

Ai Weiwei

On August 12, 2009, at 3 a.m., police entered a Chengdu hotel and assaulted the artist Ai Weiwei. He was scheduled to testify in a case against the Chinese writer and activist Tan Zuoren later that day. Tan had been arrested in March for publishing an investigative report that blamed poorly constructed school buildings for the deaths of 5,000 schoolchildren in the Sichuan earthquake. That investigation was similar to a research project Ai conducted in 2009, the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, after the government failed to name the victims of the natural disaster. Recognizing a kindred spirit in Tan, Ai agreed to testify at his trial.

Ai Weiwei has only recently begun to use his fame as a prominent Chinese contemporary artist to fight back against the dictatorship of the People's Republic of China. But it's been a long time coming. His father was an intellectual, and, as a result, Ai and his family were exiled during Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution. For a while they lived in an "earthen pit covered with branches and mud." The first chance he got, Ai moved to New York and experienced the insular eighties art world through the eyes of a Chinese immigrant. He fell in love with the work of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns.

His work leans toward Conceptualism, dealing with and questioning contemporary societal conditions while employing (and sometimes destroying) traditional Chinese craft. He built his studio in Beijing, where he has stayed since 1999, in 60 days and consequently created an architecture practice, working on project like the Bird's Nest, Beijing's National Stadium, built for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. He has since put that practice on hold in order to focus more on his art and, more important, his blogging. Ai has found the ultimate outlet for his art on the Internet in a country known for its media censorship. He has found his voice, and he recently owned up to his responsibility as an artist to bring change to China.

We met with Ai Weiwei at his studio in Beijing in November, just months after his run-in with the police. Part of the right side of his head had been shaved to reveal the scars left behind by the beating, and several studio assistants had shaved their heads in the same spot to show their solidarity. Ai spoke openly about the incident, about his past, and about art as a force for change.



BY KATY DONOGHUE, PORTRAIT BY MICHAEL BENISTY

WHITEWALL: *Your father was a well-known poet who was exiled, and I read that all of his books were burned as a result. How did he pass on to you the importance of literature and art without any material?*

AI WEIWEI: We grew up in very strict political conditions. People risked their lives because they were intellectuals or had different opinions. They would bear lifetime sentences or be sent to labor camps or die from poverty. My father happened to be one of those intellectuals, and so we were in very critical condition. But still he had lived in Paris and was a poet, and even when we had nothing in the house we would hear stories. My father would tell me about what the Roman empire was like, what Paris was like. His heart and mind and joy was in poetry so that certainly affected me a lot.

WW: *Aside from your father's stories, what were some of your early interactions with art?*

AW: Early on, nobody would encourage us to study art. My father definitely told us to become a worker and to have an honest life, and that being an artist is not an honest life. He wanted to protect us. We didn't study art when I was young. After high school I had nothing to do — I had come back from Xinjiang, where we had been exiled, to Beijing after Chairman Mao died. My father had friends who were professors in art or translators, so-called "bad guys," and they all had nothing to do so they encouraged me to study art. At the very beginning I was doing it for them, because they were very interesting, smart, and very humorous. One of them was this translator, and he gave me several books that somebody had passed to him on Van Gogh, Manet, Degas, and Jasper Johns. Of course, the Impressionists we all loved — it was associated with the mood that we had. But Jasper Johns we could never understand, the red, yellow, blue; [we thought,] "What is this? A factory painter with no skills?" So I just threw it away [laughs].

WW: *And you told your mother you were "going home." You were already calling it your home, and you were sure you were going to spend the rest of your life there. What made you so sure?*

AW: I was so sure I had to leave China in any direction. I had had enough experience with my family, by myself, government, politics; there was absolutely no hope. As a young guy just over 20, to be in New York at the center of contemporary activities was my dream. That's why I told my mom, "I'm going home. And ten years later you will hear of me as another Picasso." [Laughs] I was so naive.

WW: *The art world in the eighties was very insular. How did that make you feel as a young Chinese artist?*

AW: Yeah, it felt really backwards to me. Compared to the seventies and sixties Conceptual movement and social concerns. The eighties were not interesting, not my type. I was very involved mentally in the eighties. I saw every show, every happening in Manhattan and I took photographs and very much related to street life and neighborhood situations like gay rights, AIDS, and subculture conditions. I felt disgusted by the art system; it was all about prestige. As a boy coming from a communist country who doesn't speak good English and has no connections and that's not so interested in parties, it was normal for me to feel like an outsider.

