

AT HOME WITH AI WEIWEI

INTERVIEW BY J.J. CAMILLE

What is daily life like for China's most famous dissident artist? Since his nearly three-month detention last spring, Ai Weiwei has been heroized in the West—receiving, in absentia, the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Award for Courage and topping ArtReview magazine's Power 100 list of influential art-world figures. But in the People's Republic, he remains curatorially untouchable, legally restricted to Beijing and embroiled in a \$2.4 million "tax evasion" dispute. Below, the author takes us inside Ai's beleaguered—but characteristically informal—family compound to chat (in Mandarin, later translated to English) with the man at the center of this global controversy.

IT WAS A COLD RAINY September day when I landed in Beijing, and for the entire week the city was enveloped in thick mist. The top of any building over 20 floors high disappeared into the "fog"—actually, as every Beijing resident knows, a chemical haze mixed with dust.¹ Like many visitors in recent years, I suffered a persistent sore throat and cough. Yet miraculously, when I went to visit Ai Weiwei, the wind blew away the smog, and the autumn day turned crisp and balmy. I actually saw the sky, I mean the blue sky, for the first time.

I had met Weiwei previously both in China and the U.S., but this was the first time I visited his home in the Caochangdi art district. The street was quite empty; there were no cars or pedestrians outside his compound. Several people warned me against visiting Weiwei now, and my friend would not let me use his cell phone to call for an appointment. But since I am neither a journalist nor a political activist but simply an art lover who wanted to talk with him, I went anyway—unannounced. I was a bit nervous while ringing the bell near the Fake design studio sign.² A middle-aged man opened the now famous blue door. "Is Weiwei in?" I asked. He nodded and walked back into the first bungalow on the right, leaving me on my own.

It was very quiet inside. Across the courtyard, enclosed by a high brick wall, was Weiwei's studio house—the stark live/work space he designed himself. While some call its architectural style minimalist, he calls it "essential." Many structures in the area echo his gray brick walls and matchbox studio forms. His courtyard does not have the perfectly groomed lawn and manicured garden one finds in the West, nor even the carefully arranged rocks, groves and ponds of a traditional Chinese quadrangle. Instead, it is natural, spacious and homey. Among the many plants was a dense stand of bamboo that I thought grew only in the south.

In a corner of the lawn, under shade, sat a round garden table, a bowl of fresh jujubes and a few empty chairs. A little dog rolled about on the ground happily; four or five cats, of various colors and shapes, lay in the sunshine on the doorstep and on top of a big rock.

The door was open. I saw a very long and sturdy wooden dining table and a dozen or so antique chairs lined against the brick wall. The house is built like a loft with very high ceilings in the living room area and a full second-floor bedroom above the kitchen.

"Is anybody in?" I called a few times. Getting no response, I wandered back across the courtyard to a room where a





Left, visitors arriving at Ai Weiwei's home/studio compound, November 2011. Photo Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty Images.

Opposite, Ai Weiwei, 2010. Photo Gao Yuan.

few people were having lunch around a huge table. "Have you eaten yet?" Weiwei's wife, Lu Qing, asked.³ I shook my head, and she went to get me some rice. On the table were a bowl of shredded dry tofu, a plate of sautéed vegetables and a dish of fried shrimp with ginger and scallions. Nobody asked who I was or why I had come. Evidently, anyone who manages to visit Weiwei is treated as a guest and invited to eat at mealtime.

Weiwei ambled in. According to reports, he lost almost 30 pounds during his three-month detention last spring. Now he seemed to have gained half the weight back. He looked stronger and more energetic than he did in pictures and TV clips at the time of his release. After his brief lunch, he had to go out of the compound to attend to business. I went to sit at the garden table, nibbling sweet jujubes and looking at the persimmon trees on the other side of the lawn. The worker who was removing animal droppings told me that the persimmons would be ripe in one or two weeks, but nobody would pick them. The ripe fruit would eventually drop on the grass.

Later, my curiosity aroused by the loud snorting of a dog, I went back inside. The harmless creature, sleeping noisily in a padded vest, had the air of an aging man who has experienced many vicissitudes. The cleaning lady who was mopping the floor said that if Weiwei went out in the afternoon he usually didn't return until late at night. However, he got up around 7:30 a.m. I was surprised. Most artists in China are night owls and always wake up around noon.

The next day, when I arrived at Weiwei's home at 8:45 a.m., his associates were already in front of their computers working. Weiwei was busy dealing with paperwork, phone calls and quick meetings. He took a short break and talked to me in the dining room.

J.J. CAMILLE You're so busy.

AI WEIWEI Yes. It's like this every day. Now that I can't go abroad for my exhibitions, there is even more work to do. I have to arrange details and make sure everything will be all right.

