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LETTER FROM CHINA

Dispatches by Evan Osnos.[« China and the State of the Union | Main](#)

JANUARY 27, 2012

AI WEIWEI AT HOME, IN ABSENTIA

Posted by Evan Osnos



The branches are bare outside Ai Weiwei's house this time of year, which leaves the police cameras bulging from the lampposts like overripe coconuts. Sometimes, the temptation is overwhelming. Ai Weiwei ended up at the police station a couple of weeks ago, accused of lobbing stones and "attacking a security camera." (When word got out, one of his fans circulated his concern online: "Was the camera badly injured? Did it need a checkup? Perhaps, a CT scan?")

Osnos, Evan. "Ai Weiwei at Home, in Absentia." *New Yorker*, January 27, 2012.
<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/01/ai-weiwei-at-home-in-absentia.html>

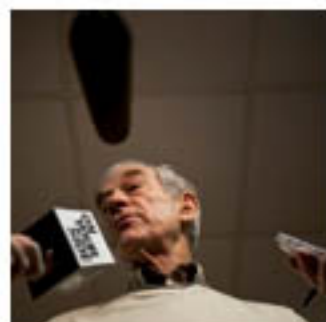
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Ai Weiwei At Home, In Absentia (1/27 11:07)

It has become Ai's new routine. "The police come every week or I have to go to the station—for education," he told me one recent morning, at the giant dining-room table, winter sun pouring in from the south. At our feet, Danny, the studio's deaf and ancient cocker spaniel, was listing around the room like a drunk. Ai cracked the door and the dog ambled across the yard to the studio, where the artist's assistants are back at work, after a fashion. Designs cover the tables and walls, much as they always have; it's an approximation of normalcy, except that Ai lives in a kind of legal purgatory, free to make art but barred from leaving the country. It is one of the terms of his release from detention last June, after he spent two and a half months in jail on tax charges.

"I have to stay in Beijing until June 22nd," he said. "Every time I go out I have to pronounce to them where I have to go and who I have to meet. I basically obey their orders because it doesn't mean anything. I also want to tell them I'm not afraid. I'm not secretive. They can follow me or whatever. But to leave China? I think that's a political decision they have to make. Of course, I have rights and am entitled to travel. But let's see how they will play that. I'm not eager to leave or not to leave."

The day before we spoke, the dissident author Yu Jie, who had been under intense pressure, boarded a plane with his family and landed in the U.S. After being repeatedly prevented from leaving the country, Yu received permission to leave after he signed a pledge not to engage in "illegal and unconstitutional" activities abroad. Ai saw it as an attempt to "release some pressure."

"Internally, since they don't have a way to discuss issues or communicate, it's really a deadlock for them, and that keeps creating pressure. They had beaten him—Yu Jie—terribly, because he is related to Christianity, and that is what they hate the most or are scared of the most. They are scared of any form of unity. They wouldn't be scared of me if I don't get on Twitter, because on Twitter I can form a community. But, as individuals, they don't care about you. So they crash down on people quite terribly, and subject people to abuse. I don't think Yu Jie could stay any longer. In that kind of situation, you just have to say, 'This is not possible,'" Ai said.

AM)

China and the State of the Union (1/25 8:32 AM)

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Adam Gopnik: The Pre-Super Bowl Lamentations of a Jets Fan (1/30 4:23 PM)

DESK PICK



Evan Osnos: Ai Weiwei's seeds of dissent.

Osnos, Evan. "Ai Weiwei at Home, in Absentia." *New Yorker*, January 27, 2012.
<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/01/ai-weiwei-at-home-in-absentia.html>

As we talked, Ai's wife, Lu Qing, wound a bright red scarf around her shoulders and bundled up against the cold. She is a private person, an artist unaccustomed to the spotlight. The last year has thrust her into an unfamiliar role, speaking publicly on her husband's behalf, responding to questions, advocating. Her name is on the studio's legal papers, so she was swept up into interrogations for the tax case, though she was never detained. She half-opened the front door, clutching to her chest a manila folder of documents. Ai watched her pack up. "She is going to submit our appeal to the tax office," Ai said. "Today is the second part, the last day we have to submit it."

Lu Qing turned back to signal that she was leaving. She paused. "You okay?" her husband said. She nodded, gave a tight smile, and pulled the door shut.

In the months since his arrest, Ai's tax case has become a legal burlesque. When the government served him a \$2.4 million bill for tax evasion, to be paid in full within fifteen days, his fans began inundating him with donations, delivered with creative flourishes. They wrapped cash around fruit and left it on his doorstep; they folded hundred-yuan notes into paper planes and sailed them over the wall into his compound. What began as a joke ended up as collateral: 8.45 million Yuan, enough to pay a bond to have the right to appeal the case.

