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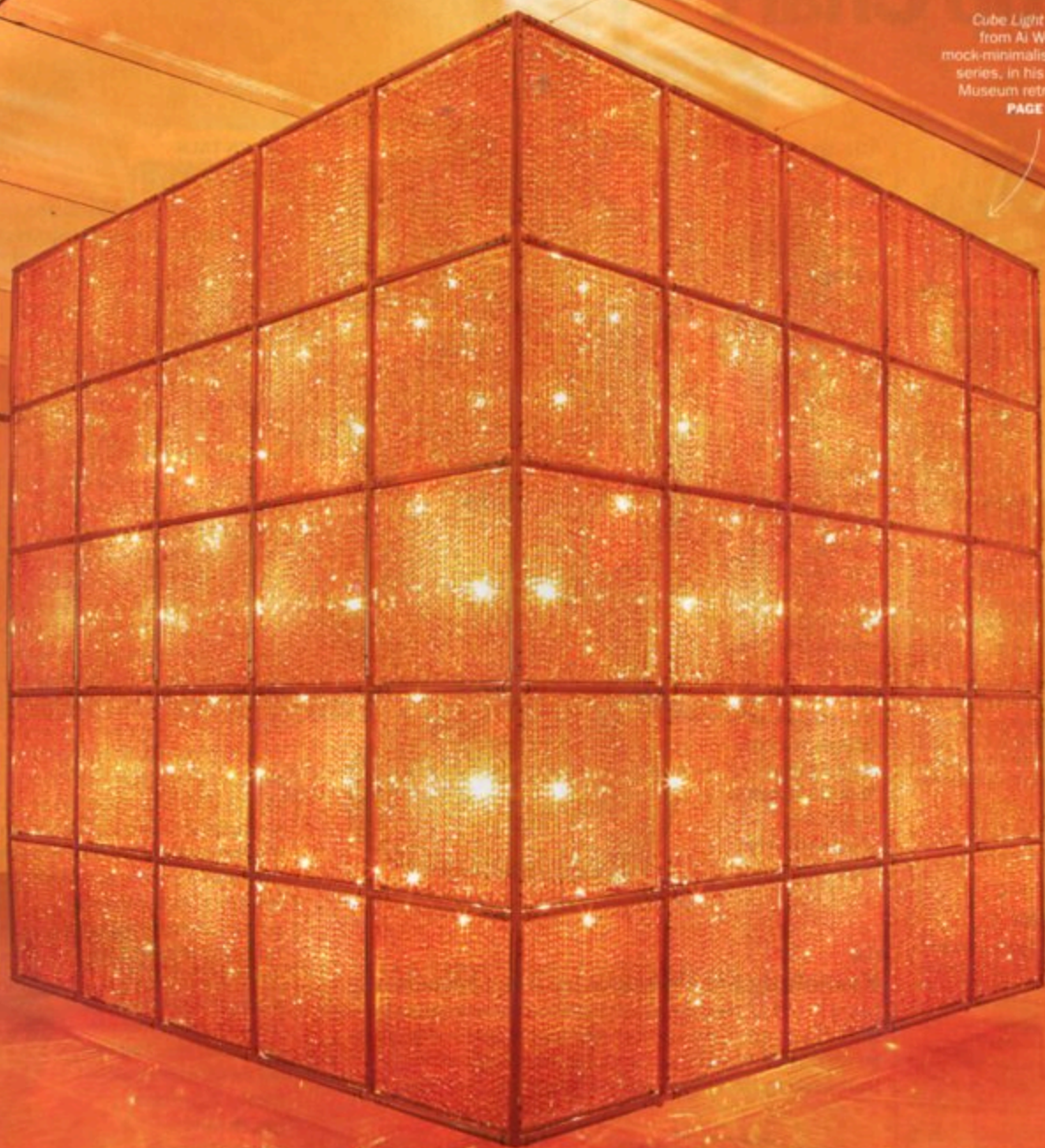
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Cube Light (2008),  
from Ai Weiwei's  
mock-minimalist Chandelier  
series, in his Hirshhorn  
Museum retrospective  
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# The Culture

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unadaptable novels; 007 by the numbers



# Cultural Revolution

## Ai Weiwei revives what China forgets

By Richard Lacayo

IT'S CUSTOMARY BY NOW TO DESCRIBE Ai Weiwei as a dissident artist—which he is. His body of work is a decades-long critique of China's headlong attempt to become a modern economy without becoming a free society. If anything, he's more famous lately for his activism than for his art. And no doubt he's fine with that. What you learn from his new retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington—his first in the U.S.—is that increasingly his art is inseparable from his activism. His work of recent



1. *Straight* (2008–12). To summon feelings about the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, Ai and his assistants salvaged bent steel rebar from the rubble of collapsed schools, then painstakingly straightened it

2. *Forever* (2003). Ai joined Forever-brand bicycles into a wheelhouse that riffs on a famous Marcel Duchamp readymade of a bicycle wheel on a stool

dynasty urn and letting it smash, as if to say, Who cares anymore? Later he used timber from demolished temples from the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) to build maps of China. It was the work of a man fluent in the usual streams of contemporary art—minimalism, conceptualism, installation art—and applying them to the contradictions of a communist state going capitalist at warp speed.

In all of this, Ai was critical of the new China but not enough to bring on cops with billy clubs. Things changed after the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province, where more than 5,000 children died in collapses of shoddily constructed schools. When authorities refused to look into the building failures or even acknowledge the death toll, Ai lent his support to a citizens' investigation by ordinary Chinese people. Consequences followed. In 2009 police in the city of Chengdu severely beat him, leading to a near fatal cerebral hemorrhage a few weeks later. The government shut down the invaluable blog he used to preach the gospel of human rights. Last year he was seized by the police and held for 81 days. The authorities insist they went after him for tax evasion, not for political reasons. That claim is, to put it mildly, contrived.

