

Ai Weiwei's New York: At the Asia Society, the Artist's '80s Photos Show How the Big Apple Shaped His Defiant Temperament



© Ai Wei Wei / Courtesy of Three Shadows Photography Art Centre and Chambers Fine Art

"Ai Weiwei, Williamsburg, Brooklyn," 1983, is among the self-portraits included in the Asia Society's exhibition of Ai Weiwei's New York photography.

By **Andrew M. Goldstein**

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NEW YORK— "I was a bit bored, very bored," **Ai Weiwei** told curator **Stephanie Tung**, talking about the period he lived in New York in the 1980s. Later in their conversation he added, "I don't really like to take photos that much actually."

Both of those statements begin to lose credibility after a tour of "Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983-1993," a new exhibition at New York's **Asia Society** that reveals the mountainous heap of pictures that the Chinese artist and world-galvanizing political dissident took while living in the East Village. Ai led an interesting life indeed for the decade he took refuge in the Big Apple, and his photographs — by turns matter-of-fact and archly ironic — suggest an engaged budding artist who had no trouble keeping himself occupied.

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Ai moved to New York when he was 24, and the early self-portraits here show him as a thin young man with a confident, up-to-something look in his eyes — a figure we get to watch morph over the course of the exhibition into the girthier and more hirsute artist we know, pursuing social causes with his camera. Much of the time he lived in the city he stayed on East 3rd Street, briefly attending **Parsons** while working such odd jobs as a street portraitist for tourists in Times Square, a extra in a **Metropolitan Opera** production of "Turandot," and a renown blackjack "guru" in Atlantic City. (Other gigs he worked include "renovation, construction, babysitting, cutting grass, [and] cleaning houses," he relates in the show's catalogue. "I liked them all.")

Ai also hosted a steady influx of fellow Chinese artists, who used his apartment as a way-station while reveling in the gritty freedom of New York City in the '80s. The expats in his circle included **Tehching Hsieh**, the performance artist who had come to notoriety by locking himself in a cage for a year in 1978 and spent the '80s doing other yearlong endurance pieces, including one where he tied himself to a woman with a rope. As the son of famous Chinese poet **Ai Qing**, Ai was also drawn to his neighborhood's literary counterculture, frequently hanging out with his East 12th Street neighbor **Allen Ginsberg** ("whose anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian stance clearly resonated with him," the catalogue helpfully notes). All the while he was taking photographs of everyone and everything, snapping thousands over the course of the decade.

Among the more compelling images in the show are the following: a nude self-portrait of Ai standing on a chair, with his genitals tucked between his legs, posing as a classical female garden statue; a photo of a wire hanger that Ai bent into the shape of a profile of a face — evoking **Duchamp's** cutout silhouettes — and filled with his now-signature sunflower seeds; another picture of Ai posing at **MoMA** with Duchamp's "To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour" (the similarities between the two conceptual artists, who both sought artistic freedom in New York, are inescapable) and a series of **Andy Warhol** self-portraits; a shot of Ai posing with Ginsberg in a Chinese restaurant; images of Mott Street's famous Chinese New Year Festival; and pictures from the funeral, at St. Mark's Church, for Ginsberg's friend, the exemplary New York mystic scavenger **Harry Smith**.

But what has the most resonance — especially today, given Ai's recent and ongoing travails in China — are his photographic documents of social ills, from the era's AIDS epidemic to its ghettoized immigrant colonies to its rampant homelessness ("nothing had improved since **Jacob Riis** began photographing New York City slums in the 1880s," a catalogue author notes), and political subjects, like military pilots returning from the Gulf War and "**Bill Clinton** at His Last Campaign Stop in New York, 1992," as one photo is titled. The grand opus of this work is Ai's pictures from the Tompkins Square Park riots of 1989, during which he took pictures of the army of squatters facing off against heavily armed and thuggish policemen — pictures that he sold to the New York Times, the Post, the Daily News, and other newspapers. After the violence subsided, photographs of the riots were used in court to convict cops of police brutality.

Asked what drew him to take pictures of the event, Ai said, "I was interested in individual rights, group rights and their relation to power — power in the form of the police control — and the resulting confrontations and abuse of those rights." It was a prologue to his battles, in courtrooms and galleries both, with the Chinese government. Now that he is silenced by his yearlong probation, one hopes he still has recourse to his camera to capture and illuminate what he is seeing around him.

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