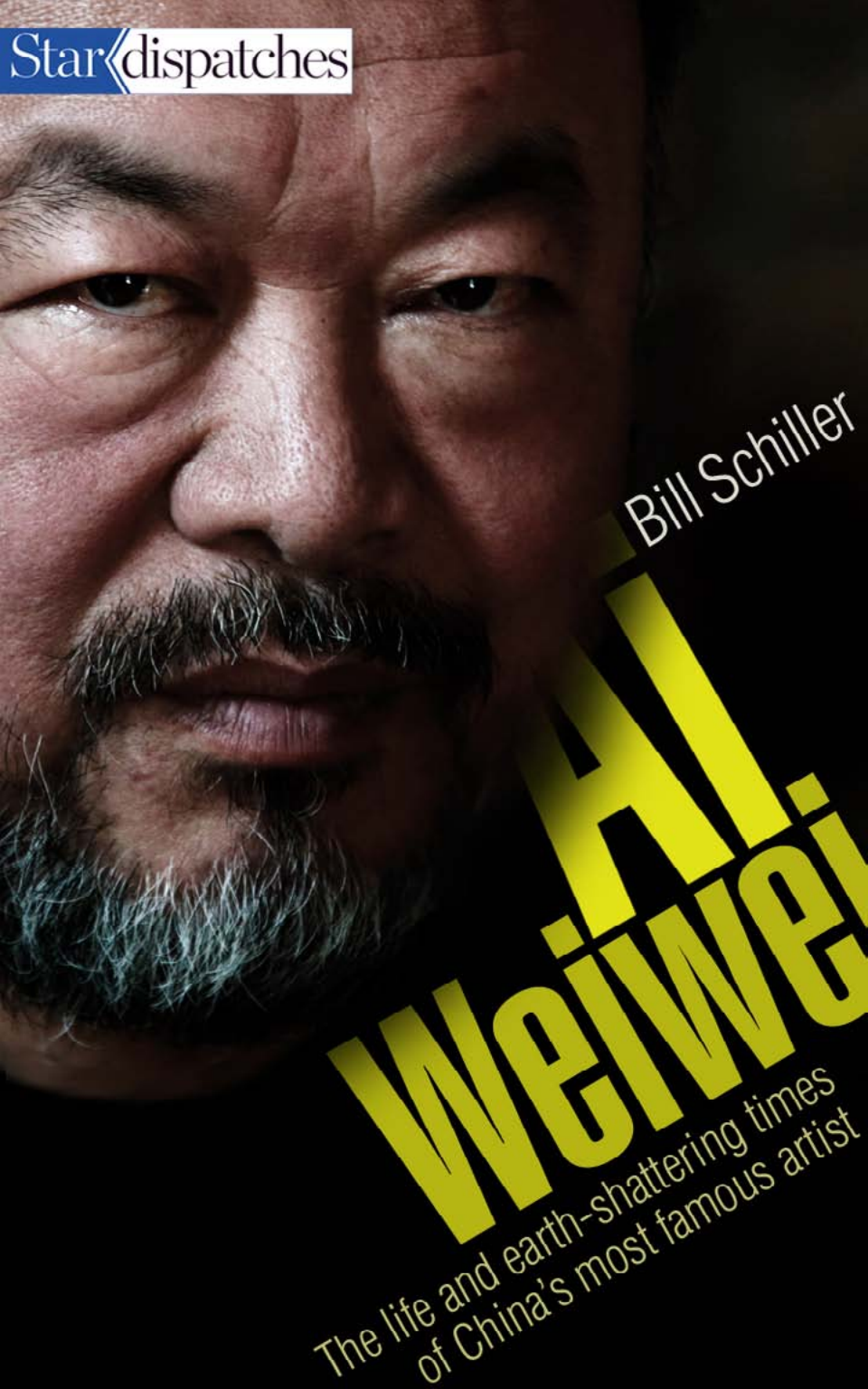
Star dispatches



Bill Schiller

Ai Weiwei

The life and earth-shattering times of China's most famous artist

eRead by Bill Schiller

Contents

Introduction

Within the world of international art, celebrated Chinese artist Ai Weiwei holds a rare if not unique position: he has been threatened, brutally assaulted and arbitrarily jailed by his own government.

