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Crossing the Line in China

AS **AI WEIWEI** CONTINUES TO OPENLY CRITICIZE
COMMUNIST PARTY POLICY, HIS INTERNATIONAL PROFILE
IS RISING—BUT SO IS GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

BY BARBARA POLLACK

This month, *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, a major public artwork by Ai Weiwei, China's notoriously outspoken artist, will debut at the Pulitzer Fountain in New York, across from the Plaza Hotel and Central Park. The installation arrives at a time when the artist's reputation has soared, marked by his exhibition at Tate Modern in October 2010 and upcoming shows at the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland and the Kunsthau Bregenz in Austria, as well as one at Mary Boone Gallery in New York in September. But it has also been a year of escalating controversy that has left Ai Weiwei concerned about his future. That concern is well placed. As *ARTnews* went to press the artist was arrested and eight of his assistants and his wife were called in for questioning. The computers in his studio were confiscated.

"I'm a living artist. I live in this society. I'm part of the continuity of struggle which is for freedom of speech and individual rights, and basically that's the core value of my art activities,"



ABOVE Ai Weiwei with porcelain seeds from his installation *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, which filled the Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern with 100 million of the replicas. OPPOSITE Four bronze heads from the artist's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, 2010.

said Ai Weiwei during an interview in February in his Beijing studio, which he designed and built in 2000. The studio complex, constructed in his signature gray-brick style, consists of three buildings surrounding a courtyard: his home and showroom, his architecture offices, and a dormitory that houses 20 assistants.

The 54-year-old artist seemed worried, having just received news that a show scheduled to open at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing in early March had been "postponed" indefinitely. According to Ai Weiwei, the center had informed him that the exhibition was "too politically sensitive" at that time. He responded that he would prefer to cancel the show. Jérôme Sans, the center's director, refused to comment.

Ai Weiwei is virtually the only Chinese artist who openly

criticizes the Communist party and Chinese officials. The exhibition scheduled for the Ullens Center, titled "So Sorry," first appeared at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2009, and it

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Ai Weiwei's Shanghai studio, which the government demolished in January.

contained such works as an installation of over 9,000 backpacks, representing the children who were killed in the 2008 Szechuan earthquake. The artist, who blames the deaths on the shoddy construction of schools in the region, recorded the children's names on his blog, leading censors to shut it down in May 2009. Then, when he went to Szechuan to show support for a citizen who had been arrested for investigating the issue, he was beaten by local police, resulting in a brain aneurysm that required surgery in October 2009. None of this caused Ai Weiwei to temper his views. He now posts messages on Twitter eight hours a day and has more than 71,000 followers. His Twitter feed is @aiww. There is an English translation by a group not affiliated with the artist that can be found @aiwwenglish. (Since Twitter is not available in China, he uses software that allows him to circumvent the censors.)

"If I am in this kind of society and if I don't even speak up, I really feel meaningless," says the artist, whose bushy black hair, full beard, and robust figure make him look like a devilish Santa Claus. He is in no way naive about the power of the state, having grown up during China's most repressive era. His father, Ai Qing, considered one of the most renowned poets of his day, was exiled to western China during the Cultural Revolution, and Ai Weiwei grew up watching him perform the most menial tasks to survive. The family was not allowed to move back to Beijing until 1976, after the death of Mao and the fall of the infamous Gang of Four. Ai Weiwei enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy and then joined the Stars, one of the first experimental art groups in China, whose exhibitions were regularly shut down.

In 1982 he left for the United States, thinking he would never return to his homeland. While in New York, he participated in

protests over such events as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. He returned to China when his father was dying, in 1993, bringing with him Western ideas that have influenced both his art projects and his political point of view.

This past year, government response to his outspoken pronouncements grew more intense. In July 2010, just a month after completion of the \$1 million studio and education complex he had designed in Shanghai at the invitation of the Shanghai government, Ai Weiwei was notified that the studio would be torn down. The reason given by authorities, who compensated him for the loss, was that he didn't have the necessary planning permission—considered by many a subterfuge, since the government had given the artist title to the land as part of the original deal. The government action was seen to have been a response to his tweets about two legal cases: those of Yang Jia, a Beijing resident who killed six policemen after being arrested and beaten for riding an unlicensed bicycle, and of Feng Zhenghu, a human-rights lawyer who was waylaid at Tokyo's Narita Airport for three months when the Chinese government prohibited him from returning to China.

In November, Ai Weiwei organized a protest in Shanghai over the scheduled demolition, inviting followers to come to a crab feast he was holding at the studio. (The word for crabs in Chinese is a euphemism for censorship.) Though the artist was put under house arrest for 60 hours and was not allowed to attend the event himself, more than 1,000 people showed up for it.

