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GONE MISSING

BY MARK SINGER

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A few days before Ai Weiwei, the best-known, most daring, and least categorizable artist in China, was detained as he was about to board a plane in Beijing and disappeared within the state security apparatus, he got a phone call from Larry Warsh, a friend from New York. At the time, Warsh, who, through his company AW Asia, promotes Chinese artists, was in Miami, on vacation with his family.

Five or six times a year, Warsh flies to Beijing for what he calls “long weekends with Weiwei,” and as

he was fishing with his seven-year-old son, Ethan, he decided to act upon the urge “to pop in to see him.” The immediate item on his agenda was the installation next month of Ai’s first public art commission in New York, a reinterpretation of a seventeenth-century water clock—a dozen bronze animal heads representing figures of the Chinese zodiac, to be situated within the Pulitzer Fountain across from the Plaza Hotel.

“When I’m not in China, my three modes of communicating with Weiwei are telephone, texting, and telepathy,” Warsh said last week, two days after Ai’s arrest. “When I go there, I spend time at his studio, we walk in the park, we eat, we talk. My instinct was telling me somehow to go, but when I spoke with him he said, ‘Laru’—according to Weiwei, that’s my name in Chinese—‘it’s not necessary, because I’ll see you in New York very soon.’ But I guess that might not happen now.”

Ai lived in New York in the eighties and early nineties and still has an apartment here. On a return visit in 2008, Warsh arranged a meeting with Adrian Benepe, the Parks Commissioner, and they toured the city to find a site for an undetermined public art work that, unlike Ai’s conceptual creations, would be “accessible to audiences that are beyond the art world.” The particulars emerged in February, 2009, when Warsh showed up at the studio the morning that the artist’s son, Ai Lao, was born.

“For someone who has words for everything, he had no words,” Warsh recalled. “We went right away to the hospital, and he showed me the baby. That was very moving. I’m a big baby fan. Then we went back to the studio and started discussing public sculpture and what would make sense for New York City. An art historian was with us. An auction of the Yves Saint Laurent estate was taking place around the same time at Christie’s in Paris. The zodiac clock had been installed in the Old Summer Palace, in Beijing, which was looted by the French and British in 1860. Two of the animal heads eventually wound up with Saint Laurent. Since these had been stolen, there was a huge controversy. Anyway, as we sat in the studio, Weiwei had this ‘Aha!’ moment. He would create full-size bronze derivations of all twelve of the animal heads.”

As Warsh spoke, he was a back-seat passenger in an S.U.V. en route to central New Jersey, where the bronzes have been stored since arriving by boat in December, after being shown at



Ai Weiwei



"Another flu shot, Larry."

the São Paulo Biennial. Along the way, he worked on an iPad and kept checking Google for news. "You know, I'm looking at this," he said. "And every time I do I want to see that he's been freed." (It would be another twenty-four hours before the state news service tersely announced that Ai was being held for "suspected economic crimes.")

The temporary home of the animal heads, which had been cast in Chengdu, turned out to be a secured building on the grounds of an early-twentieth-century estate in deep horse country—an unheated stucco-and-fieldstone redoubt formerly occupied by a tennis court with a spectators'

balcony, huge mullioned windows, and a couple of bowling alleys in the basement. The bronzes lay on their sides in six wooden crates, swaddled in several layers of bubble wrap. The wrapping of one was cut away to reveal a four-foot circular base and, atop a six-foot pole, a convincing and intimidating rooster, wide-eyed, with an erect cockscomb, highly detailed feathers and wattles, and a beak large enough to swallow a cat. A dozen cylindrical marble foundations lay nearby.

The plans for the official unveiling in New York City included a press conference with Mayor Bloomberg and luncheons and dinners in Ai's honor, after which he and Warsh had mapped an itinerary that included museum visits in Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., and London. All that was certain at the moment, however, was that the zodiac figures would be installed in New York, with or without the artist's presence.

"Being an optimist, I can visualize his release," Warsh said. "One of the hardest things for Weiwei will be missing his son. He talked about this a lot—things that could happen to him. He's always been mentally prepared, but missing his son will give him the most hurt and anguish, more than anything." ♦

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