

Art community rallies to Ai Weiwei's defense

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(AP) LONDON (AP) — Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has vanished. But look around, and he seems to be everywhere.

More than a month after one of China's best-known contemporary artist was arrested while trying to board a flight to Hong Kong, his name, his face and his art have popped up across the globe. China's communist rulers have steadfastly refused to say where Ai is or who's holding him, but his colleagues in the international art world say they want to make sure he isn't wiped off the face of the earth.

"As long as he's incarcerated, artists and cultural figures will be asking what we can do," British writer Ekow Eshun, a former director of the country's Institute for Contemporary Arts, said Wednesday.

In London, Ai Weiwei's name has appeared at the top of the Tate Modern, one of the U.K.'s most-visited museums. In Paris, a gigantic inflatable plastic amoeba called "Leviathan" has been dedicated to the arrested artist, while academics in Germany have made him a visiting lecturer at Berlin University and awarded him honorary membership of the city's academy of the arts.

Across the Atlantic, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has praised Ai's courage, while in Hong Kong his portrait has appeared around the city's military garrison.

Many of the events — like two exhibits opening in London and another at Berlin's neugerleimschneider gallery — were planned in advance of Ai's arrest. But they've since been turned in to de facto demonstrations of solidarity with the 53-year-old artist, whose work has often ridiculed the ideology of China's one-party state.

"Where is Ai Weiwei?" asked a stark, two-story-tall banner mounted across the German gallery's yellow-brick facade last month. The Tate, which recently filled its flagship Turbine Hall with millions of the artist's tiny porcelain sunflower seeds, placed the words "Release Ai Weiwei" on the side of its glass roof structure.

The two exhibits of the artist's work in London include one in the capital's Somerset House, a high-profile venue which hosts the biannual London Fashion Week. The other, at west London's Lisson Gallery, features a two-story-high black-and-white



A young woman looks at works by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei in the courtyard of Somerset House in London, Wednesday, May 11, 2011. The works comprising 12 massive, open-mouthed bronze animal heads meant to recreate the traditional Chinese zodiac were unveiled to the media Wednesday. Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has vanished. But look around, and he seems to be everywhere. More than a month after one of China's best-known contemporary artist was arrested while trying to board a flight to Hong Kong, his name, his face and his art have been popped up across the globe. China's communist rulers have steadfastly refused to say where Ai is or who's holding him. His colleagues in the international art world say they want to make sure he doesn't disappear from view. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham) (Matt Dunham)

photograph of the artist staring out from its facade.

In Paris on Monday, British sculptor Anish Kapoor dedicated his latest monumental work to the Chinese artist — even though he'd never met him.

"He's a colleague, an artist," Kapoor told the Guardian newspaper. "In a very simple way, he is heroically recording human existence."

That spirit of solidarity has been at work in Germany too: Ai was named an honorary member of Berlin's Academy of Arts over the weekend, something the academy described as a sign of his international importance.

In New York, Bloomberg joined the city's art community in honoring Ai at Manhattan's Pulitzer Fountain last week, telling the assembled audience that his fearlessness in the face of official intimidation spoke to "the indomitable desire for freedom that is inside every human being."

In China, where Ai is thought to be held secretly by state security, activists have also raised their voices. In Hong Kong, which has its own separate legal system, stencils of his likeness have been sprayed around and even laser-projected onto the local army garrison building.

Despite the growing outcry, China has refused to answer question about the artist's fate.

"This case remains under investigation and those outside people should refrain from comment," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said Tuesday. China's authoritarian government regularly acts to crush dissent, but the Ai's disappearance has been seen as part of a more far-reaching crackdown that followed the wake of the popular uprisings which have been sweeping the Middle East.

Hundreds of lawyers, activists, and other intellectuals have been questioned, detained, confined to their homes or simply disappeared, apparently to squelch any chance of a popular rising.

Gwyn Miles, the director of the Somerset House Trust, said that while Ai could be a provocative artist, Beijing's decision to silence him was a sign of that officials there were feeling insecure.

"It seems to me that a strong government could take provocation," she said.



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