

AI WEIWEI – THE ARTIST AND THE POLITICAL DISSIDENT



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Biography and background

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing. His father, Ai Qing, was an important Chinese poet who was accused of being an enemy of the state and sent to the re-education camps during Mao's mandate. Weiwei spent his first eighteen years in the region of Xinjiang, and then the family had the chance to go back to Beijing.

Later on, the future artist applied to the Cinema Academy of Beijing where he studied with Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou¹, two very important contemporary film directors.

In 1979, he took part to the group of The Stars, a group of Chinese avant-gardist artists and that was born right after the Cultural Revolution. The name had the intention to underline the unicity of the members of the group: each star was part of a whole but still very important on its own.

Their artistic purpose was to erase the traces of the Social Realism coming from the Soviet Union, by using the forbidden styles coming from the West (expressionism, Dadaism, fauvism, impressionism, surrealism and cubism). They also tried to put themselves and their feelings into their works, even though there was often a big trace of political dissatisfaction and critic as background.

They started exposing in public parks around Beijing without having the permission to do so. However, at the beginning of the Eighties they had the authorization to expose at the China art Gallery, an event that registered eighty thousands visitors and that made history because it was the first time that an independent group could show its works of art inside a public institution owned by the state.

Thanks to this exhibition they had the possibility to be published on a very important art revue, Fine Art, which gave them a very significant recognition.

In any case, until Mao's death, a deep tension was perceivable because according to the Chairman art should serve and educate the masses, and individuals couldn't really express themselves.

Ai Weiwei was active part of this group, but he developed his art in a different way, being able to make his work last during the years and until today, also because he had the chance to move to New York and live there for twelve years.

Here in the New World, Ai Weiwei studied at the Parson New School for Design, which he decides to leave sooner than expected in order to maintain himself with modest jobs. He lives in the East village, where his entourage is made of many contemporary artists with whom he can exchange ideas and visions. Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp and the poet Allen Ginsberg are three fundamental personalities who inspire Ai Weiwei's future works.

¹ Zhang Yimou was the artistic director of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games of Beijing in 2008.

In 1988, he organizes his first exhibition, called Old Shoes, Safe Sex, where he shows some important artworks like the condom glued to the raincoat and Duchamp's profile made with a metal coat hanger.

His first art that he developed was photography. He liked taking pictures of very simple and common situations, like fragments of everyday life in the area of the West Side of New York. Many of these photos were in his camera until not long ago and have been developed only recently. His artist friends also appear in these snapshots.

When he heard the news of his father's illness, he immediately decided to go back to Beijing, where his first important project was a series of three books the Black, White and Grey Book, that had the power to influence many Chinese artists and that became the manifesto of the Chinese avant-gardist movement.

He has also become an architect and some of his most famous projects are his own studio, the Fake Design, and the Bird's Nest, the Olympic Stadium realised for the Games of 2008. Both of them are in Beijing.

This Fake word has created many debates, because in China its pronunciation sounds a little like a bad word, the same that often comes back during Weiwei's career. In 2000, for instance, when he installs an exhibition called F*** Off – Uncooperative Attitude, set on the side of the Shanghai Biennale and which represented a very important milestone for his evolution as an international artist. Clearly, even only from this kind of choices, we can acknowledge that his own attitude goes against the Government, and will not stop doing so in many of his works, like the Study of the Perspective, where he shows his middle finger in front of every important monument or institution around the world (The Forbidden City with Mao's portrait included).



Ai Weiwei, Study of Perspective: (clockwise) Tiananmen, Beijing, China; The White House, Washington D.C., USA; Reichstag, Berlin, Germany; Eiffel Tower, Paris, France; Tiananmen, Beijing, China; Viking Line Ferry

CREDIT: <http://it.phaidon.com/agenda/art/picture-galleries/2011/may/11/the-audacious-artwork-of-ai-weiwei/?idx=9&idx=9>

In this way, little by little, he began catching the journalists' attention, because he found the good way to advertise himself.

The photographer

As said above, Ai Weiwei moved to New York where he spent 12 years of his life. He left China with no more than 30 dollars in his pockets, any knowledge of the language and with a big question mark waiting for him. New York was the capital for contemporary art at that time. In fact, once in America, he met the right people, those people who helped him (willing or not) become the artist he is today.

Photography was the first activity he got in touch with. To him, photos were the equivalent of drawings, since they both are an observation of reality and its consequent immortalisation. The only difference was that photos were realised through the eyes and thoughts, rather than through hands as for the drawings.

In his pictures, Ai Weiwei recorded many of his Chinese friends (like the film director Chen Kaige) in everyday life moments. At a first glance, these photos look even simple and artless and yet they are full of meaning, of spontaneity and intimacy.

Another subject that he likes taking pictures of, is the area of New York where he lived: clubs, underground stations, graffiti on walls, abandoned buildings and many other places that don't even exist anymore.