Yet even as he sits in his studio not far from Beijing's Capital International Airport, prevented from travelling outside his country, his work, ideas and advocacy for free expression travel the globe.

Matthew Teitelbaum of the Art Gallery of Ontario, where a major exhibition of Ai's work will open in Toronto on Aug. 17, calls him "one of the most important artists of our time."

Others call him "the most important," "the most influential," "the most powerful."

Ai has won such accolades by acting on his belief that contemporary artists should deal with contemporary issues — a controversial notion in China. The country's authoritarian rulers believe that contemporary issues are the sole domain of government.

Or put more simply, Ai wants to start a conversation. The government does not want to talk.

Nevertheless, every day, Ai's voice and influence spin through the cybersphere on social media, primarily Twitter. And in galleries around the world and private collections, Ai's work continues to circulate outside the reach of the restraining arms of China's ruling Communist Party.

He works in many media. He started out as a photographer, moved into performance art, but is today mainly known as a conceptual artist, fashioning pieces by altering objects or creating ones of his own.

What troubles the Party — what has always troubled it since it took power in 1949 — are individuals like Ai who dare to speak up or try to take their ideas to the people. That is why Ai has largely

been silenced and isolated in the country of his birth. That is why he has been attacked: the government sees him as a threat.

His admirers and fans see him as a brave artist and activist.

Brave or not, Ai will tell you that he feels fear, just like everyone else: he is human. But he has long held a deep-seated belief in people's right to live in a free and open society, and in 2008 he was positively seized by that idea.

It all began with a tremor.

Ai Weiwei, 2010, after his surgery for a cerebral hemorrhage, ©Gao Yuan

1 Wenchuan

At 2:28 p.m. on May 12, 2008, in a Chinese county called Wenchuan, an earthquake struck, sending a tectonic shock wave rippling across the country.

"Seismic events," as scientists call them, are not uncommon in this region, located east of the Tibetan plateau. But this one was different; in fact, it was rare: a massive quake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale.

Nearly 2,000 kilometres away in my third-floor office on Worker's Stadium Street in downtown Beijing, my desk wobbled. Seconds later my phone rang. It was my Chinese assistant, Lili.

"Did you feel that?" she asked breathlessly.

Lili had been standing across the street next to a 26-storey office building, waiting for the light to change, when suddenly the structure swayed like a reed in the wind.

"People are running out of the building!" she said. I could hear the stream of animated conversation in the background through the receiver. There was a giddy sense of excitement in the speakers' voices, a sense of tragedy narrowly averted. But of course, as we would soon find out, this was not the case.

At that very moment in a valley town called Beichuan, and in countless schools all across Sichuan province, children were dying at their desks, blocks of buildings were being heaved and rolled like dice across the landscape and tens of thousands of people were in the throes of death. Seventy thousand, 80,000, perhaps as many as 90,000 — no convincing, verifiable figure has ever been confirmed.

Elsewhere in Beijing that day, indeed not far away, the internationally famous artist Ai Weiwei felt that same shifting beneath his feet and would decide, ultimately, to take the measure of that

moment and the response of the Chinese government, which was, even then, shifting into crisis mode.

In an authoritarian state like China, when a natural disaster strikes it isn't just a human tragedy; it is a tragedy laced with the potential for a political crisis. In effect, the unelected leaders are about to mount the national stage, and how they deal with that tragedy, and how they are perceived to deal with it, will have serious implications for their hold on power. As a consequence, the human drama beamed to the outside world becomes a high-stakes political drama at home, in which the authorities are seized not only with the task of saving human lives, but of saving their own, politically.

Which of those two motivating factors dominated, only China's leadership could say for sure.

But the leaders know that any failure in managing the message in such a crisis could result in angry throngs moving out into the streets. And after that, anything can happen.

For the people of Sichuan, the devastation of the Wenchuan earthquake would alter their lives forever.

For Ai Weiwei, it would become a moment of reckoning.

