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## Who Is Ai Weiwei?

By **Lucy Birmingham**

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TOKYO— Who is [Ai Weiwei](#)? According to Chinese authorities, he is a dissident to be watched, one whose inflammatory blog needed to be silenced. But to others, the Chinese conceptual artist, architect, photographer, and curator — loathed and loved for his human rights activism — is the courageous voice needed in today's repressive China.

In person, Ai's voice is gentle, almost soothing. Bearded, burly, and 52, he could pass for a robust Chinese Santa who enjoys a good joke. He's known for his wit, grace, and deep compassion toward the suffering of both humans and animals, and he's admired for his strategic thinking and his knack for combining art and social projects. Dedicated volunteers, like those with his Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, have risked their own safety for his causes. A perfectionist, he attracts a highly skilled and devoted staff at his studio, FAKE Design, from which he catapulted to international fame as design consultant for the Beijing Olympics "Bird's Nest" National Stadium, a collaboration with Swiss architecture firm **Herzog & de Meuron**.

According to some, though, his temper can incinerate the best of intentions. He's been called a headline grabber, a master of borrowing from other artists, and a "scholar clown," and he's been denounced for criticizing symbols of elitism and authority ranging from New York's [Museum of Modern Art](#) to the Chinese government to the Eiffel Tower.

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There is no question that Ai Weiwei lives his art to the fullest. How best to view an artist of such proportions is complicated.

"Ai Weiwei: According to What?" at Tokyo's [Mori Art Museum](#) (MAM) — Ai's first large-scale solo show worldwide, on view through November 8 — attempts to reveal the multifaceted nature of this artistic genius by showcasing 26 works made since the 1990s. Some well-known and controversial pieces are glaringly absent, but the exhibition presents six new works, including *Chandelier*, a satire of the bizarre Chinese state aesthetic in the shape of half a chandelier that hangs in the museum's entrance lobby.

A second new work presents Ai's most recent merging of art and activism. Stirred by the sight of backpacks scattered throughout the May 12, 2008, earthquake disaster, in which thousands of children were killed by collapsing school buildings, Ai created *Snake Ceiling*, a serpentine installation formed from hundreds of new black-and-white backpacks sized for elementary and junior high school students. The coiled snake, suspended from the museum's ceiling, alludes to aesthetic form, the snake as ancient monster, and the tragedy and systematic cover-up at the heart of the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, Ai's guerrilla investigation.

"To protect the right of expression is the central part of an artist's activity. ... In China many essential rights are lacking, and I wanted to remind people of this," Ai told ARTINFO in a conversation at the Mori Art

Museum.

Using his widely read blog as a platform (he has 17 million readers, he says), he charged that the high number of school fatalities was due to local officials siphoning money from school building costs. Grieving families said the structures were badly built and collapsed easily during the quake. But officials refused to list the names of the dead students, which could be used to unveil a possible cover-up, so Ai formed the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project with researchers and volunteers who discovered the names of 5,190 students. (The official government figure became 5,335, possibly thanks to pressure from Ai's campaign.)

According to the project's findings, some 3,500 (80 percent) of the students perished in 18 of the 14,000 damaged schools, a result that supports Ai's theory about a building scandal. His blog posts were systematically censored or deleted throughout his investigation. On May 26-28 he wrote about being followed and about unknown persons visiting his mother's house. On May 29 his blog was shut down.

"They shut us down because we were too active, so much heat, everybody coming into the discussions. We caused an Internet riot," he says. "Even after 30 years of opening up with such an economic boom, the government doesn't want to change the political structure. There are so many hidden problems — corruption, total loss of ideology, the tendency of the judicial system to stick to party lines. There's no fairness or justice."

Not one to give up, Ai later turned to the Internet again, this time to Twitter, to call for an Internet boycott protesting the government's Green Dam Youth Escort filtering software for new computers. Originally planned to start July 1, it was ostensibly an effort to block online pornography but was widely criticized as a censorship tool that would restrict China's 300 million Internet users. On June 30, the government announced a delay, most likely a result of complaints by Washington and U.S. industry groups.

Despite that small victory (in which Ai may or may not have had a part), he feels that international influence is waning in China, as the country is now the United States's No. 1 foreign creditor, holding roughly \$1 out of every \$10 in U.S. public debt. "I don't think there is international pressure anymore," he says. "Because of the economic crisis, China and the United States are bound together. This is a totally new phenomenon, and nobody will fight for ideology anymore. It's all about business."

Ai's remarks were removed from Twitter soon after his Green Dam protest, effectively silencing his online voice within China. But even if his arrest is the next step, he says, "I am not afraid and also not worried," though he does admit that "anyone fighting for freedom does not want to totally lose their freedom."

That said, he wishes more voices would join his cause. "I tell people that because you don't bear any responsibility, you put me in danger. If we all say the same thing, then I think the government has to listen. But because no one is saying it, I become singled out, even though what I'm saying is common sense. It's very essential values that we all have to protect. But in Chinese society, people are giving up on protecting these values."

"The government realizes that Ai has a passion for China," explains [Uli Sigg](#), the former Swiss ambassador to China from 1995 until 1999, Ai's first patron, and perhaps the world's most influential collector of Chinese contemporary art. "But that doesn't mean the government can tolerate everything."