While approaching the year 1989, when the protests of Tiananmen Square broke out, Weiwei became a more and more experienced and skilful photographer; his subjects changed a bit and he started showing his dissident spirit.

The sculptor

Like many contemporary artists, also Ai Weiwei started sculpting, relying in this way on his manual abilities and on many assistants too.

His first work that could be considered as a sculpture is the profile of Marcel Duchamp, made with a metal hanger and called Hanging Man (1983). Not only Weiwei had a great respect for Duchamp, but also he was keen on using familiar and usual materials. In that period, the art world was covered with the usage of these kinds of materials and objects. For instance, Duchamp's most famous art piece was the bicycle wheel simply placed on a stool, with the purpose of giving a new implication and connotation to such items.

As he grew into a more mature and famous artist, his projects increased as well, so he had to put his trust into expert hands.

It is the case of the work Sunflower Seeds that he exposed at the Turbine Hall of Tate Gallery in London in 2010, and that is made of one million handmade seeds. They are singularly made and painted by expert ceramists from Jingdezhen.



CREDIT: <http://www.juxtapoz.com/news/ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds-mary-boone-gallery-nyc/>

By doing so, he also shows how attached he is to the traditions of his country and gives the chance to many poor workers to take part to a big project that reveals itself to be an occasion to help a superstar artist.

Curiously, another version of the Hanging Man, realised later in time, is filled with sunflower seeds.

There are a lot of milestone artworks on the scene, that are relevant to this facet of the artist. I can quote the Ming Vases, which are old terracotta pots with drops of coloured paint on them.

The metal bars that he collected from the ruins of the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, and that he set in different ways according to the exhibition. He once made them straight and arranged them on the floor as to create a second floor; for other shows he bended them and exposed one by one or three by three.

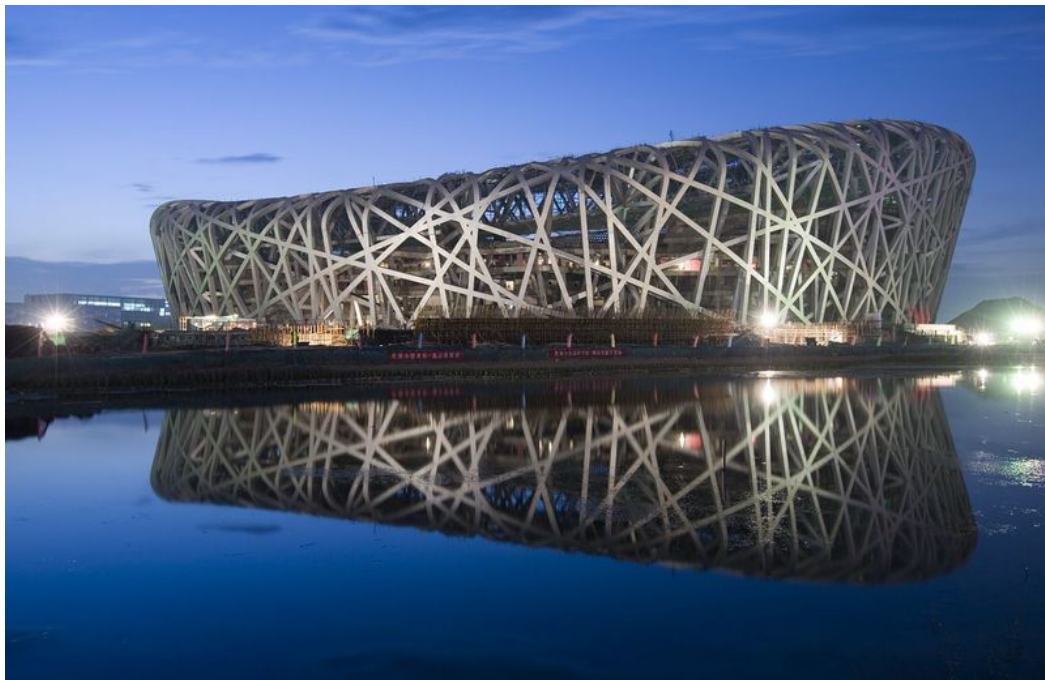
Moreover, he made Marble Trees, so perfect, white and with a smooth surface, and with no leaves growing on the branches, as to show the harshness of an element that is not considered so.

The 12 Gold Zodiac Heads are another of his magical artworks: they have been exposed in many galleries and public places around the world and they consist of twelve (of course) gilded bronze animals heads, each one is a symbol of the zodiac (rooster, dragon, horse, mouse, dog...).

The architect

An important aspect of Weiwei's way of being an all-round artist is his architectural side.

The biggest project he realised together with Swiss architects, Herzog and De Meuron, is the Bird's Nest, created in a rather new area of Beijing in 2008 to host the Olympic Games. It was a success, a structure that anybody had never seen before. Huge, majestic and solid, it became the symbol of a new China, the country that has opened to the world, showing how powerful it is and what it is capable of. Let's just recall the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games: it was like watching a movie, or a musical, where everything was precisely studied, dynamic and in unison.



