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A photo of a surveillance camera monitoring Ai's house in Beijing, posted on the artist's blog in June 2009. Courtesy Ai Weiwei.

Ai Continues Activism Against China; Government Responds

By Katherine Grube

BEIJING—On New Year's Eve 2008, during a conversation with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist at Vitamin Creative Space's Beijing branch, artist-provocateur Ai Weiwei predicted: "2008 was the first year that China safeguarded legal rights; it's when people started to wake up. But in 2009, I think China will confront greater problems."

These words now seem unnervingly prescient, given that the first six months of 2009 in China were marked by politically sensitive anniversaries and often-violent protests including riots by members of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang province. From his Beijing studio, Ai continued his calls for a more responsible government even as China stepped up its response to the artist's efforts.

After tense interactions with Chinese authorities in May, which culminated in the closing of his Sina.com blog and a visit by police to his mother's home, government antagonism continued in June and July. Ai re-opened his blog on servers located outside of China [<http://blog.aiweiwei.com>], writing new blog posts, both humorous and irate. On June 7, Ai posted grainy photographs of surveillance cameras installed outside his house and unmarked vans stationed on the street. The following day, black-and-white portraits of the artist and his large, well-fed belly appeared under the title, "It's getting

bigger every day." The portraits present a portly man unaffected and, if anything, amused, by the government's activities. Posts later in the month adopted a more serious tone, listing the government's more heinous offenses: "Selling AIDS-infected blood, corrupt coal pits, fake news, those who should be administering justice violating it, widespread corruption, rights violations, internet censorship; all you need to ask is a question for you to be anti-China."

In late June, Ai's activism broadened to include protests against Green Dam-Youth Escort, web-censoring software that filters content and limits access to certain websites. The government planned to require that the software be installed on all computers sold in China after July 1 to block access to pornography. Ai objected to the software as an intrusion upon individual liberties and went so far as to call for an internet boycott on the launch date. According to Ai, the web-boycott was observed by 6,000 people.

Ai's efforts were part of a larger outcry; the United States warned that the software would violate free-trade agreements and pressed China to reverse the decision. On June 30, the government postponed the mandatory software installation.

Although minor provocations comprise many of Ai's daily blog entries, his long-

term focus remains the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, an effort conducted by more than 50 researchers and volunteers to collect the names of the deceased students in towns across Sichuan province. On July 28, Ai declared the project "basically complete," after researchers collected the names of 5,194 students who died in collapsed schools during the May 12, 2008, earthquake. Project volunteers confirmed that 4,803 children perished; the remaining 391 children's deaths are unlikely to ever be confirmed because of incomplete school registries and logistical impediments. Ai's researchers tallied 141 fewer student deaths than the government's official number of 5,335, and their research refutes the official claim that 1,300 students died in Beichuan Middle School. Instead, Ai's team confirmed 786 student deaths.

Two weeks before the final count was released, Ai had launched a new phase of the project beginning his own inquiry into the collapsed school's structural integrity, sending volunteer engineers alongside experienced project researchers to the affected regions. In a July 9 blog entry, project researcher Liu Yaohua detailed his 17-day trip in Sichuan during which he documented collapsed schools, took samples of foundations and photographed the damage. Police maintained a noticeable presence Liu reported, and visited his hotel room in Mianyang, a town near Beichuan. Research in the area was suspended on July 19 when police intercepted Liu's car and interrogated the two drivers and three researchers on board for an entire day. The team resumed their research in Deyang, a town 50 kilometers to the south.

Select content from Ai's blog will soon be available in printed form. Beijing-based translator Lee Ambrozy is compiling separate English and Chinese volumes, but because of the sensitive political content, negotiations with publishers are ongoing. ■



An unmarked van monitoring Ai's house in Beijing, 2009.

my eight

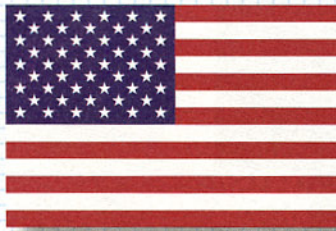
Ai Weiwei

Born in 1957 in Beijing, Ai Weiwei is an artist and architectural designer turned political activist. In recent months, Ai investigated the casualties in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake in an attempt to document the total number of victims, whose names China still refuses to disclose. In May, upon going public with his research, his personal blog was censored and shut down by the Chinese government. The outspoken artist offered *ArtAsiaPacific* eight of his “favorite” governments.



1 CHINA

My motherland has restricted freedom of speech and crushed human rights for 60 years and is still alive. I have the greatest admiration for a nation in which people can at the same time suffer and maintain peaceful order.



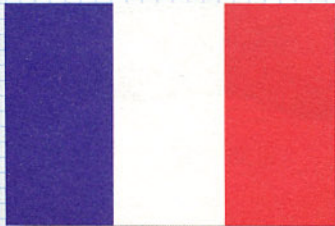
2 USA

A nation with a great tradition of belief in democratic society, fairness and justice, but that has now almost completely lost its ability to protect that ideology and has deteriorated into a state of deep economic and ideological shame that is self-made.



3 NORTH KOREA

For contributing to humanity by taking a country hostage, and for contributing to humanity by using the threat of nuclear weapons to remind the world of its existence.



4 FRANCE

For its blind self-indulgence in the field of culture—culture which, like perfume, always disappears into the air.



5 GERMANY

For the relentless thought and discussion that is spent on all matters.



6 JAPAN

Japan and China show how two neighboring nations can have utterly separate understandings of each other.



7 SWITZERLAND

For its great rationality, which makes it a perfect example of a boring life.



8 TAIWAN

For being the most democratic society in the Chinese world—and for its willingness to be a nation or not to be.