Sigg continues, "If you cross a certain line, then the government acts and absorbs the cost of that. Once they decide to go ahead, nothing will stop them. Then they will just close their ears."

Ai's father, [Ai Qing](#), who passed away in 1996 at age 86, greatly influenced him. One of China's most esteemed poets, he was sent to labor camps in northern Heilongjiang Province and western Xinjiang Province for 20 years for criticizing the Communist regime. The family followed and lived in horrible conditions. "For one sentence, you could sacrifice your life," explained Ai in a 2008 interview with [ArtZineChina.com](#). "As a youth, I lived as the son of an enemy of the state."

As he discussed his father during a seminar at the Mori Art Museum, his voice wavered with emotion. “He was a very independent person. ... I can still see him with strong dignity, surviving inhuman conditions. ... He influenced a whole generation of intellectuals to become early revolutionaries. Now, some of China’s leaders recite his poetry by heart.”

In 1981, at age 24, discouraged by the lack of free expression, Ai left China and lived in the U.S. for 12 years, mainly in New York. There he learned about [Marcel Duchamp](#) and [Jasper Johns](#), whose painting *According to What* (1964) was the inspiration for his MAM exhibition title. He befriended artists and intellectuals, worked at odd jobs, and took thousands of black-and white photos, now edited into a fascinating video showing at the exhibition. Some document turbulent events like the 1988 riots in Tompkins Square Park, when police tried to remove the homeless who were living there. Some are photos of friends like poet [Allen Ginsberg](#), the now famous director [Chen Kaige](#), and artist [Xu Bing](#). In 1993 Ai returned to China after learning his father had fallen ill.

“He benefited very much from his experience in the West,” says Sigg. “Many Chinese artists had knowledge of Western art, but it remained superficial because they didn’t have access to the materials and philosophy. Ai has that background.”

This combination, and an interest in antiques, led Ai to create metaphorical pieces like *Han Dynasty Urn With Coca-Cola Logo* (1994), for which he inscribed the ubiquitous logo onto an ancient urn he found in an antique market, illustrating the ambiguity of value and aesthetics over time. His famous photo triptych *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) depicts him actually dropping and destroying a priceless urn. It is a dramatic posture toward creation through destruction, a recurring theme in his work. In *Colored Vases* (2006), Neolithic Age jars have been dipped in bright industrial paints, pointing to surface appearances and hidden reality.

Also included at MAM are his sculptures made from reassembled Ming- and Qing-Dynasty furniture, and salvaged temple beams and pillars that explore the beauty and mystery of traditional Chinese nail-less joinery. *Map of China* (2006) is a 3D object made with intricately assembled old wood pieces and traditional joinery that poses subtle questions and a critique about China’s perceived domination of Taiwan and regions such as Tibet. A recent installation, titled *Moon Chest* (2008), made of reassembled chests that represent the waxing and waning of the moon, reflects Ai’s architectural eye.

Ai says he is no longer interested in creating architecture, but his 50-plus architectural works nevertheless remain a central part of his body of work. At the MAM show, models, books, and postcards are on display, including the Dog House, Ai’s first design proposal in Japan (yet to be built), for art patron [Joni Walker](#). And architecture’s influence is still felt throughout his practice — in his fascination with shapes and materials, for example. *Ton of Tea* (2006) and a new, still-fragrant work titled *Teahouse* (2009) are blocks made of compressed tea leaves, while his 2003 installation *Forever* is assembled from bicycles, produced by a state factory called Shanghai Forever, that were once considered the must-have objects of 1960s China.

A later work, meanwhile, forgoes materials all together. *Fairytale*, premiering at the exhibition, is a 150-minute film consisting of video and images from Ai’s historic 28-day journey with 1,001 Chinese citizens to the 2007 Documenta 12 exhibition in Kassel, Germany. Although Ai was invited to Documenta to create an artwork, the journey itself became the work, with participants chosen from thousands of applicants and the \$4.1 million cost covered by two Swiss foundations.

Between the MAM exhibition and a larger one opening at Munich’s **Haus der Kunst** in October, Ai may overtake [Cai Guo-Qiang](#) as China’s most famous contemporary artist. Although Cai is a skilled, popular showman famed for his spectacular fireworks display at the Beijing Olympics, his work lacks the depth that is so integral to Ai’s many projects.

For his part, Ai boycotted the Olympics, exercising what he called his “freedom of choice.” He says, “The Olympics became a very superficial activity that didn’t lift China into another possible condition but rather created great difficulties for [Chinese] society today.”

And ultimately, he says, he doesn't want to comply with the system, even as an artist. "China is still culturally under strong censorship, so a state museum would certainly never invite me," he says. "If I have a show, I don't want to be censored. ... That's not my principle. I don't care if I ever have a show in China."

This lack of reverence is surprising for someone who once said he would become the "Picasso of China." Asked about his role in history, he turns circumspect and characteristically flippant. "I want to be forgotten," he says. "I think we have too much history. It's not so important. I think people should have fun and enjoy their own time. I haven't done much, so why should I waste people's memory?"

He then adds with a careful, reserved smile, "My messages are temporary and shouldn't be our permanent condition. And like the wind it will pass. We'll have another wind coming."

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