CAMILLE Yet I see you're not as glued to your computer and iPhone as you used to be. Until recently, you really enjoyed blogging and tweeting your photos, ideas and critiques throughout the day. Now that you cannot do that, though you can still browse the Internet, do you feel like you've been forced back to the period of the '80s, when there were no personal computers in China, when artworks couldn't be shown to the audience right away and get an immediate response?

AI Having used the computer the way I did before, I now feel I am forced back not to the '80s but to the Stone Age. The current rules are more like harassment than real restrictions. They could affect my family, friends and colleagues if I'm not careful. However, new restrictions create new possibilities. I don't think anyone can stop freedom of expression. They can restrict some kinds of behavior, but they can't restrict one's desire to express oneself.

CAMILLE How are you coping with the situation?

AI There is always going to be some limitation, good or bad. Under any kind of regulation, an artist can always find his creative space. Creativity

itself grows out of a restricted condition. I don't regard limitation strictly as a negative. When one is denied an immediate sharing of artwork and public commentary, the silenced voice becomes another kind of creative form. Silence itself has its own critical force.

CAMILLE I guess you must have foreseen this turn of events?

AI Well, the outside world is always changing. As an artist, I have to be able to adapt to any limitation and find an effective new way to express myself.

others. I try to reflect both points of view, hoping to convey my personal desires and, at the same time, the actual crisis in reality.

CAMILLE You've succeeded in that. Your words and actions have reached an incredibly broad audience and exerted a powerful influence on the world.

AI I think an artist's work sets its own condition. It redefines us and our sociopolitical situation. I always seek to protect freedom of expression. That doesn't mean that we can achieve total

support from the public. I think that's the most important work I ever did.

CAMILLE You wear multiple hats—sculptor, conceptual artist, photographer, architect, "interview artist," and social and cultural critic. Which role do you prefer? What kind of artwork do you most wish to create in the future?

AI I'd rather not think of myself so much as an artist. I always hope that one day I can forget all of those titles and live as a man who just enjoys the present moment. But, unfortunately, that's too luxurious. I have to think about all kinds of possibilities and extreme conditions, though I can't really predict the future.

CAMILLE Some people call you the Chinese Andy Warhol.

AI I don't see that. No, I'd rather say that Andy Warhol is the American Ai Weiwei.

CAMILLE I've heard that you don't want to do domestic architectural design anymore. I guess only bigger projects, like designing a museum, would attract you now?

AI Not necessarily. No matter how big or how small a project, if I like it, I want to work on it.

CAMILLE Paralleling China's economic boom, Chinese art has become very hot in recent years. Yet critics say that some of the work is too derivative.

What's your opinion?

AI I think they're right. Contemporary Chinese art often lacks strong originality, since the basic thinking comes from the West. Today there is no real discussion in this society about esthetics, art or design in relation to moral and philosophical issues. The lack of free criticism puts its own special cast on Chinese art.

CAMILLE Some Chinese artists have become very famous and rich lately. I guess they prefer to focus on selling their work rather than challenging authority the way they did in the early '90s, when they had nothing.

AI I'm disappointed that they are too timid to challenge the status quo, to use their work to express a desire for social change and free expression.

CAMILLE Not everybody has your openness. Yesterday when you left, I talked to your cleaning lady. She told me that she had worked for you since 2002, except for two years when she went back to her hometown in Anhui province. She returned to Beijing with her husband and kid, and they all have lived here in the house ever since, along with some of your associates.



CAMILLE Do you plan to work in some more traditional art form, since you're no longer allowed to do what you used to do?

AI My work is always related to aspects of real life. It doesn't necessarily have to be painting, sculpture or even installation. Our conversation could be called a form of art.

CAMILLE Are you working on any new projects?

AI At the moment, I'm doing a lot of thinking and writing.

CAMILLE Well, I hope we visitors leave you enough time. Some people, especially in China, say that contemporary art is too self-indulgent, too abstract and conceptual, but you plunge into common people's real life, especially their problems, and try to have a direct effect.

AI First of all, I'm a human being, with a right to live as I wish and to express myself. While I have my own individuality and uniqueness, I also share, obviously, general emotional characteristics with

freedom; we have to face reality, to deal with restrictions. Yes, I try to share my work and communicate with a broader audience, especially people who are not familiar with art, who have never even heard the word "art" in their lives. I believe art is for people who have sensitivity and imagination, not just for museum professionals, dealers and critics. Art history has to be rewritten by people who can give it new definitions.

CAMILLE Which one of your recent works do you like the most?

AI My work of trying to identify the more than 5,000 students who died in the Sichuan earthquake. One of the finished pieces [*Namelist of Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizen Investigation, 2008*] looks a bit like social research. But through the Internet, through volunteers, we overcame severe police restrictions and threats. We then used the Internet to get complete coverage and exposure of the event to the audience, winning great

"THE SILENCED VOICE BECOMES ANOTHER KIND OF CREATIVE FORM. SILENCE ITSELF HAS ITS OWN CRITICAL FORCE."

Her husband works as a renovator, and her child goes to school nearby. The cook's family also lives here in your compound. It's very rare in China that the people who work for you live in your home with their entire families from the countryside.

AI Why not? We're essentially the same. There is not much difference between them and me. In fact, some of them are very smart, but they haven't had the same opportunities. I grew up in the countryside in Xinjiang province.⁴ Most of my old classmates stayed there for their entire life. Some passed away, some are fighting with illnesses. A lot of them retired and became old. But we were all the same before, only I had a chance to get out of there and do what I like.⁵

CAMILLE Indeed, opportunity is vital, but not everybody can do what you're doing.

AI Well, artists don't produce anything useful or practical for society. Think about it: we just express our opinions and our emotions through language or artworks. We're not better, only different. I think we can afford to shoulder some responsibility.

CAMILLE You don't just say it, Weiwei; you do it. That's why people love you. I saw you have many visitors, and I assume you have lots of friends.

AI Yes, there are always people coming to visit. I appreciate those who support me, but I have very few close friends. I think that's very nor-

mal. Every person has his own life, with his own needs, beliefs and problems. I don't have high expectations and don't ask too much. With family, the same goes. It's best to treat things with a light heart.

CAMILLE Your mother must have been worried to death last spring, with no news from or about you. Would you ever restrain yourself for the sake of her health?

AI My mom looked very frail when I returned. At her age, she can't afford to be frightened and living in anxiety about my safety. As her son, I have to consider her well-being. However, sometimes I can't help myself. I'm quite impulsive.

CAMILLE Yes. You spoke out recently on Twitter for your associates and your friends.⁶

AI I have a family and a mother; my associates also have families and parents. They got in trouble because of me. While I'm considering the feelings of my own family, I also have to consider the feelings of their families. As a responsible person, I have to speak for them. It's only human.

CAMILLE You made some pretty strong statements lately about living conditions in Beijing.

AI I said something, but when the news came out, the media added provocative subheadings, implying things that I didn't say. I understand that reporters and editors need to grab attention, but sometimes they cause me, my family and my colleagues unnecessary trouble.

THROUGH THE GLASS DOOR, we could see a few people waiting for Weiwei, and his assistants had some papers for him to read. We had to end our conversation. Weiwei gave me a bear hug. His belly was smaller than the last time I met him, in Miami, but his hug was firmer. I said, "Take care." He smiled a little. It was his first smile of our meeting. ○

All endnotes in this article are editorial interpolations.

1 A few weeks later, the pollution would cause six highways to be closed and 200 flights to be canceled in one day.

2 Besides being a Duchampian tease about authenticity, the first word of the Fake Design company name sounds, in its Mandarin pronunciation, roughly like a drawn-out, two-syllable version of the English "fuck." **3** Tall and striking, Lu Qing, herself an artist, has posed with her skirt raised in Tiananmen Square for one of Ai Weiwei's most memorable photographs (*June 1994*) and as an attending figure in Li Zhangyang's sculptural group depicting Ai as a decadent, semi-reclining potentate coddled by admirers (*Foot Washing*, 2007). She has also, as nominal head of the Fake Design company, dealt with Beijing police and tax authorities during her husband's detention. **4** During the purges of the late 1950s, Ai Weiwei's father, the famed poet Ai Qing (1910-1996), was sent with his family to the remote Xinjiang autonomous region, where he was set to menial tasks—including cleaning public toilets—and forbidden to publish. After two decades, in 1978, he was declared "rehabilitated" and returned to Beijing to be treated thereafter as a cultural hero of the People's Republic. In 1979, he became vice-chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association. **5** After studying briefly at the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, Ai Weiwei joined the Stars, China's first avant-garde art group, which held two landmark exhibitions at the beginning of the nation's Opening Up period. In 1981, he went to New York, where he took courses at Parsons The New School for Design and lived a bohemian life on the Lower East Side for 12 years. Upon his return to China in 1993, his career as an artist-provocateur began in earnest. **6** Despite official restraints on his commentary, Ai Weiwei last August tweeted messages lamenting the treatment of four associates (his driver, his accountant, a studio worker and a reporter) who were taken into custody at the time of his own detention.

J.J. Camille is the pen name of a Chinese-born writer living in New York.

This spread, two interior views of Ai Weiwei's residence.

Right, studio with pet cat and Forever brand bicycle elements from the circular installation *Forever*, 2003.

Opposite, living quarters with *Safe Sex*, 1986, raincoat, condom, wooden box.

Photos Ai Weiwei/Fake Design.

