

ART REVIEW

## The Message Over the Medium



Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times

A detail of "He Xie," an installation of ceramic crabs at the Hirshhorn Museum that refers to a dinner celebrating Ai Weiwei's studio shortly before its razing by the Chinese government. [More Photos »](#)

By ROBERTA SMITH  
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WASHINGTON — Ai Weiwei, the lionhearted Chinese artist, architect and activist who is having his first American museum survey here at the Hirshhorn, might be the world's most famous living artist. But going by the Hirshhorn show, "Ai Weiwei: According to What?," it would be inaccurate to say that Mr. Ai's fame rests primarily on his visual achievement, even factoring in his role in helping the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron design the Beijing Olympic stadium popularly known as the [Bird's Nest](#).

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Over the past several years, the portly, wild-haired Mr. Ai has emerged as an eloquent and seemingly unsilenceable voice for freedom, speaking truth to China's repressive regime as few others in that country have. His most significant contribution to history, already noted by other art critics, may be the scathingly critical blog that he maintained from 2006 until 2009, when the Chinese authorities shut it down. His postings were recently [anthologized in a book](#) (though not in Chinese) that is a riveting study in courage, blunt reasoning and political outrage.

Mr. Ai, who seems to lose his sense of humor only rarely, has characterized his increasingly dangerous jousting with the Chinese government as a kind of performance art. Things intensified especially in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake; he began to agitate for an investigation after thousands

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of children died when [their shoddily built schools collapsed](#) while surrounding buildings remained intact.

In 2009 he was beaten by the Chinese police. In 2010, a large new studio that he had built in Shanghai at the local government's enthusiastic invitation was condemned, and later torn down, ostensibly for code violations. In 2011 he was imprisoned for 81 days, accused of tax evasion and distributing pornography. He was forbidden to leave Beijing, have contact with journalists or use the Internet. While staying close to home, he cultivated his Web site (which was shut down last spring), continued his regular [Twitter postings](#), spoke freely to the press and [wrote a bitter assessment of life in Beijing](#) for Newsweek. In the latest round of legal wrangling, he has refused to pay the back taxes and fines imposed by the government, which is holding his passport, making it impossible for him to attend the openings of the Hirshhorn show or the [two-site exhibition that begins on Saturday](#) at the Mary Boone Gallery in New York.

Tellingly, the opening label of the Hirshhorn show identifies Mr. Ai as “one of China's most prolific and provocative contemporary artists” rather than one of its greatest or most original. Too often in this exhibition, the objects come off as a window dressing that is all but overshadowed by the celebrity, pronouncements and predicaments of the artist himself. They suggest that he doesn't make great art as much as make great use — amplified by digital technology — of the role of the artist as public intellectual and social conscience.

Mr. Ai was born to a fair amount of political awareness in 1957. Two years later, during the Cultural Revolution, his father, Ai Qing, one of China's best-known poets, was sent to be “re-educated” by cleaning toilets in a rural village. In 1976, as the political climate thawed, the family returned to Beijing, where the younger Mr. Ai enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy and joined Stars, a nascent group of subversive young artists. In 1981 he traveled to New York; over the next dozen years he briefly attended the Parsons School of Design, took thousands of photographs and lived primarily in the East Village, where protests over housing and squatters' rights further sharpened his political awareness. There are nearly 100 of his New York photographs in this exhibition; they show his cohort of Chinese friends, various demonstrations and random street scenes. They also include many pictures of Mr. Ai himself that form a portrait of an ambitious, self-assured young man who very much intended to be somebody.

Mr. Ai returned to China in 1993 to be near his ailing father, who died in 1996. He became active in the Beijing artists' neighborhood that called itself the East Village, a scene that he also documented extensively in photographs. Often the camera was his main artistic tool. He photographed his hand making a rude middle-finger gesture to world monuments from Tiananmen Square to the White House, and documented provocative if rather juvenile acts of iconoclasm, like dropping and shattering a valuable Han dynasty vase.

As China turned increasingly to capitalism, art became one way to look progressive, and Mr. Ai's star began to rise, both at home and abroad. He became a member of the cultural elite, with privileged access to materials and cheap labor, of which he took full advantage, while also becoming increasingly outspoken in his political views.