Ai was born to be an outsider. Not long after Ai's birth in 1957, his father Ai Qing, a prominent poet, was denounced as a bourgeois rightist and exiled with his family to the provincial northwest. Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing in 1976, then five years later moved to the U.S., eventually to New York City. During more than a decade in Manhattan, he came to grips with the work of Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns, hung out with Allen Ginsberg and saw the AIDS warriors of ACT UP in action.

Ai may have learned something from ACT UP's famous battle cry, Silence = Death. The Hirshhorn show begins with a memorial to the earthquake victims that breaks the official silence around them in the simplest possible way. It's a vast wall chart listing their names, birth dates and other particulars that Ai's investigation pieced together in the face of government stonewalling. Is it art? He knows that Duchamp settled that question long ago: art can be anything an artist does, a doctrine that can invest even a dogged search for truth with a touch of the metaphysical. From speakers above the wall chart, voices pronounce each name, one at a time, a sound-art piece

years is a succession of blows against the empire, a sustained demand that China's government take seriously ideas like human rights and freedom of speech. It's a brave and essential stand, even if you come away more impressed by the man than by some of what he's made.

When Ai, 55, first gained attention in the mid-1990s, it was for art that cast a cold eye on China's willingness to despoil its past in its rush to the future. He famously photographed himself dropping what he said was a 2,000-year-old Han-

for which Ai recruited people via the Internet. That's art too.

When Ai steps away from the issues that engage him as intensely, his work can feel underconceived. He likes to take useful objects and render them useless. For *Table with Two Legs on the Wall* (2008), he rebuilds a Qing-dynasty table into exactly that and arrives at a nifty image of the past struggling to position itself in a new world. When he aggregates a bunch of Qing stools into a standing circle, as he does in *Grapes* (2010), it produces... a standing circle.

But increasingly, everything he does is focused on things that matter to him deeply. One of the most powerful works in the show is *Straight* (2008–12), a minimalist floor piece made of 38 tons of steel rebar—thousands of metal rods that had been embedded in the concrete of the collapsed schools in Sichuan. Over a period of years, Ai and his assistants retrieved the twisted rods and painstakingly straightened each one. Arranged across a gallery floor in shallow, undulating piles, they form an enigmatic topography. If the unbending implies an attempt to deny the memory of the earthquakes, the rusted rods lined up like so many little corpses also pulls the tragedy back into historical memory and gives it literal weight, the kind that won't just go away.

To the immense frustration of the Chinese government, Ai won't go away either. During his detention last year, they lifted his passport, so he wasn't able to be in Washington for the opening of his show at the Hirshhorn. (In D.C. through Feb. 24, the show moves later to Indianapolis, Miami, Toronto and Brooklyn.) No matter. If he wants to, he'll find a way to use even that latest obstacle to his freedom in his work, which is increasingly just the physical by-product of his most recent confrontation with the authorities.

That would describe *Brain Inflation* (2009)—paired ink-jet prints of his hospital brain scans after the cerebral hemorrhage. Silence may equal death, the work tells us, but speaking up comes with its own risks. The painful absurdities of life for a Chinese dissident should provide Ai with no end of material. But though his activism may sometimes seem like a kind of performance art, the consequences are never less than real. ■



## Q&A with Ai Weiwei

TIME's Austin Ramzy recently met with Ai at his Beijing studio for a wide-ranging discussion on subjects that included his 81-day detention last year on suspicion of tax evasion, which was widely seen as retaliation for his public efforts to promote human rights and government accountability in China





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What's the latest news in the government's legal case against you? On June 22, the end date of my one-year period of probation, the police told me, "Your case is closed. You're a free man. We have nothing to charge you with because you behaved very well this year," which, I admit, was a

surprise. I think I violated every rule they set, but you can see their attitude was to be finished. Maybe it became clear to them that we are not an agent of any foreign interest group that wanted to subvert state power. If you were given back your passport and allowed to travel, do you worry

about being able to return? There are so many cases of people being blocked from returning. I always think, Why should they do that? It is not good for them. It is not good for anybody. Every decision I make, I always try to say the opposition has the possibility to change. Otherwise,

why would you still fight? How did your years in the U.S. change you, and how did they affect your art? The American experience influenced my understanding of individuality, basic human rights, freedom of expression and the rights and responsibility of citizens. Is your citizens'

investigation project a work of art? It has clear content and a very specific expression. And it reaches people. It is hard to shake. It is very solid. It makes young people recognize themselves as a group and have a new way of looking at political conditions. And it exists in many forms—sound, documentary. There

were two documentary films about it. To me, it is art. Do you plan to make work related to your days in detention? It always comes later. When you give it some thought and it starts to come back, it asks you to do something. I am sure work will come out of this. We've already started that part.



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3. *Grapes* (2010). Ai often likes to use found objects, like these Qing-dynasty stools, in ways that deprive them of their functionality—so much the better to draw them into the realm of art.

4. *He Xie* (2010–). The title means "river crab," and the piece consists of 3,200 porcelain crabs. But the words are also soundalikes for the Chinese term for harmonious, used in the Chinese Communist Party slogan "the realization of a harmonious society"—a notion that has become a pretext for censorship. In November 2010, Ai served river crabs to hundreds of supporters who visited his Shanghai studio before authorities demolished it.

5. *Table with Two Legs on the Wall* (2008). Ai sawed a Qing table in half, then rebuilt it in a curious new configuration, perhaps to speak to the idea of the past's finding its way in an unfamiliar present.