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Look Back

JEFF KELLEY ON AI WEIWEI

SINCE NOVEMBER 2005, artist Ai Weiwei has maintained a blog devoted to political commentary and art-world documentation, his entries driven by serial streams of photographs that not only represent but also enact—and even help negotiate, via the seduction, intimidation, and matter-of-factness of the camera—the encounters, formalities, distances, and intimacies with whomever or whatever comes within range of Ai's critical regard. Whether he is in his Beijing studio or traveling abroad, if you want to see what Ai is seeing on a given day, click on that date on his site (blog.sina.com.cn/aiweiwei). You are liable to see members of his staff (he likes to give them haircuts on camera), his languid yet willful cats, a rare blue sky over Beijing, the collector Uli Sigg, works in progress, Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson, or an audience at MIT he photographed while lecturing. In effect, Ai's activity of photographing returns the greeting, the gaze, the question, the scrutiny, and the surveillance the world (and the art world) brings to his plate. Whatever the force, he always pushes back. The camera, usually within reach on his large wooden table, reminds him and anyone near him to pay attention. "I'm not always clear," he once said, "but I'm always ready."

The public profile of his blog no doubt contributed, however, to Ai's uncharacteristic circumspection when he was considering how to respond to this past May's massive earthquakes in China—for the object of his critical eye was, in a real sense, the Chinese public itself. What troubled Ai was what he considered a nationalist undercurrent to media coverage of the disaster, something that went, to his mind, almost totally unremarked upon. Of course, the situation was unprecedented in many ways: A significant event was the media's depiction of Premier "Grandpa" Wen Jiabao's kindly, stricken face—he arrived in the disaster zone within hours of the quake—registering a grief and compassion the Chinese had never seen on their leaders' faces. At the same time, a shaken public was able for once to recognize itself on state-controlled television, in newspapers, and through word of mouth as a citizenry capable of caring for its injured and its homeless in the mountains of Sichuan—and the Chinese people wished to embrace this collective image. In the days after seven thousand classrooms collapsed in Sichuan, the populace, numbed by grief, came to see itself as a nation.

The impulse was understandable: From my own hotel in Beijing, I watched the televised rescue effort and read *China Daily's* accounts of yet another miraculous disinterment—yet another strong-willed survivor pulled from the rubble like a limp and dusty rag doll, into the pallid light of a quasi-future that began when the ground exploded. These moments registered like weak but hopeful heartbeats across the government-sponsored network of mass media, so that as time closed in on the countless trapped and undiscovered dying, each new headline, radio report, or rumor passed on by a taxi driver felt increasingly like an attempt to stave off the inevitable accounting for the dead.

And yet over time these stories began to take the main form of public speech in China: propaganda. As the shock subsided, and as the aftershocks continued, the run of televised images and newspaper stories took on the repetitive qualities of information meant to influence public opinion rather than inform it. (The nation's pride in coming to its own rescue was the subtext of every story.) It was in this context, some ten days after the earthquake hit, that Ai posted to his blog a provocative editorial in which he called for the Chinese people to give the earthquake's victims dignity, in part by not confusing matters of compassion with those of country. "Silence please," he inveighed. "No clamor. Let the dust settle, let the dead rest." Rescuing the dying and helping the injured, he wrote, "is a form of humanitarianism unconnected to love of country." People need not praise government officials or thank the motherland, since "it was not the motherland in the end that allowed some luckier children to escape from their collapsing schoolhouses." He railed against the "hypocritical news media so adept at stirring passions," the "politicians playing the tragedy of the departed for statecraft and nationalism," and the "petty businessmen who trade the souls of the dead for the false wine of morality." In a conclusion incendiary and melodramatic,

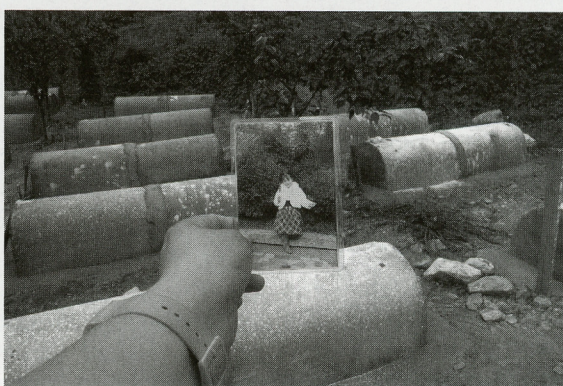


Soldiers during rescue and cleanup operations, Sichuan Province, China, June 1, 2008. Photo: Ai Weiwei.

Ai invited "all those organizations of culture and propaganda who live by sucking the blood of the nation . . . to let themselves die a day earlier."

Coming in advance of the Olympics—for which he helped design the National Stadium—and against the earthquake's broken background, Ai's criticism was risky, even for someone whose celebrity has generally insulated him from government reprisals. Indeed, for Americans, the episode might recall Susan Sontag's essay in the *New Yorker* after 9/11, in which she wrote that the hijackers, whatever else they might be, were not cowards. Just as few Americans were disposed to such analyses while the ruins of the World Trade Center smoldered in Lower Manhattan, so few in China were in the mood to contemplate whether compassion could be turned toward propaganda. The flood of responses to Ai's blog post featured a mixed bag of support and animosity, with many calling Ai "dispicable" and a "dog following the Western world."

