

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

## VENICE '09

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## IN BRIEF

● **Bravo** is creating a reality TV show, currently called "Untitled Art Project," for emerging and semi-established artists, co-produced by Sarah Jessica Parker's company, Pretty Matches, and Magical Elves, the producers of *Project Runway* and *Top Chef*. No air date has been announced, though casting calls were held in July in New York, L.A., Miami and Chicago.

● **UNEMPLOYED?** Looking to change careers? A new book offers a solution. **How to Start and Run a Commercial Art Gallery** (Allworth Press), penned by New York art dealer and blogger Edward Winkelman, is a soup-to-nuts manual for would-be dealers, and an informative resource for artists or anyone curious about how galleries operate. The lowdown: it helps to love art, but you need a business plan.

● **APPS FOR ART:** Christie's auction house and London's **National Gallery** have released applications that iPhone and iPod Touch owners can now download. Christie's free app allows users to browse auction calendars, preview upcoming lots, check past sales results and learn about selling work. For \$2.99, you can buy a virtual visit to the National Gallery. Its app contains 250 works, along with informative audio and video segments.

● **OPENING THIS MONTH ON THE GLOBAL CIRCUIT:**

- **Istanbul Biennial**, Sept. 12-Nov. 8. Organized by the Zagreb-based collective What, How and for Whom (WHWW), the exhibition features about 70 participants organized under the title "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" which is taken from a song in Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*.
- **Biennale de Lyon**, Sept. 16, 2009-Jan. 3, 2010. Curator Hou Hanru has selected some 60 artists for his show "The Spectacle of the Everyday."
- **ICP Triennial**, Sept. 18, 2009-Jan. 17, 2010. The International Center of Photography, New York, stages its third triennial as part of its "Year of Fashion" program. It includes artists who use photography and video to explore the fashion-appearance-identity nexus.
- **Tel Aviv Biennial**, Sept. 10-26. The second installment, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of Tel Aviv's founding, features a team-curated selection of 40 Israeli and international artists.

## AI WEIWEI'S YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

IT'S TURNING OUT to be a stellar yet precarious year for Ai Weiwei. In recent months, his studio has been put under surveillance, his successive blogs deleted by Chinese authorities, and men who may have been government agents paid a worrying visit to his mother. At the same time, his international stature as both an artist and government critic continues to grow. Ai's activist projects concerning Sichuan earthquake victims and Internet censorship have gained coverage from big media, including CNN and the *Wall Street Journal*. He is also enjoying his first ever solo museum exhibitions, "Ai Weiwei: According to What" at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, through Nov. 8, and "Ai Weiwei: So Sorry" at Munich's Haus der Kunst, Oct. 12, 2009-Jan. 17, 2010.

"What's critical to [Ai's] work more and more is the social dimension," said Charles Merewether, curator of the 2006 Sydney Biennial, at a July 26 panel discussion at the Mori. And as that social dimension becomes more pronounced, Ai finds himself more in the spotlight. Last December, the artist and a group of volunteers began assembling a list of students who died during the Sichuan earthquake of 2008. Many of the deaths were related to the shoddy construction of school buildings, and government reporting on the tragedy was slow and widely believed to be inaccurate. So Ai published the list of students on his blog, which was promptly taken down. Also this year, he organized a one-day Internet boycott to protest the mandatory inclusion of Green Dam, a piece of government-created spyware, in all computers sold in China.

Secret police surveillance of Ai was at its most intense in the spring and summer, which saw the anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake in May, the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June and the Green Dam release in July. Lately though, things have cooled down. "It's not as bad as it was," said Nadine Stenke, Ai's studio assistant in Beijing, in late July. "The blogs are still down, but there's no longer any obvious surveillance." Ai's new blog ([blog.aiweiwei.com](http://blog.aiweiwei.com)) resides on a U.S. server but can't be viewed in China. To date, the artist has largely been immune to persecution—in part because of his international fame, in part because officials (especially in this year marking the 60th anniversary of the PRC's founding) are reluctant to arouse memories of his father, Ai Qing, a famous poet long internally exiled under Mao.

Ai Weiwei's activist efforts coincidentally began about the same time as planning for the Mori exhibition, in early 2008. "The day after Weiwei came back from visiting the earthquake area in Sichuan, he flew to Tokyo," Mori chief curator Mami Kataoka told *A.I.A.* "He was already talking about the children and the disaster but had not yet started to create work about it."

Six of the 26 works on display at the Mori are new, including *Snake Ceiling*, a sculpture created out of about 1,000 children's backpacks, which are fastened together into the form of a long snake that coils across the gallery's ceiling. Although the work clearly commemorates the children's deaths, the show as a whole is intended as a general introduction to Ai's work. Its subtitle, "According to What?" is taken from a painting by Jasper Johns, and the exhibition uses Ai's New York tenure in the 1980s as a departure point from which to examine the development of his artistic vocabulary. The first galleries display minimalist sculptures inspired by American artists like Sol LeWitt. Later rooms show how Ai combined those formalist ideas with notions of Chinese history, as embodied in antique Chinese pottery and furniture. The work in the final gallery, a video from his *Fairytale* project, which brought 1,001 Chinese visitors to the 2007 Documenta in Kassel, Germany, conveys Ai's new humanistic concerns.

"As an artist, I will never be satisfied if I cannot reach . . . the nation's problems," said Ai at the Mori discussion. "My activism is part of me. If my art has anything to do with me, then my activism is part of my art."

—David Frazier



Above, view of *Snake Ceiling*, 2009, made of children's backpacks, installed at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. Left, Ai Weiwei.