Until Wenchuan he had been, first and foremost, an artist. But in the following two weeks as he watched and read Chinese news reports, all of which tried to transform Sichuan's tragedy into a triumph — the nation, led by the Communist Party of China, gloriously coming to its own rescue, set to a score of martial music on the nightly news — Ai decided he had to go and see for himself.

A group of parents were claiming that the reason their children died was because of shabbily built government schools. He wanted to hear their stories first-hand.

Ai had been an outspoken critic of the government before.

In the year prior to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, Ai had experienced what felt like betrayal. At the outset, proud

Chinese person that he is, Ai had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Games. As both an artist and architect, he had thrown himself into the design process for the "Bird's Nest" National Stadium — built by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron — with both sincerity and vigour. The stadium would become the centrepiece of the games and one of the architectural wonders of Beijing's $40-billion makeover.

The shape and sweep of the stadium was crucial, Ai would tell Art in ASIA magazine later, meant to give people "the impression of freedom and openness . . .

"The first thing I pursued when designing the stadium was a sense of equity and fairness. I tried to create a space where everything is applied equally, just like we feel fairness at a round table. The second one was freedom. I tried to make everything look equal no matter what. The third one was uniformity. I designed it to be easily recognizable by anyone, with the most basic and simple compositions."

The result was a kind of coalescence of art, architecture, athleticism and Ai's own values. It became China's Olympic icon, a structure that is today instantly recognized around the world.

China's selection as host of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games had not been without controversy. Competitors and critics argued that the country did not deserve it, decrying China's abysmal human rights record. But China told the world, give us the Olympic Games and we'll show you human rights.

"By allowing Beijing to host the Games, you will help the development of human rights," the Beijing bid committee's Liu Jingmin promised.

But as the Games approached, it became painfully evident to Ai, and to others, that this was not going to happen.

In fact, the opposite occurred: tens of thousands of residents had been pushed off land to make way for Olympic construction;

foreigners had their visa renewals denied and were removed from the country; business meetings with incoming foreign executives were summarily cancelled; commercial construction sites were shut down and Chinese workers from other parts of the country were shooed back to the countryside.

Beggars were cleared from the streets. Brothels were closed down. Itinerant garbage collectors — recyclers who routinely gathered cardboard, bottles, tin, Styrofoam, anything they could lay their hands on to scratch out a living — were told to stay out of the city until the games were over.

Stollers outside the Bird's Nest stadium during Beijing's 2008 Olympics *(Richard Lautens/Toronto Star)*

Meanwhile, plans continued apace to create a showcase event that would announce to the world that China had arrived on the global stage. The celebrated Chinese film director Zhang Yimou, whose films were once critical of the Communist Party, was hired to assemble an opening ceremony that would wow the world.

Seeing all of this and sensing the advent of an Olympic spec-

tacle that was shaping up to be the single biggest propaganda event of the new century — primarily aimed at glorifying the Party — Ai withdrew in disgust.

He did not launch a counter-campaign. He did not seek publicity. But if asked, he would give his opinion. The Games and the stadium itself were a "fake smile" for the outside world, he said. Nothing more.

"And I was proven right," Ai would tell me later.

In the end, however, it was not the Olympics that would prove to be Ai Weiwei's watershed moment, but the Wenchuan earthquake. As that tragedy unfolded, Ai decided he would harness his own immense artistic skills to the cause of human rights and, ultimately, become an activist.

"I want to spend all my time on politics now," he would tell an interviewer. It was a major shift.

At the core of Ai's decision, the fact that spurred him to make that leap, was what he found on the ground when he flew to Sichuan and toured the earthquake scene armed with video and still cameras and heard for himself the forlorn wail of Sichuan's heartbroken parents.

Why was it, they asked, that their children's schools had collapsed into great heaps of dust, when state buildings that housed officials and their staff, right next door, stood tall and resilient?

The government insisted it was the quirk of a natural disaster. Disasters did not discriminate.

But in the days that followed, as the grieving parents rummaged through the rubble desperate to find their children, dead or alive, they discovered something else: the rebar or reinforcing bars that were meant to strengthen the concrete used in school construction were substandard and feeble.

As it turned out, the earthquake did discriminate, ripping apart their children's schools because they had been poorly built.