CREDIT: <https://wildenstein.wordpress.com/2011/04/05/ai-weiwei/>

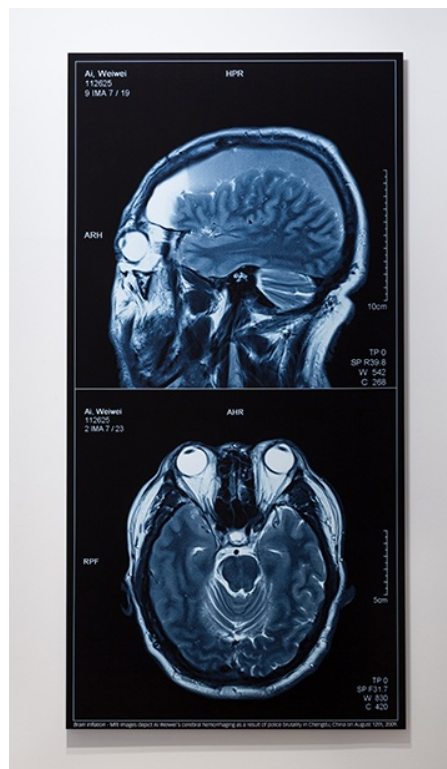
The dissident and activist

Besides being a world known artist, Ai Weiwei has made himself famous for being an activist, constantly complaining and doing something against the Chinese Government.

In 2005 Sinaweibo.com, the biggest Internet platform in China, asked Ai Weiwei to take part to it, and write his own blog

At first, he was a little sceptical about it, because he almost didn't know how to use a computer. Soon, he became very active on it, reporting simple daily episodes but also hard thoughts against the government. Four years later, the blog was shut down by authorities, because of its popularity and Ai Weiwei's outspoken attitude on event such as the Sichuan earthquake.

His bold manners (among other) were also the reason why he was arrested at the Beijing Capital Airport and imprisoned for eighty-one days by the police. Nobody knew where he was during this period, not even his family. Apparently he was also beaten hard, which caused him a big trauma, that has been surgically operated while he was in Germany for a solo show. His astuteness was to make an artwork out of this.



Brain Inflation, 2009

CREDIT: Galleria Continua, San Gimignano

His studio in Shanghai has been reversed upside down and almost destroyed by authorities, who were looking for something that could jeopardize him and so have an motive to imprison him. Originally, media said that the charge for his arrest was "incomplete departure procedures", but soon the Chinese Ministry of foreign Affairs confirmed that he was arrested under the investigation of alleged economic crimes. Ai Weiwei's accountant and driver disappeared and his wife was long interrogated. His documents, passport included have been taken from him and after being released he received them back only during summer 2015.

While he was missing, everywhere in the world there was a street art campaign going on, saying Free Ai Weiwei. The whole art community mobilised with petitions and other

initiatives, like the “1001 Chairs for Ai Weiwei” that called for artists to bring chairs in front of embassies all around the world, sit at 1pm and protest silently and peacefully.

When he was released in June 2011, authorities justified his detentions with the charge of tax evasion. His bail was apparently granted by his confessions of his crime and cooperative attitude and his willingness to pay back the taxes he evaded.

Ever since he has been released, he continued his act of protest against China, by using different means this time. He started using Twitter, for which a VPN is required, otherwise it is banned in China. The same happens for Instagram, the social network where you share photos with the community. Ai Weiwei is now very committed to the Syrian refugees situation. Everyday, he posts many images and short videos of what is happening in Greece and in other areas where the refugees are received.

What created his power and resonance around the world is his ability to be always smart, caustic and effective.

I like him as an artist very much; I had the chance to see his works many times and to collaborate with an art gallery for his solo show. I also respect him a lot for his courage, because it is not easy in China to make your voice to be heard, unless you are following what the Party tells you to do and say.

On the other hand, I feel he has taken a great advantage of his reputation, because he created a whole brand out of this situation. Today, anytime he is in “trouble” the whole world takes up the cudgel for him. For instance, not a long time ago, he asked the Lego Company to send him an extraordinary quantity of Lego bricks to make a new artwork. Lego refused because it was frightened of the fact that Weiwei could have used the bricks to build another political artwork. The artist reaction was as caustic as always: he has accused the company of censorship and discrimination. That was a tactical move and as a consequence, many people, galleries and museums, promptly helped him through social networks and thanks to the hashtag #legosforaiweiwei, by sending their own amount of bricks. The artist was then able to finish his new work that he conceived for an Australian exhibition.

When I went to his Fake Studio in Beijing, apart from being very nice and welcoming, he gave me a signed postcard version of one of his famous photos and a plastic envelope with three sunflower seeds in it. The thing is: I didn't ask for any of this, and by doing so he proved to me how much of a VIP he has become.



CREDIT: <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-34636319>

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