Despite his role in designing the Bird's Nest, he denounced the Olympics as party propaganda and was even more galvanized by the Sichuan earthquake and the government's refusal to investigate or even acknowledge the disproportionate number of deaths among schoolchildren. Mr. Ai visited the Sichuan region; his somber photographs of the schools' rubble surrounded by intact structures are among the Hirshhorn show's standouts. He also organized volunteers to gather the names, ages and schools of dead and missing children, posting a list of more than 5,000 on his blog just before it was shut down.

The Hirshhorn show (which will travel to the Brooklyn Museum in April 2014) is subtitled “According to What?,” after a [painting by Jasper Johns](#); in this context the phrase conjures the debilitating irrationality of life under totalitarianism. The exhibition is dominated by sculptures and

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installation pieces from the last decade; they conform to the familiar, fashionable international genre of handsome, Conceptually generated artworks that elaborate on the tried-and-true tradition of the Duchamp ready-made and the Johnsian remade ready-made, often using charged materials and objects. Sometimes Mr. Ai's versions are simple one-liners, like a neolithic vase painted with the Coca-Cola logo in Andy Warhol silver. (He has [a similar work](#) in "Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

A bit more visually striking are a suite of Han vases, dipped in bright Pop Art colors. Simultaneously mawkish and opaque is a large snake coiled on the ceiling, made of (new) schoolchildren's backpacks. The list of the dead children, in Chinese characters, that papers the wall of one gallery may not be much to look at, but at least the deluge of information, signifying lost lives, reverberates.

Like the snake and the list, numerous other works come with elaborate back stories comprehended more through label reading than through looking. "Kippe" is a large, imposing block pieced together from scraps of lustrous wood that, the label informs us, comes from dismantled Qing dynasty temples. The large "Cube Light," a kitschy amalgam of gold glass crystals and shiny metal, is described as a re-examination of Minimalism inspired by a chandelier from Sergei Eisenstein's film "October," but the overpowering impression is of something custom-made for a high-end department store.

"Straight," a handsome expanse of steel rebar, is just another Post-Minimalist variation on Richard Serra until you learn that the material comes from the collapsed schools of Sichuan and has been carefully straightened. (One of the works in the Mary Boone shows will present some of the rebar in its twisted state, arranged on the floor and mirrored in a same-size photograph that evokes a drip painting by Jackson Pollock.)

And a pile of highly realistic crabs in glazed porcelain looks like mindless skill gone wild, but, again, a label recounts the dinner that Mr. Ai gave at his Shanghai studio in 2010 as a sardonic nod to its imminent destruction by the authorities (who prevented him from attending, although 800 others did). The dinner consisted of piles of river crabs, partly because they are a seasonal delicacy, and partly because the Chinese word for them, he xie, also means "harmony," the maintaining of which is frequently the official reason, and by now also a code word, for state censorship. (Another part of this work will be on view at Mary Boone.)

One of the few pieces at the Hirshhorn whose meaning is relatively implicit in its form is a Qing dynasty table that Mr. Ai split down the middle, then reassembled with the halves of its top perpendicular to each other. It can stand only if two legs are on the floor and two are on the wall, resulting in an inherently martial posture that resembles a squat wrestler caught between a rock and a hard place, straining so as not to be crushed by them.

A problem with a standard museum exhibition like this for Mr. Ai is that he is probably at his artistic best on big, international stages, executing works of imposing size yet intimate scale that mass together relatively small things to convey a palpable sense of humanity. This was evident with the sea of 100 million [hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds](#) that covered much of the floor of Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London in 2010, and also the 1,001 antique Chinese chairs, part of a work called "Fairytale," scattered throughout the galleries of Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, in 2007, quietly insinuating an ancient Eastern culture into a show of mostly Western contemporary art. Today we need all the great art and all the political agitation we can get. But it may be too much to expect that both will emanate with any frequency from the same person. By now, Mr. Ai's art has helped carry him beyond art, where he is definitely somebody.

**WHEN AND WHERE** Through Feb. 24. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, on the National Mall, Washington.

**MORE INFORMATION** (202) 633-1000, [hirshhorn.si.edu](http://hirshhorn.si.edu).

**WHERE TO EAT IN WASHINGTON** Mitsitam Native Foods Cafe, [mitsitamcafe.com](http://mitsitamcafe.com); Paul, [paul-usa.com](http://paul-usa.com).

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