WW: *You've said that writing is the best art form because it can be understood by everyone. Is that why you wanted to publish the Black, White, and Gray books when you returned to China in 1993?*

AW: Yes. At that time there was no foundation for contemporary art — no circular writings, of course, no galleries, no museums. So to create a place and platform for people to communicate, to read, to pass into different hands, publishing a book was the most needed.

[They showed that] art is not just a canvas hanging on a wall. It can be a concept, an idea; it can never be realized, but can still be exciting, which was very successful. Before then, art was only shown in hotel lobbies for foreign travelers.

WW: *When and why did you build your studio?*

AW: In 1999 I built this studio. I had spent six years with my mom, and she never asked me if I had an American passport, if I had a diploma (both of which I don't have), and I hadn't married and had no property or money. I was naturally not a dumb person, just a wise guy. She was shy to ask me, so I decided I had to move away and I made this building in a very quick fashion, in 60 days. Since then I've become an architect, and we finished about 60 projects in seven to eight years. I became well known in the international architecture world before I was known as an artist.

WW: *When you built the studio, you had no architectural training. Before that, what was your interaction with architecture?*

AW: Before that, I had two mentionable interactions with architecture. Before I moved back I saw a book in a bookstore — it's about a building Wittgenstein built for his sister in Vienna. So I'm like, if Wittgenstein can build a building for his sister . . .

WW: *Why can't you?*

AW: Yeah [*laughs*]. Another building that made an impression on me is the Guggenheim by Frank Lloyd Wright, which is a building I don't like because it's not flat, so it's difficult to have art shows in the space. But it made a strong impression on me. It's nice to think about it now.

WW: *You've said that architecture is important because it's a physical example of mankind at one point in time. Do you see it as our way of leaving traces?*

AW: I think so. It reflects our mind, how we want to be looked at and how we want our world to become. Architecture is a very limited performance for practical reasons.

WW: *And you seem to hone in on practicality in your designs — you employ basic materials, clean lines, all revolving around the resources nearby and the people using them.*

AW: Yeah, it's all about how we relate to so-called reality. Of

course, whatever we make is a new reality — doesn't matter how you do it, but it's still your interpretation. I like basic households that look like they were drawn by kids. Essentials can have the most striking quality.

WW: *You've documented the recent rapid development in Beijing, some of which has been done by foreign architects like Herzog and de Meuron (whom you worked with on the Olympic stadium in Beijing dubbed the Bird's Nest), or Rem Koolhaas's CCTV tower. How do you feel about the presence of foreign architects in China?*

AW: Many people criticize that, the CCTV tower, but I think I'm on the pro side because 99.9 percent of the nation's buildings are done by local architects. They have practiced for years, and that practice becomes so out of date technically with absolutely no ethical or moral judgment. Western architectural practice and education completely goes in the other direction. So to have a few buildings as an example for young people [in China] to see what is possible, I think it's very encouraging.

WW: *I'd like to talk about your design work. Your recent *Table with Two Legs on the Wall* [2009] and *Table with Three Legs* [1998] essentially take a very functional object — a table — and render it useless. Why?*