Ai's blog became perhaps most provocative, however, when, less than a week after posting his editorial, he traveled to the disaster zone in the Sichuan mountains with his camera in hand—in effect situating his own photographic practice within the context of media imagery. In daily life, his photographic approach is usually oblique, as if the pictures were being shot from the hip, which they sometimes literally are. Thus, his images appear more detached and more penetrating than if he were fixing them through a viewfinder. He took this gaze—uninterested in newsworthiness—on a four-day journey upriver through a shattered, downcast



Soldiers, workers, and citizens, Sichuan Province, China, June 1, 2008. Photos: Ai Weiwei.

land. Saturated with a deep and mournful tonality, Ai's earthquake photos cascade toward us like debris in a flood: a once-elevated concrete roadway lying like a limp reed along the riverbanks in a steep rocky canyon; soldiers in white chemical suits walking in orderly rows across mounds of detritus; scores of children's backpacks lying unclaimed on the ground; a small girl peering from a refugee tent; the artist Zhao Bandi, with his famous panda hat, trying to offer solace to children through enactments of humor from behind a crestfallen face. The end of the world, it seems.

For those familiar with Ai's blog, his sudden uploading of the earthquake pictures when he returned to Beijing felt like an eruption. The dance between curiosity and detachment that typifies his blog photography, and the serial runs of images that trace his mind freely following its interests, was bogged down in the disaster zone by the suffering and struggles of others he encountered along his way. The pictures unintentionally convey an artist's humility in the face of what cannot be imagined but only encountered. Still, they are beautiful, and thereby cognitively dissonant. That dissonance fosters a deeper consideration of the act of looking itself: If the serial streams of earthquake images are weighted by the reality of what the artist was seeing, they nonetheless shatter the veneer of propaganda by showing us more than we can see, not less than we should know. Twenty little girls in tents; twenty white-suited work crews wandering the rubble; twenty fallen

bridges; twenty clumps of roadside refugees. One's sense of the scale of the disaster is magnified thus—by the narrative impulse lurking beneath all Ai's photography, following, as it does, a moment in time until he is finished with it. In Sichuan, it was never finished with him.

Some further consideration of Sontag is warranted here. In *On Photography* (1977), the critic argues for photography's significance as a medium for the focus and filtering of a modern sensibility in a world of mass images. "Society becomes modern," she writes, "when one of its chief activities is the production and consumption of images." The stakes would seem clear when, in China, for instance, images of political and natural disasters (in addition to the consequences of this summer's earthquake, there has been the violence in Tibet, and people stranded and freezing in Guangzhou) are matters of control, as are the pictures of international triumphs the government hopes to proliferate (the Olympics and the "openness" of its rescue efforts in Sichuan). If, as Sontag tells us, photographs can provide means for acquiring subjects—information, in other words, subject to state control—then Ai's photographs in the disaster zone are somehow means for capturing and then releasing them. Traveling upstream, he moves against the self-congratulatory flood of pictures cloaked in tragedy, tracing little broken bits of human dignity along the way.

In fact, looking at Ai's images as those of an artist working in the documentary mode, one might also

consider Sontag's discussion of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1972 film, *Chung Kuo Cina*, which was banned by the Chinese government at the time for its presumably disrespectful depiction of Chinese people who were shown, among other things, waiting to be photographed in Tiananmen Square. Quoting from an anonymously published pamphlet criticizing the director's willingness to focus on "someone's ruffled hair, eyes dazzled by sun, sleeves, trousers, people peering"—and therefore overlook the people's "deep revolutionary feelings"—Sontag seeks to contemplate the social and political implications of eschewing such "picturesqueness of disorder." Looking at the cultural mind-set from afar, she articulates an aesthetic and narrative divide. ("We find the Chinese naive," she says, "for not perceiving the beauty of the cracked peeling door.") What authorities wanted from photography back then was forward-facing representations of the social order: teams, units, leaders, bountiful harvests, and schoolrooms full of rosy-cheeked, revolutionary children. They wanted as little ulterior meaning as possible. That's still what they want. Even the earthquake, with the terrible beauty of its cracked and peeling classrooms, its heaps of swollen wreckage, its knots of parents suddenly abandoned to old age without their children, could not shatter the totalitarian habit of mind that sees pictures as information in specific need of control. Thus, a straight narrative of heroic self-reliance—masquerading as openness—emerged from the rubble as a new national story line in the run-up to the Beijing games.

But if meaning comes, as Sontag suggests, from the "odd angle" or "the poetry of the turned back," Ai's oblique, hip-shot approach to his subjects carries with it a push-back, both pictorial and attitudinal, to any sense of the staging of social order. He wants to see clearly and show clearly what he sees. Looking becomes critique. In the new China, to look hard at what is real is an act of compassion. It is also a political act. In the age of blogs, the camera is not really an instrument of documentation, recording something that happened, but rather—the way Ai does it—the posting of a point of view about what is happening now. It is because he has been such an unwavering critic of the Chinese government, and also sometimes of its people, that Ai's hard look at a ruined land softens into compassion of a high order. Encountering the end of the world, Ai Weiwei may not have been ready, but he was always clear. □

BASED IN OAKLAND, CA, JEFF KELLEY IS A CRITIC AND INDEPENDENT CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART.