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INTERVIEW: Ai Weiwei on His Hectic Digital Life



Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Photo collage is made up of Ai Weiwei's Instagram feeds

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BEIJING — The 56-year-old Chinese artist **Ai Weiwei** leads a diligent life offline, something that contributes to his phenomenal productivity.

“I get up around six or seven every morning, and I’m always the first one in the studio. I will have done several things before anyone else comes in,” says Ai.

Typically, he spends his mornings surfing the Internet, arranging works, and meeting visitors, while in the afternoon he goes for a walk and spends time with his family. Additionally, throughout the day he constantly posts messages on **Twitter**, something he has described as part of his artistic practice.

Before Ai was a microblogger, he was a prolific blogger. He started in 2005 with a site hosted by **Sina**, which became one of the most trafficked blogs in China before it was

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shut down in 2009. The following year he published a collection of his essay-length posts entitled *Time and Place*.

“I value writing very highly,” Ai says. “To write clearly about what I have experienced is an essential thing for me.”

Since his blog was shut down, sending messages and replies on Twitter has become a part of Ai’s daily routine. Subjects cover everything from when to have a swim to the behavior of the United States’ National Security Agency. Summarizing the subjects canvassed is impossible — the subjects are too complicated, chaotic and fragmented, traits often attributed to contemporary life, especially in China. Yet Ai denies that social media is a way to dodge or mediate existence.

“Life is something you cannot avoid. If anyone can avoid his own life, then he must be a great person,” Ai says.

“Life can be divided into three situations: enjoyment, apathy, and misery. These situations appear in everyone’s life alternately.”

Of the three, Ai says he always felt apathy and boredom most strongly, and so he keeps looking for new things to do.

These days Ai also uses **Instagram**, where he has uploaded more than 1,100 pictures since 2011. Unlike Twitter, Instagram is not blocked by Chinese censors.

Ai’s Instagram feed includes pictures of lawyer Liu Xiaoyuan with one of Ai’s trademark buzz cuts, pictures from an Elton John concert in China, self shots, and countless pictures of his cats.

In his self-portraits, Ai looks gentle and innocuous, far from the radical portrayed in local media coverage. When asked why he shoots so many selfies, Ai says, “This is not about narcissism, but self-awareness.”

During the interview, he never stops taking photos of the two cats that are lying on the table. Ai says the cats always lay on the table when he is interviewed, something he finds confusing.

“Are they national security guards? Or are they’re just interested in sound?” Ai asks.

When the interview finishes, Ai posts his latest cat pictures online.