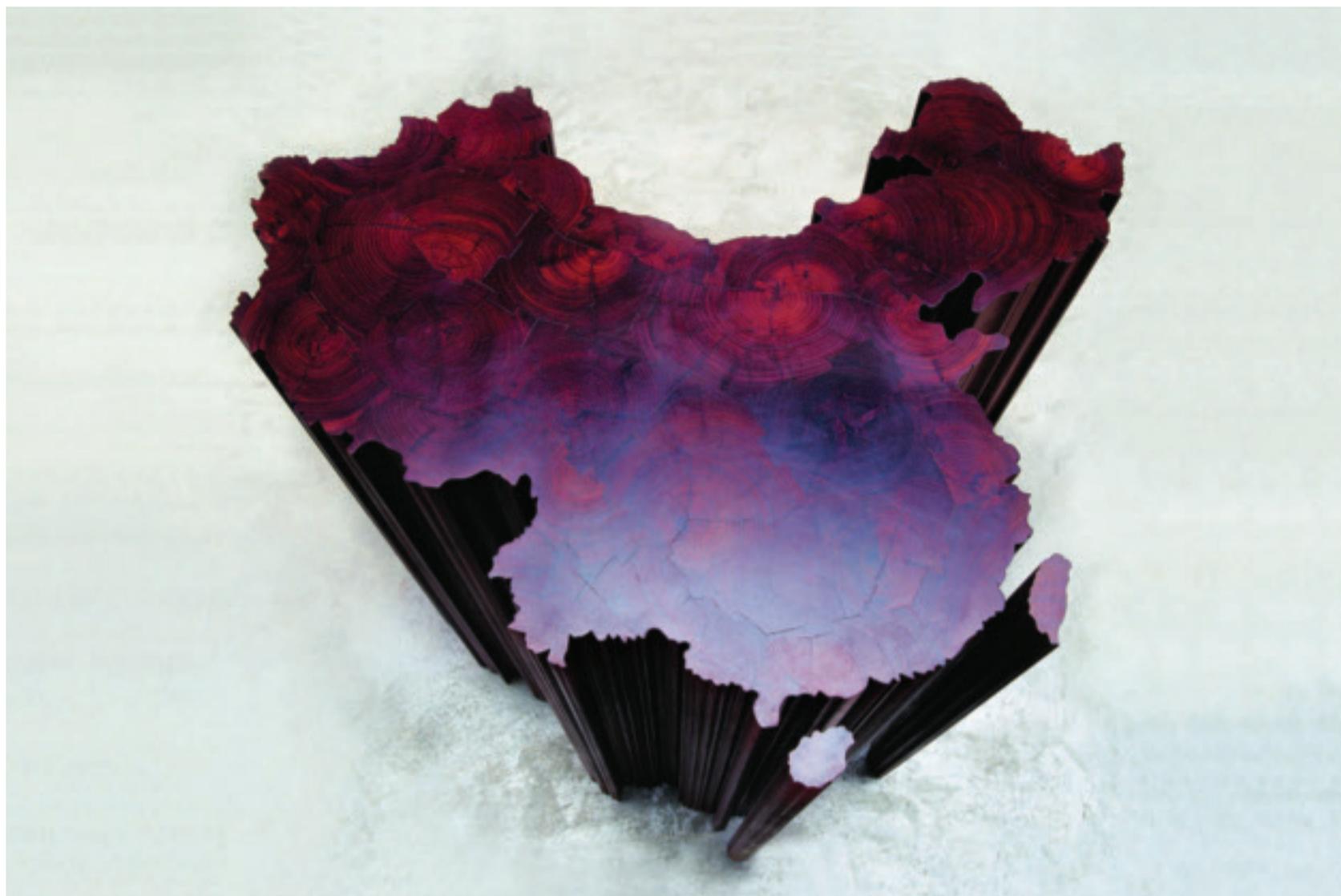
AW: For two reasons: First, to put an ordinary object into a completely foreign condition. It really destroys our way of looking at things. And second, if you can reveal a questioning or challenging of old techniques and traditions, then you are showing the tradition on another level with contemporary ethics and conditions.

WW: *Right, you work a lot with traditional craftsman to make some of your designs. When you tell them you want them to make a table with three legs, is there any resistance?*

AW: It's a little complicated because you have to work with them for a long time, open discussions about techniques. It's an interesting game, but for them it's different because they would never create something that is not functional — it destroys its moral standing.

I remember this work I did in New York that was two adjoined shoes. After I made it, I hadn't sold it and I took it to a shoe polisher in a Polish neighborhood. He took the shoe and he looked at me — I didn't realize it would cause him any problem. He called his wife in the back room, they both looked at my foot, and they shook their head and said the machine was broken, that they could not polish the shoe. I felt very sorry after because

"EARLY ON, NOBODY WOULD ENCOURAGE US TO STUDY ART. MY FATHER DEFINITELY TOLD US TO BECOME A WORKER AND TO HAVE AN HONEST LIFE, AND THAT BEING AN ARTIST IS NOT AN HONEST LIFE. HE WANTED TO PROTECT US"



Above:
Ai Weiwei
Map of China
2003

IRON WOOD (TIELI WOOD) FROM DISMANTLED
TEMPLES OF THE QING DYNASTY (1644-1911)
39.4 INCHES LONG, 39.4 INCHES DIAMETER
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Right:
Ai Weiwei
Map of China
2004

IRON WOOD (TIELI WOOD) FROM DISMANTLED
TEMPLES OF THE QING DYNASTY (1644-1911)
20 INCHES LONG, 78.7 INCHES DIAMETER
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





Above:
Ai Weiwei
Table with Three Legs
1998

TABLE, QING DYNASTY (1644-1911)
36 X 40 X 67 INCHES
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Right:
Ai Weiwei
Two Joined Square Tables
2005

TABLES, QING DYNASTY (1644-1911)
53 X 66 X 36 INCHES
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





