

# WSJ

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SPECIAL INNOVATORS ISSUE

## A BRIGHT FUTURE

The People & Ideas  
Changing Our World

Crow, Kelly. "The Art of Resistance." *Wall Street Journal Magazine*, November 2011

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# THE ART OF RESISTANCE

This year,  
**AI WEIWEI**  
went from being  
a great Chinese  
artist to the  
voice of free  
expression  
for the  
entire world

**O**N THE AFTERNOON OF APRIL 3, SWISS DEALER Urs Meile called the Beijing home and studio of Ai Weiwei, one of China's top contemporary artists who is best known for helping design the "Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium three years ago.

Right away, Meile could tell something was wrong. He and the artist have been friends for years and talk once a week, but this time Ai wouldn't say much at all and there was a strange strain in his voice. "I'm flying to Hong Kong tonight," Ai told him, before mumbling, "It's so crazy, so crazy here."

The next morning, Meile got a frantic call from collector Uli Sigg, a former Swiss ambassador to China who had planned to meet the artist upon arrival. "You'll never believe it," Sigg told the dealer. "Weiwei got arrested."

Nothing has shaken up the art world this year like the arrest and nearly three-month detention of Ai Weiwei (pronounced "Eye Way-Way"), the 54-year-old son of a poet whose irreverent photographs and conceptual sculptures—often made from porcelain, tea or temple wood—have earned him a coveted spot among China's pivotal, post-Mao generation of artists. Major museums like New York's Museum of Modern Art and London's Tate Modern collect Ai's work, and his pieces have sold at auction for as much as \$657,000.

This year Ai pulled off something even rarer: He became more important than his art, thrust by his arrest into a global diplomatic firestorm few major artists have ever experienced. After police detained him at the Beijing airport, information about his whereabouts and alleged misconduct were kept secret for weeks, stoking fears in the human-rights community that he had been jailed for his habit of openly criticizing his Communist government. (Authorities shut down Ai's popular blog two years earlier, ostensibly for similar reasons.)

Repression has only made him more famous. Within days of his disappearance, artists and human-rights advocates were protesting outside Chinese embassies around the world. The Tate Modern painted "Release Ai Weiwei" on the exterior of its building, and Anish Kapoor canceled a planned exhibit at Beijing's National Museum of China in a gesture of solidarity. By the time Chinese authorities said they were investigating Ai for alleged tax evasion, over 140,000 people had signed Change.org's online petition seeking his release.

In a season when democratic uprisings swept from Syria to Sudan, here was an artist from another tightly controlled nation-state who seemed to stand for something greater than his asking prices, who turned everything he touched into a bid for self-expression, including the Internet. To his more than 100,000 followers on Twitter, he was Teacher Ai, Uncle Ai—the "fat guy" with the trickster grin and Santa Claus paunch who could be counted upon to post truth-to-power tirades all day long. On January 10, he wrote: "In an environment without public platform or protection for associations, the individual is the most powerful and most responsible." On March 30, four days before his arrest, he wrote: "You have to act or the danger becomes stronger."

On June 22, Ai was released from his detention on the condition he pay roughly \$2 million in allegedly owed back taxes. He was also ordered not to travel, post to Twitter or talk to the media for a year. He has already tested these waters a few times, notably publishing an angry editorial in Newsweek over the summer in which he described Beijing as a "constant nightmare." Local authorities later made him sign a tougher gag order.

What happens when you become the modern-day, artistic equivalent of that young man who once stood before the tanks of Tiananmen Square? For one thing,

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people take a closer look at your art. And what the collectors and curiosity-seekers are discovering now is how remarkably different Ai's art is compared with that of his peers in Asia, or anywhere else. Two decades ago, China's avant-garde was mainly painting neo-Pop portraits of the Chairman. Ai spent those same years scavenging Beijing's back alleys and antique shops for Silk Road materials he could transfigure into art, like Marcel Duchamp once did with a urinal or Andy Warhol did with a soup can.

In one seminal trio of photographs from 1995, "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn," Ai stands before a camera, eyes defiant, as he lets the urn slip through his fingers to shatter at his feet. (The Hans ruled when the Romans did.) He has also slathered Stone Age vessels in soda-pop slogans and garish house paints, the visual embodiment of an ancient culture fumbling with its changing values.

