

Art Community Rallies To Ai Weiwei's Defense



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In this photo provided by New York City Hall, Mayor Michael Bloomberg dedicates a sculpture installation, "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," by detained Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, rising from Pulitzer Fountain at Grand Army Plaza at 59th Street at 5th Avenue in New York Wednesday, May 4, 2011. New York City honored the outspoken artist who couldn't attend the opening of his exhibit because he's detained in China. Bloomberg discussed freedom of expression at the exhibit of 12 monumental bronze animal heads, the first stop in a five-city tour.

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 neugerreimschneider 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.