glowing about [Twitter](#), which gives those skilled at breaching the Great Firewall “the first chance in 1,000 years to exercise their personal freedom of expression”. It is also a form suited to the compressed nature of the Chinese language, where each ideogram represents a concept. “In Chinese [in 140 characters] you can seduce a girl or write a constitution. You can write a short novel or tell a beautiful story,” he says. One of his tweets – he has 36,320 followers on @aiww – reads: “No outdoor sports can be more elegant than throwing stones at autocracy; no melees can be more exciting than those in cyberspace.”

Ai orders tea, I coffee. One thing that strikes me about visiting China, I say, is the palpable sense of optimism. But, listening to Ai, you might conclude it is lacking in hope. The reality is slightly different, I prod gently. “It’s not only slightly different, it’s very different,” he concedes. “China is a colourful country and there is a lot of freedom.” Yet, the lack of an independent judiciary and state limits on free speech are fatal flaws, he says. “China is like a runner sprinting very fast but it has a heart condition.”

His tea has arrived in a silver pot. As he pours it, I return to the subject of his father. I was impressed to read that Ai senior had taken pride in his work cleaning toilets. “They were broken public toilets, dirty and messy,” his son recalls. “Sometimes he would come home covered in shit. He didn’t have extra clothes. But he was calm and he said: ‘For 60 years I didn’t know who cleaned my toilet.’ That was so convincing for us.”

In the 1940s, before he was declared a rightist, Ai’s father had been close to Mao, who had written five personal letters to him. They had been a matter of great family pride. After Ai’s father fell out with the Communists and the Cultural Revolution took hold, the Red Guards seized the letters. But his father had memorised them. “One letter was asking my father to make an appointment to have a talk on culture and literature. Another was to send a horse to pick my father up,” he recalls. I can sense his nostalgia. If Ai had those letters now, would he consider destroying them? His answer surprises me. “They were political figures, it’s true,” he says, “but these were personal letters and they expressed feelings between those two men.” They are pieces of history he would leave intact.

David Pilling is the FT’s Asia editor.

Gideon Rachman’s [review of a book](#) on China

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Zeffirino

31F Regal Hotel, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong

Bread basket (olive bread, Sardinian crisps, focaccia) with pesto and bell pepper sauce

Set menus x 2

Pumpkin soup X 2

Risotto with Parmesan x 1

Lasagne with pesto sauce x 1

Grilled lamb chops with black truffle sauce (and mint sauce)

Grilled seabass with white wine sauce

Glasses Barolo wine x 2

Total (including service) HK\$976.80 (£81.60)

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Jacques Herzog on working with Ai Weiwei

With my partner Pierre de Meuron, I had become familiar with Chinese contemporary artists through Uli Sigg [the Swiss collector of modern Chinese art]. It was through him that we had learnt of Ai Weiwei’s work, although he was still relatively unknown in the west. One day in 2001 Sigg dropped in to our Basel offices with Ai in tow. We went out and had a very good time together.

After that we all decided to travel to China together. Both Pierre [de Meuron] and I got on with Ai well, he has a wonderful sense of humour and is great company.

Ai is incredibly knowledgeable about the culture of old China – about everything from vases to cities – and this knowledge is reflected in his work, constantly drawing on history and tradition. But at the same time his art is very contemporary and I think this is why we made a good match. In both his work and ours you can glimpse the classical but also the radically contemporary.

We decided we should collaborate and in fact we've done many projects together but the Beijing national stadium for the 2008 summer Olympics [for which Ai was artistic consultant] is the only one to have materialised.

I feel Ai is a great architect on his own terms. He has a real talent for it. You can see that from his own architectural projects – his studio in Beijing is a wonderful building which only he could have done.

Ai loves China, and it is this affection which drives him to criticise the government. People often get that wrong. His criticism stems from his anger at the restrictions. He loves the Bird's Nest. His refusal to attend the opening ceremony was misinterpreted as a protest against the building but it was a gesture made out of political rather than artistic convictions. He uses criticism as art, he has a hugely popular and outspoken blog. Despite his criticisms, the Chinese state has unofficially recognised his importance.



Who would have thought China was ready for this kind of criticism or for our designs? We designed the stadium together as a kind of test – to see if this radical contemporary work would be embraced by China. It was, we never had any interference from the authorities.

Ai's involvement was crucial to us, not just because of his artistic vision but also because of his cultural knowledge of China. His input was also invaluable from a practical point of view; to do a project like the Bird's Nest you need strong alliances and he helped us operate in China.

He's a great artist and his work has evolved hugely over the years. He still retains a sense of tradition and craftsman-like skill. But at the same time, he is incredibly modern. I am very pleased his work will be installed in the Turbine Hall – it's the perfect setting to display his talents.

As told to Edwin Heathcote

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