"His attitude, more than any other work, makes him unique," says Roxana Marcoci, MoMA's photography curator. "He's not only one of the strongest artists to come out of China—he's one of the world's best cultural thinkers."

His stay in jail and the ongoing police monitoring are taking a toll, though, friends say. During his detention, guards stood inches away from him around the clock, even as he showered and slept. He was interrogated about his dissident activities at least 50 times, friends add. Even now, officers in green uniforms visit his home daily, often lingering for hours. When New York dealer Mary Boone visited in late summer, she said Ai had to call authorities whenever he wanted to step out. Surveillance cameras remain trained on his front door. "He still teases me, but he's quieter now," Boone says of the artist.

Moving forward, Belgian artist and longtime friend Wim Delvoye says Ai must find some way to create pieces that won't be overshadowed by Kafkaesque circum-

stances. "It must be paralyzing," he says. "What kind of work can you do with the entire world watching?"

On the other hand, Meile, the dealer who called him moments before his arrest, says the artist has spent over three decades embedding elements of his storied past into his artworks. "His work is about China, but it's also about him—sometimes you just have to look for his clues."

**A**I WEIWEI WAS BORN IN 1957, A CHILD OF revolution and exile. His thin, quick-witted father, Ai Qing, had studied art in Paris in the 1930s but had switched to poetry in the patriotic upsurge surrounding Mao Zedong's founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Ai Qing's poems earned him fame but also suspicion, and in 1958 he was tacitly accused of championing free speech, an anti-revolutionary offense.

His sentence: Sixteen years of cleaning public toilets for a village of 200 people in the arid, northwestern province of Xinjiang near the Russian border. Ai Qing was nearly 60 years old at the time. His second wife, Gao Ying, joined him with their young son, and for years Ai Weiwei grew up watching his father seethe over the situation.

"Weiwei heard all his father's stories, and his disdain for the Party apparatus comes out of that complex history," says Christopher Phillips, a curator at New York's International Center of Photography who has known the artist for a decade.

Yet it was through his father that Ai also learned about Auguste Rodin, Vincent van Gogh and a slew of Western artists whose works were never discussed during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, when Mao sought to purge the country of any elitist or foreign influences.

By the time Ai graduated high school, his father had

been forgiven and recalled to Beijing. Ai hung out at art stations and the local zoo, sketching and painting ever he saw. He also befriended a small group of artists who began hanging their Cubist-style paintings on a fence near the Forbidden City compound, dubbed it the Democratic Wall. On September 1988, he and this loose collective known as the '89 Generation (as opposed to Mao, China's late "Sun") moved to become the country's first organized show of contemporary art. Authorities shut it down the following day.

Two years later, frustrated and ambitious, Ai quit art school and moved to New York City in his pocket. He couldn't speak a word of English. In a later interview with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, he told his classmates, "Maybe 10 years later you come back, you'll see another Picasso!"

This past summer, New York's Asia Society invited some of the 10,000 photos he took to the heady decade that followed his move. Ai took on housekeeping and carpentry jobs to support himself in the East Village apartment, which became a way station for young Chinese expats like "Farewell My Concubine" director Chen Kaige and artist Xu Bing, now vice president of China's Central Academy of Fine Arts. His friends commingle with images of tenant farmers in Tompkins Square Park, Greenwich Village and surreptitious shots of museum artwork that came to idolize, like Warhol's "Self-Portrait."

At some point during these years Ai's came his de facto sketchbook, says Stephanie Tuner, junior curator at Beijing's Three Shadows Photo Centre, which originated the Asia Society show of his photos, we see how he sees the world," she says.

In 1988, a young dealer, Ethan Cohen, gave Ai a solo show in New York. What Ai produced and



an elegant mix of everyday objects whose functions had been reworked into the absurd: a shovel handle attached to the neck of a violin, a pair of men's shoes cut in half, with their front halves reattached back to back. Jerome Cohen, the dealer's father and a law professor at New York University, said he paid \$500 for a coat hanger that Ai had bent into the profile of Duchamp. "It's still hanging in my living room."