Then, in December, the artist was again prevented from traveling, at the time of the Nobel Prize ceremony. The prize was awarded to Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese human-rights activist who is in jail, and the Chinese government was afraid that his supporters would show up in Liu Xiaobo's absence. Ai Weiwei,



Moon Chest, 2008, consists of 81 pieces made from huanghuali, a rare rosewood used for imperial furniture during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

however, was not planning on attending the ceremony. He was, instead, scheduled to appear as a judge for the Future Generation Art Prize, funded by Ukrainian billionaire Victor Pinchuk.

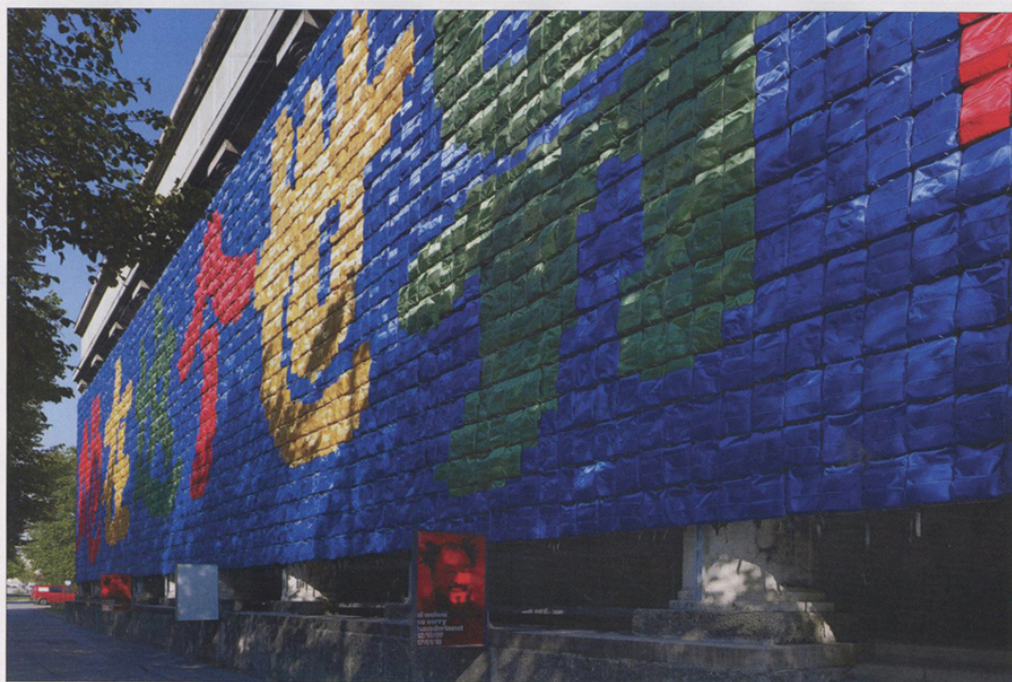
Meanwhile the artist's profile grew increasingly prominent. "Ai Weiwei has made a major contribution over the past ten years to Chinese art and international art, and he is an artist with many parallel realities," says Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator at the Serpentine Gallery in London, who has worked with the artist many times. "He has become a very public artist, a public intellectual who assumes the role of the artist proposed by Joseph Beuys and his idea of social sculpture," Obrist explains, referring to Ai Weiwei's practice as both artist and architect, most famously as designer of the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing, for which he collaborated with the Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron. Obrist sees Ai Weiwei's current practice of posting comments on Twitter, and, before that, on his blog, as a prime example of social sculpture.

Last October, Ai Weiwei unveiled *Sunflower Seeds*, an installation of over 100 million porcelain replicas of tiny black-and-white seeds, filling the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. The little objects were fabricated by some 1,600 artisans from Jingdezhen over the course of two years. The piece was intended as a kind of interactive carpet, where visitors could walk on the field of ceramic seeds. But, shortly after the opening, the participatory part of the installation had to be closed off because of dust particles created by people tramping over the seeds. The work could still be seen from the Turbine Bridge above. (Additional seeds were produced, and are being sold in 220-pound piles.) None of the installation's meaning was lost, according to Tate Modern curator Juliet Bingham. "The thinking

behind the work lies in far more than just the idea of walking on it," she says. "Each piece is a part of the whole, a commentary on the relationship between the individual and the masses. The work continues to pose challenging questions:

What does it mean to be an individual in today's society? Are we insignificant or powerless unless we act together?" Sunflower seeds have a particular significance in China, where they are a popular street food. During the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao was often depicted as the sun and the people as sunflowers tilting toward him.

Likewise, Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* operates on several levels. At a glance, it is a funny, circus-like spectacle featuring the heads of 12 animals—each weighing 800 pounds and measuring four feet tall—standing on poles in a circle. But it also tells a story of looting and repatriation. "Even the zodiac can be political," says Ai Weiwei. In this instance, the heads were inspired by the 18th-century fountain clock created by two European Jesuits at the behest of the Manchu Emperor Qianlong for the original Summer Palace in Beijing. In 1860, the palace was ransacked by French and British troops, and the heads from the clock were looted. Recently, the heads sparked controversy when they showed up at auction. In 2000, the Poly Auction Co. repatriated three of the heads from the clock, purchased for \$4 million. In 2007, Hong Kong collector Stanley Ho bought a head for over \$8 million and returned it to China. But in 2009, when two heads came up at the Yves St. Laurent sale at Christie's in Paris, the Chinese government demanded their return. The sale went forward, despite warnings that the decision would damage the auction firm's dealings with China. The heads were purchased for \$19 million by a buyer for China's National Treasures



Fund, but he refused to pay, and the pieces were ultimately returned to the consignor.

Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, funded in part by New York collector Larry Warsh and his organization AW Asia, will tour nationally and internationally. A second edition of the work will be installed at Somerset House in London this month, coinciding with a show of Ai Weiwei's works at Lisson Gallery. According to Greg Hilty, Lisson's director, prices for the exhibition will range from \$28,000 for small porcelain vases and \$200 to \$282,000 for sculptures up to \$564,000 for large-scale installations. A 200-pound pile of "sunflower seeds" sold for \$550,000 at Sotheby's London in January 2011.

According to Warsh, funds are still being raised to support *Zodiac*, which was made in an edition of six, along with two artists proofs, which are not for sale. He says that Ai Weiwei paid for the piece and that there is a smaller, bronze and gold-plated edition of the work, for sale through the artist's studio. Ai Weiwei says that Warsh himself paid for the sculpture and is handling all sales.

Many people wondered why the artist had not yet been arrested, since many human-rights advocates in China have been detained for posting far less controversial remarks than Ai Weiwei's on the Internet.

"There are people who have not done things so provocative and have been put away in various ways, and Ai Weiwei managed, with some occasional scrapes, to stay out on the street," says Jerome Cohen, an expert on human rights in China and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Cohen explains that this has been an increasingly repressive time in China, starting with the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party in October 2007 through the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008 and up to the current rash of protests taking place in some of China's major cities. "Ai Weiwei could become a kind of leader of protests," says Cohen, who spoke to *ARTnews* just a week before the artist was arrested. "So far there is no leader. Anyone who looks like he might be, gets locked up, except Ai Weiwei, who has been very provocative, so he should be worried."

"Ai Weiwei is very strategic," says Uli Sigg, former Swiss ambassador to China, who owns the world's largest collection of Chinese contemporary art. He has known Ai Weiwei since the artist's return to China in the early 1990s and has worked on many projects with him, including Ai Weiwei's contribution to Documenta XII in 2007, for which he provided funding. Most recently, the two cocurated an exhibition in Bern, Switzerland, on contemporary interpretations

of Chinese landscape painting, opening this month. "Ai Weiwei picks his topics very cleverly, and normally he picks them in a way that he can find some official statement or something that leans in the same direction as he does," says Sigg. "That is only part of the explanation, of course."

"I totally disagree with that statement," says Lee Ambrozio, who recently translated and edited Ai Weiwei's three years of blog postings for publication by MIT Press. "Ai Weiwei doesn't know how to not cross the line. He always crosses the line. He is pushing the line further and further." According to Ambrozio, Ai Weiwei has inherited his father's literary skill, mixing official government rhetoric with low-level slang and curse words. But throughout the collection of posts, the text is resolutely political. And when his blog was shut down, Ai Weiwei turned to Twitter.

In Chinese art circles, most other artists thought that Ai

Weiwei was the only one who could get away with such subversive work. In January 2010, China's *Art Value* magazine had readers vote on the Internet for their favorite artist. Ai Weiwei won, with 3,000 more votes than the next leading artist, following which the magazine eliminated Ai Weiwei from the competition. The artist showed up outside the magazine's awards ceremony, mocking the other artists who attended. "I just make fun of those guys," says Ai Weiwei. "Where are you all, those artists? Why don't

you protect the basic human dignity or the rights of art? You just sell, sell, sell."

Though few would go on record for this article, there are those who believe that, because of his father's history, the Chinese government was reluctant to touch him and remind people of the dark days of the Cultural Revolution. Others believe that there was someone higher up in the government protecting him. "I asked him two years ago if he has a protector up there, and he says he doesn't, but people think he does and maybe that's enough," says Cohen. "Nobody wants to take the chance and get their fingers burned by moving against somebody who may have some powerful clout."

Some speculated that he had just gotten too famous internationally for the government to arrest him. "He has some international support, but so do other people," says Sigg. Now, with his detention, it is evident that not even that support is sufficient to protect him.



ABOVE Ai Weiwei's photograph 10/31/07, *Lucerne, Switzerland*, 2007. OPPOSITE *Remembering*, 2009, an installation of 9,000 backpacks, commemorating schoolchildren killed in the 2008 Szechuan earthquake (top). *Soft Ground*, 2009, wool floor tiles; *Rooted Upon*, 2009, 100 tree trunks from China; and *Fairytale*, 2007, wallpaper of photos from his performance of the same name (bottom).