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## Artists

# “To use art is not enough”

*Ai Weiwei on the reasons writing, blogging and tweeting on politics matters*

### INTERVIEW

AI WEIWEI

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, speaking today at Art Basel Conversations (right), is recovering from brain surgery in Munich, the result, he says, of an assault by police officers in Sichuan Province. “The operation saved my life,” he said when *The Art Newspaper* visited his Beijing studio just before the fair, adding that it will take around four months for him to fully recover.

Ai’s popular blog on Chinese website Sina.com has been removed, and his activities are now limited to Twitter, on which he has around 10,000 followers. “140 characters is enough—following the operation, that is all I have the attention span for,” he said. “I cannot write long articles right now.” Twitter is blocked by the government in China, so users hack into the site.

Recent topics on his prolific feed have included his ongoing struggle with Sichuan police over the assault, his research into the Sichuan earthquake, the nomination of Chinese writers for the International PEN Writers in Prison award and the recent Obama visit to China, often using strong language. The police in Sichuan have issued an official denial of his assault (Ai says he has a recording of the attack that took place against him), and the government has now launched a probe into his finances.

Describing his move into the media, Ai said: “To use art is not enough, to describe your view, in the old traditional forms, such as painting, sculpture...as a citizen you need to express your views. Writing, blogging and giving interviews is a part of that, otherwise you will very easily be misunderstood by the establishment...as long as there is power and people there will be a struggle.”

Ai grew up with his family in exile in Shihezi, on a semi-military farm camp in Xinjiang Province, in the north west of China. “[The Cultural Revolution] was nothing but frightening,” he said. “The whole society was frightening. I was born in 1957—the year my father [the poet Ai Qing] went into exile. First he was sent to the forests in north China to work, then one year later to Xinjiang, so I grew up there until I was 18



Ai Wei Wei photographed in Beijing last week, with the scars of his ordeal clearly visible

years old. During the Cultural Revolution we were sent to live in the poorest conditions as punishment. I hate to tell those stories, there is too much sentiment there. The fact is people died, were dying. My father lost his sight in one eye, he almost died several times, and I came out of there very fragile.”

Ai then went to New York. “A completely different civil-

n’t let you go too far, unless there was some structure. There were struggles, there was no real understanding of contemporary life then, it was more art for art’s sake—but quite political.”

Ai said he threw away his work from that period. “I never knew I would be so successful today...I had my first show in 2004, in Bern.” Ai had already been in China for more

least one million times worse.”

Ai’s latest work is *Sunflower Seeds*, 2009, a pile of 1,000 handmade ceramic sunflower seeds. “These seeds, they are a memory of the Communist times, we would share these seeds with friends,” he said. He does not know what effect the Chinese government’s censorship on art exports (*The Art Newspaper*, November 2009, p1) will have on future shows he may have abroad—works for his previous two major shows this year at the Munich Haus der Kunst and Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum were shipped out of China before the rules came into place in August. “I think strategically China has come to a very crucial moment, they have to re-justify themselves, even the past 20 to 30 years are based on a kind of destructive, suicidal act. Now they are trying to reach a higher level, but I think in any society, culture should have its own rights, not to be touched by the government, not to be promoted by the government, also not to be destroyed by the government.”

**Chris Gill**

*For the full version of this interview, see the January issue of The Art Newspaper*

*Art is not about making people happy. Not much art touches the taboo*

isation—1980s art, German expressionism, all these kinds of things there,” he said. His career started as a painter. “In school I majored in animation and then started doing more installations or objects. I came back to China in 1993, having left in 1981.” Ai was one of the original members of the Stars Group, considered the most important movement following China’s reform process of the 1980s. “This was completely new, freedom, but the party would-

than ten years, working on his underground book project, and had founded the China Art Archives and Warehouse gallery with Hans van Dijk. He also co-curated the Shanghai exhibition “Fuck Off” in 2000 at Eastlink Gallery, with Feng Boyi. “I was quite unhappy about some of the content [of that show], but art is not about making people happy. Not much art touches the taboo—it was ugly, bloody, violent and sickening, but not far from reality. Reality in China is at