Looking back, Ai's political consciousness may have been honed in New York, but he didn't really find his artistic vein until after he moved back to Beijing in 1993 upon learning that his father was ill. By then a group of younger artists like Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan were hanging out on the city's fringes and doing edgy art performances—running naked atop the Great Wall, say, or sitting naked in a public restroom, coated in fish guts and flies. Ai and his photographer pal RongRong chronicled it all in a trio of 'zine-like books they published over several years. Only a handful of collectors, like the Swiss ambassador, Uli Sigg, paid any attention.

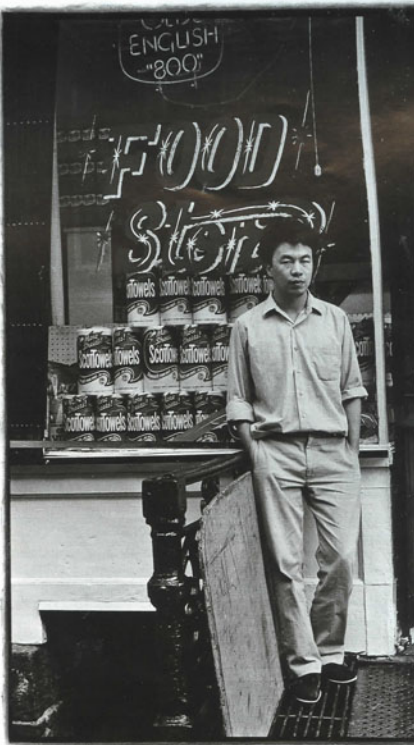
In 1997, Sigg took Meile, the Swiss dealer, to meet several of these artists, including Ai. Meile says he remembers walking down a narrow alley, or *hutong*, into a house Ai shared with his mother. His first thought upon looking around was, "Where's the art?" In many of the other artists' homes and studios, he'd seen leaning piles of paintings whose technique blended Soviet Realism with Pop, but Ai had nothing to show for himself except a small, dim bedroom and a bookshelf containing rows of muddy-colored pottery.

"Then he started talking," Meile says of the artist, "and I realized he was the only Chinese artist I'd met who could put the country's own traditions up against everything that had happened in the modern art world."

Ai told him he was fascinated by objects China

#### FUN WITH URNS

The artist has been subverting everyday objects since early in his career. In 1995, he photographed himself dropping a Han Dynasty urn (below); in 2010 he splashed ancient vases with industrial paint (far left); for "Kui Hua 2" (2009, left), he hand-painted porcelain "seeds"; a self-portrait of the then-26-year-old artist in New York City.



Ai Weiwei, *Scott's Toilet Paper*, 1995. Ai Weiwei, *Scott's Toilet Paper*, 1995.



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seemed eager to shunt aside in the name of modernization, including the Ming-era chairs, tables and latticed shutters that went into the trash heap whenever a new luxury high-rise went up. With these he began playing the misfit carpenter, reconfiguring 400-year-old tables into perpendicular shapes so they could appear to creep up walls or splaying their legs so they seemed to crouch like crabs. The pots and porcelain cups he amassed often ended up in shards; the glistening pearls he gathered into a pair of coffee-table-size bowls were brownish-yellow. Rejects, all. (In another ironic riff, he named his architectural atelier FAKE Design.)

Philip Tinari, an art historian and incoming director of Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, once joined Ai to troll for materials in Jingdezhen, a city southwest of Shanghai renowned for its porcelain industry. Along the roads, they spotted several dealers hawking refrigerator-size pieces of local trees, specifically their stumps and root systems. Craftsmen often turn these gnarled masses into kitschy restaurant decor by carving their stumps into the shape of a peacock's head with the roots trailing out like feathers. But Ai pounced on the goods like he was "saving" historic artifacts, Tinari says. Months later, Ai arranged them like some "weird forest" in a German museum survey of his work.

"China is his ready-made," Tinari says. "The country has all these superskilled workers who spend their lives making reproductions of the same old art. What they need is an artist like Weiwei to come in and tweak."

His "Sunflower Seeds" project last fall involved hiring 1,600 workers in Jingdezhen to create and hand-paint 100 million life-size porcelain "seeds," which he scattered like a rocky shore across the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. (Visitors were allowed to walk on the piece until concerns were raised about the potential dangers of breathing in the dust churned up by the activity.)

Three years before that, he turned his own countrymen into a piece of performance art when he paid to send 1,001 Chinese participants, many hailing from rural provinces, to an art exhibition called "Documenta" in Kassel, Germany, the historic home of the Brothers Grimm. He titled the project "Fairytale."

