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## LETTER FROM CHINA

*Dispatches by Evan Osnos.*

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AI WEIWEI AND THE ART OF DEMOLITION

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In early 2008, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei received an unusual call from the Shanghai city government, inviting him to build a studio in a stretch of grape farms on the city's edge, a project that might help Shanghai keep pace with Beijing's emergence as the cultural capital of China. Ai, whom I profiled last year in the magazine, was puzzled. He lived in Beijing and he was already staking out an increasingly rambunctious role as an activist and critic of Chinese-government power. He was wary that someone, somewhere in the bureaucracy, would put an end to this proposed new studio.

“There are different types of land that can be used for agriculture and some for commercial use, and this is often used as an excuse to stop things from happening,” Ai told me, when I called him today. But the official invitation seemed sincere. “An official traveled to Beijing and convinced me, and I thought he's a nice guy, and on paper, from the beginning, they said this project was lawful. I kept asking, where is the evidence? But the government makes land as lawful as they want it to be.”

Ai and his architects—whose previous work has included a key role in designing the “Bird's Nest,” China's iconic Olympic stadium—set to work on turning a decrepit warehouse into a complex that would be not only a studio but a hub for visiting artists. “It took us a year to design and another year to build. And during that year they encouraged us to go faster,” he said. At the same time, Ai was involved in a parallel, very different project that was also gathering speed: In the summer of 2008, he began writing about the case of Yang Jia, a Beijing man who had accused the Shanghai police of mistreating him and then attacked a police station, killing six officers with a knife. Yang

was eventually convicted and executed, but his name became a byword of dissent among those in China who sympathized with his disaffection and believed his prosecution had been rammed through the system. Ai wrote more than seventy blog posts on the subject of Yang Jia. “The concealment of the facts and the distortion of impartial justice harms the most basic rights of Chinese citizens,” Ai wrote. “This is undoubtedly the biggest thing to happen in China in 2008, far more important than the Olympics, because this is relevant to every one of us.” Ai also made a documentary about the bizarre case of Feng Zhenghu, an activist who spent more than three months wandering Tokyo’s Narita Airport when Shanghai officials refused to stamp his passport and let him back into the country.

By last July, Ai had finished construction in Shanghai and was poised to open. All of a sudden, he received another round of paperwork. “We get this paper and it says that the studio has to be destroyed. I thought it was some kind of mistake,” Ai told me. The same official came to see him again. “He said, ‘Weiwei, I am sorry but there is nothing that can stop it.’ They came up with a reason but it doesn’t make sense. They told me that the use of the land is not lawful.” Ai went on, “There was never any paper to explain what had changed. But several people who work with him told me that it was because of my political involvement.”

Ai did not accept the news quietly. His office sent out invitations by e-mail and Twitter, summoning people from across the country for a going-away party, of sorts, at the studio. The struggle over demolition, as I mentioned in a piece this month on China’s state of mind, has become the national psychodrama, the defining battle over power and fairness, and Ai planned to make this demolition into the first and last piece of art at his Shanghai studio. For food, he would serve river crabs, a politically loaded entrée that sounds like the Mandarin word for “harmony”—the government’s term for a society that is free of dissent. Word spread online and, by the eve of the party, Ai was poised for a mini Woodstock. Then he was placed under house arrest in Beijing. The party went on without him.

“It was a miracle,” he said. “Eight hundred people managed to go to the site. Many were taken to tea by the secret police”—the euphemism for a questioning by authorities. “There were all kinds of people—lawyers, old men, kids and babies of two or three years old, all brought by their parents. Some spent two or three days on the train to get there.”

Ai was eventually released from house arrest, and he said he was told the demolition in Shanghai would begin sometime after Chinese New Year, which falls on February 3rd this year. Yesterday, however, he received another call, this time from a neighbor in Shanghai; the demolition had begun without warning. He hopped a plane, and by the time he arrived, the artist in him—he is known, after all, for his gleeful destruction of ancient urns—couldn’t help but be impressed by the speed of the destruction. “They had a very professional demolition team. Two sides, each side had four machines, big machines tearing it down and breaking it. I watched until night came.” He sent photos and videos out over the Web.

“I thought, huh, the destruction of it has already made it art. Art exists in different forms.

What is art? Should we go back to the age of only sculpture? At least a hundred thousand people knew this news over the Internet. They watched it in front of their eyes.”

He spent roughly a million dollars on the project, and the government offered him compensation for his losses. “They gave us a big amount of money,” he said, adding, “We said the building is not just brick and concrete, and we said it’s a work. But they think of it very simply.”

When we spoke by phone at midnight Wednesday, he was already back in Beijing. “It all goes down so fast. There’s no reason to stay,” he said, his tone alert and directed, rather than aggrieved. “Everything is in the past. And we have to look forward,” he added, sounding like a marathoner with miles left to run. The loss of Ai’s Shanghai studio is largely symbolic, a brazen distillation of the kind of mundane civic drama that goes unnoticed most days in China. Knocking down the studio of China’s most uncooperative public intellectual is the kind of spectacularly counterproductive public-relations move that makes one wonder how China’s economy is run so professionally when other parts of the state are not. His real home is in Beijing, but when authorities began talking last year about possibly demolishing parts of his neighborhood, Ai and other artists staged a march down Chang’an Avenue, in the center of Beijing, a massively provocative choice of location. The march ended peacefully, and Ai heard that the Beijing government eventually backed off the idea of knocking down the artists’ neighborhood. But, if the Shanghai experience taught him anything, it suggested that the drama of demolition is hard to predict. When a demolition outfit came to survey his studio in Beijing, Ai said, he sent them away. “We said, ‘This time we are going to demonstrate not just on Chang’an jie, but in Tiananmen Square,’ ” he said.

*Art: Ai Weiwei, “Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn,” 1995. © Ai Weiwei. Courtesy of the artist.*