Ai Weiwei
Template
2007

WOODEN DOORS AND WINDOWS FROM DESTROYED MING AND QING DYNASTY HOUSES (1368-1911), WOODEN BASE

283 X 472 X 334 INCHES BEFORE COLLAPSING

166 X 396 X 344 INCHES AFTER COLLAPSING

PROJECT FOR DOCUMENTA 12, KASSEL, GERMANY, 2007

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

— WHITEWALL 111 —





Above:
Inside Ai Weiwei's Studio House
in Beijing, 1999, designed by Ai
Weiwei.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Right:
Beijing Olympic Stadium
(Bird's Nest), 2005–2008,
designed by Herzog & de Meuron
and Ai Weiwei.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



"THERE ARE BASIC VALUES OF LIFE THAT CAN NEVER BE RISKED, AND THIS DICTATORSHIP IS NOT POSSIBLE. THIS IS THE ONLY WAY WE CAN MAKE A CHANGE — TO BEAR RESPONSIBILITIES AND MAKE AN EFFORT FOR OTHERS. YOU CANNOT WAIT FOR CHANGE. YOU HAVE TO MAKE CHANGE FOR YOURSELF"

I realized it was insulting to their job. But they didn't realize I'm a sick person in my brain [*laughs*].

WW: *Do you think you were drawn to Conceptualism as an artist because you could be a force for change?*

AW: I was never really conscious of this. I try to transform the meaning into something that can be consumed by a general public. It should not only be museum level. I think artists should have a better communication with our real life, the general public.

WW: *You said in a recent interview with Karen Smith that you only really recently recognized your own personal responsibility as an artist.*

AW: Yeah, I've been forced into it.

WW: *Was it unavoidable?*

AW: Yeah, because how can you see your work and not relate to the joy and pain of the people who are your neighbors? It's in front of you and you say you don't care? I don't think that's possible, especially because I grew up in this society, so I know how precious it is for a voice who can share the same feeling. At least I can show people there is a different kind of approach, and it's not about right or wrong.

WW: *Recently you were singled out for voicing your opinion because of the research you conducted on the Sichuan Valley earthquake, naming the names of the children who were killed by the natural disaster. You were assaulted by Chinese police and later hospitalized.*

AW: [*Touching the part of his head where his hair had been shaved to show the scar from the scuffle with police*] I was naive. It's fixed, it's just normal now, but my brain was completely destroyed by the blood and liquid inside.

WW: *Was that the first time you had been confronted by the police?*

AW: Yeah, it was the first time, but before that there had been a lot of sentencing. They watched me, now they have cameras [*surrounding the studio*], before they had two people in front of my house. Especially since I had spent my youth in New York and am not afraid, I openly tell them I'm not afraid: "You can put me in jail or you can leave me alone." But, of course, they have their own way in a dictatorship. They came into my hotel at 3 in the morning and broke into my room with police and punched me and that caused

this bleeding [*in my head*]. I don't know, I think maybe I can avoid it if I don't do the testimony for this guy.

WW: *And that's what this whole confrontation was about, right? That you were going to testify for Tan Zuoren, who had published a similar investigation to yours on the death of more than 5,000 schoolchildren from the Sichuan earthquake?*

AW: Yeah. It's a court judicial system, no matter how corrupt, it's basic fairness. Otherwise, the whole society is collapsing. I never imagined that they would do something that the mafia does to keep a witness from testifying in court. But it happened.

WW: *And you took photos of it and posted it on Twitter.*

AW: I was lucky I knew the Internet very well. Before they opened the door, I had cameras ready, and I used my phone to send images to Twitter immediately. Now it's all over the world, and they [*the Chinese government*] don't know. They only know old tricks. But this time it's different and they are being exposed.

WW: *You've said the Internet is the best invention culturally, because even if you try to censor it there is too much out there for the government to keep up with.*

AW: Yeah, they can't.

WW: *I saw that the people working in your studio have all shaved their heads in the same spot. Have you experienced people rallying around you?*

AW: We posted it on the Internet, and it's become a new haircut style [*smiles*]. When we have humor it means we still have a sense of love in the air. It's not about one person beating you up — it's about our condition. Most people would not have a chance to go to the hospital.

WW: *This whole confrontation happened in September. How have things changed?*

AW: It certainly hasn't gotten better, but people don't know how to deal with somebody like me. They deal with people who are very unfortunate. I don't have to be like this with them, but I am dedicated to this. I want them to realize that there are basic values of life that can never be risked, and this dictatorship is not possible. This is the only way we can make a change — to bear responsibilities and make an effort for others. You cannot wait for change. You have to make change for yourself.