"That's the law, but it's not a right law because it means that poor people can never make an appeal," Ai told me. "But people gave us money, so we have to go through all the details with them, and that," he said, grinning, "gave us an opportunity to openly discuss this in the public and leave a record for history, a strong struggle with the tax bureau so later they will not do the same thing to other people. They never thought we would do that. They've never had anyone do that. The first paper we submitted was stamped '0001.' It was almost the end of the year, and it was stamped '0001.'"

But, I asked, is the tax bureau his real counterpart in this, or does his case have its origins somewhere else in the government?

NEW YORKER

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“This is something I’m always wondering. Because now people are putting out a lot of information, saying, oh, some official’s staff is saying that if they knew it was going to happen, they wouldn’t have allowed it, that it was a mistake. But I don’t really believe it. It’s some kind of political struggle. But who is using what? You will never know. It’s a struggle between them. It’s a secret.” He has his theories—mostly, that the arrest was not an impulsive decision, but one that took preparation and approval from high up.

“The first person who came to question me said he doesn’t know me, he’s just been assigned the job, and he had to go on the Internet to find out who I am. And I could tell from his questions, he had zero knowledge about me. But then another person arrived, and he said, ‘We prepared for a year. We checked your background for a long time, and we had a very difficult decision whether to arrest you or not. But we decided we had to.’” Ai tended to believe him. “But that person? I never saw him again. I always asked to see him again, but nobody ever seemed to have an answer.”

Ai’s cell phone rumbled and he answered the call. He smiled. Mary Boone, the gallery owner, was on the line. It was late at night in New York, but she wanted to tell him how his show was going. On the floor of her Chelsea space on West 24th Street, she had Ai’s hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds, three million of them, which had been crafted by ceramic artisans in the pottery town of Jingdezhen. (The show is open until February 4th.) They are part of an ocean of seeds, one hundred million in all, that he originally unveiled in a 2010 installation at the Tate Modern in London. At the Tate, they formed a vast gray swamp, filling the cavernous Turbine Hall, but in New York, after two eventful years, they have taken on a different meaning. They are arranged in a rectangle with severe, angled corners. In the *Times*, Roberta Smith wrote that the “unruly ocean has been downsized to something more like a reflecting pool. It also suggests a kind of memorial plinth, a monument to the palpable absence of Mr. Ai.”

As is often the case for Ai Weiwei, his work and his life have become hard to differentiate. The seeds have found their way into the tax case. “When the seeds began to show, people started to ask: Can we have some? I responded very casually, ‘Whoever wants some, just give me an address and I’ll send them to you.’ We received about a thousand requests. And, since then, it has become a kind of movement. We’ve sent out several hundred thousand. This is amazing. They call it the ‘Sunflower Seeds Party.’ The party can be read as a party or a Party. And

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young people love it. They say, 'The girl at school I loved for so long, and I could never really speak to her, I made an earring out of a seed and gave it to her.' Another one said, he gave it to his parents. One said the seed will be the first gift to my unborn kid. And someone else said, by the year two-thousand-and-something, the seeds will have life coming out of them. They call them seeds of freedom. It's very interesting that people need something to carry their fantasy."

Online, the seeds became a proxy for Ai himself. "They talk about seeds and it moved like a wave. They couldn't talk about me and they couldn't talk about the government, but when they talked about seeds, nobody could do anything about it, because they aren't talking about anything—just sunflower seeds!" Once the tax bill arrived, the two were joined. "We'd been giving these seeds for free and suddenly everyone is saying, 'We want to pay something.' So we set up account and borrowed money and then it will be returned to you. The Web site allowed it to continue for three days. My phone rang like crazy all night. Thirty thousand people. Nine million [Chinese yuan]. A young girl walked in with a backpack full of money and said where do you want this? It was the savings for a car and now I can't buy the car. It's yours.'"

He said: "That was all because of the seeds. It introduced people to a kind of humor, the little possibilities."

Ai Weiwei is everywhere and nowhere this season. At Sundance last week, the documentary "Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry" premiered to a standing ovation. "A year ago he would have been here," the filmmaker Alison Klayman told the crowd. Ai had hoped to join then by a video link, but it was scrapped out of concern for the consequences.

Before I left his house, I asked him he thinks he'll win his tax case. "No," he said flatly. "We're only winning by revealing the truth. We can win in a sense of so many people beginning to understand. They will understand that you cannot win a case, but at least you can say, 'I have to fight because it's related to at least thirty thousand supporters.'"

Photograph by Ian Teh/Panos.

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