Delvoye, the Belgian artist, went to Kassel as well and marveled at how many Germans treated Ai like a celebrity, spotting him on the street and calling out "Weiwei!" Delvoye expected Ai to revel in the attention, but whenever the pair hung out, he said their conversations more often steered toward societal and political problems Ai still perceived back home: "His anger is always bigger than his pleasure at being famous."

**I**N THE SPRING OF 2008, A DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKE in Sichuan in central China further ratcheted up Ai's political activism. The disaster killed an estimated 70,000 people and left over 4 million without homes, according to official figures. Yet the one thing Ai wanted to know—a reckoning of the children who died inside earthquake-stricken public schools—wasn't immediately forthcoming. So, he marshaled the readers of his blog to pitch in and canvass the affected areas. Eventually, he posted the names of more than 5,400 children; the government later divulged its own, slightly bigger tally.

Ai also leveraged these activities to make artworks—he papered the front wall of Munich's Haus der Kunst

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# CONSCIENTIOUS

**OBJECTIFICATION** Clockwise from top left: "Porcelain Cube" (2009); "Table with Two Legs" (2005); artists Cornelia Parker and Anish Kapoor deliver a petition in May 2011 calling for Ai's release; Ai amid "Rooted Upon" (2009), an installation of 100 pieces of trees.



museum in tiny backpacks two years ago—but his stature within China's artistic elite seems to have suffered as a result. Melissa Chiu, the Asia Society's director, says some began to question whether his political activism mattered more to him than his artistic practice. "Those who knew him for a long time still appreciated the work, but some felt like he was sucking all the oxygen from the room," she adds.

In 2009, Tinari turned up at a picnic Ai threw to protest Internet censorship and was surprised to find that he was one of the only art-world characters there; the rest of the crowd was human-rights lawyers and dissidents. From there on out, events seemed to snowball: Ai's blog was shut down in May of that year; surveillance cameras turned up outside his studio door that June; he was struck on the head by police during an August trip to support a dissident on trial in Chengdu and had to have emergency surgery a few weeks later because the injury led to internal bleeding in his brain. By the following November, Ai learned that his newly built studio and artist's residence in Shanghai would, for complicated development reasons, be torn down.

Ai's response? He threw another party, this time serving up river crabs for roughly 100 people at the ill-fated studio. (River crabs are a Chinese euphemism for censorship.) Franklin Sirmans, who heads the contemporary-art department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, was among the partygoers who tried to make the best of the situation, but Ai's absence—he was forbidden to travel to Shanghai to play host—put a damper on the event. "It felt really odd that he wasn't there," Sirmans says. The studio was razed two months later.

When word spread a few months later that Ai had been detained by police, Chiu from the Asia Society says

she wasn't exactly surprised. She even says she had "mixed feelings" about his arrest in large part because she worried his activism would "overwhelm his art."

In fact, it all served to pique collectors' curiosity, especially during the weeks of his disappearance. Ai's gallery in London, Lisson, went ahead with a long-planned show of his work in May and 6,000 people stopped in, triple the usual traffic, says curatorial director Greg Hilty. The gallery said it even set a moratorium on sales of his work until after his release, in part because people were offering up such wildly varied amounts for pieces. Over in Lucerne, Meile said strangers were emailing him as well, some with messages that read, "Please forward us a work by Ai Weiwei." He didn't.

When the artist emerged from his detainment after 81 days, he was thinner but "not broken," Meile says. These days, Ai is trying to refocus his attention on pieces he already had in the works, like a set of ceramic river crabs. He's also tracking his suite of bronze zodiac heads, his first major public sculptures. The animal heads toured New York during his detainment; they're currently at the Taipei Museum of Art. And on August 5, he resurfaced suddenly on Twitter, posting, "What's up?" Days later, a follower asked him arguably the biggest burning question in Chinese art today, specifically whether people there should "deal with everything by describing the actual facts or just live our lives satirically?" His reply: "Either confront things clearly or leave quietly."

Larry Warsh, a major New York collector of Ai's work, who helped sponsor the zodiac sculptures, says he can't imagine Ai ever resettling anywhere else. "In spite of everything, China is important to him," Warsh says. "He wants it to change—and he wants to be the catalyst." ♦