Parents take a break at the site of a former school where children were buried by earthquake rubble (Bill Schiller/Toronto Star)

Parents accused local officials of taking the budget allocated to them by the central government, cutting corners and costs so that they could buy cheaper, flimsier materials, and then lining their own pockets with the lucrative difference.

It was greed and government corruption that lay at the heart of their anguish, they said.

In China there is a saying: "The mountains are high. The emperor is far away."

When officials are far from the capital they sometimes get away with murder; sometimes, manslaughter. This, the parents insisted, is what really happened in Sichuan.

Had the buildings been built according to a proper plan, had there been government oversight and regulation, had regulations been enforced by a government responsible to the people, then countless lives might have been saved.

But in China, as Ai Weiwei would point out, the government is not responsible to the people, it is not elected, it is not — as he says — "legitimate."

The government is responsible only to the Communist Party of China, and the Communist Party of China is responsible to no one but itself. It is the most powerful self-regulating body on the planet, presiding as it does over 1.3 billion people who have no power of recall and, indeed, no power to elect their leaders in the first place.

But to stand up to that power, as anyone who has ever done so in the past 64 years will tell you — at least, those who have been released from jail — comes at a cost.

2 Naming the dead

Less than 24 hours following that tectonic ripple, I was on a plane hovering above the Sichuan landscape, hoping for a soft landing in Chengdu, the provincial capital, where we planned to hire a driver and explore the devastation. The plane was circling and circling seeking permission to land, but no permission came.

Non-stop aftershocks on the ground were making it impossible to land.

Finally, a voice from the flight deck came over the public address system informing us that the plane was "running out of fuel," and that the pilot would now seek permission to land in Chongqing, China's mega-metropolis of 33 million people about an hour away.

With that, dark laughter rippled through the cabin, signalling a kind of Chinese resignation to fate.

A woman next to me uttered *mei banfa* — "nothing you can do" — which seemed to crystallize for me so much about China. In the West, an announcement that a plane was running out of fuel might trigger a tsunami of complaint and questioning — perhaps an investigation by a federal regulator. A plane running out of fuel? How much did you take on board, people would want to know — how much are you required to take on? What do the regulations say?

But these were Chinese passengers, and the kind of questioning that we in the West take for granted, rooted as we are in traditions of individual rights, is a foreign concept.

And it struck me then, suspended in the air above Chengdu, that this pervasive *mei banfa* attitude makes for easy governance for the Party. In the main, it helps shape a largely unquestioning society.

Ai Weiwei was and is the antithesis of that attitude. He is the

anti-*mei banfa* man, and by speaking out, and questioning, he would eventually put himself at considerable risk.

Playing with notions of citizenship as Ai Weiwei would — he frequently uses the word "citizen" — is a dangerous activity in China, given that at its core citizenship brings with it the idea of government accountability, that a government is accountable to its people and not to a Party.

While it is true that taxes are collected in China, indeed with ever-greater fervour by government collectors, taxpayers have no say in how that money is spent. "Taxation without representation" is not a concept that has gripped the Chinese imagination yet. And despite a high-minded constitution that promises all fundamental freedoms, rule in China is by regulation and diktat.

Ai Weiwei, however, is a democrat, and therein lies the difference.

Gathering photos, video and first-person interviews with Sichuan survivors, Ai returned to Beijing more determined than ever to seek justice for the region's parents, many of whom had lost their only child having dutifully upheld China's one-child policy. Soon, Ai would come to be seen by the government as a triple threat. First, he was independently pursuing the truth, something just not done in China. He wanted to know the names of the children who had perished, the grades they were in, the schools they attended. He wanted to give the dead their dignity by naming them.

But in China, truth is what the government says it is and government-controlled media dispense it daily. From the outset, the government had no intention of naming the victims.

Second, Ai Weiwei was demanding that the government be accountable, take responsibility, launch an investigation into the "tofu schools," as they came to be called because of their tofu-like consistency, and get at the root of the problem if only to prevent it from happening again.

Third, Ai Weiwei was demonstrating a capacity for organization, never an activity to which the government warms. He had started with a core of just 20 volunteers, but soon had networks of teams moving on the ground in Sichuan, gathering and collating volumes of information.

By the time I caught up with him the following March, at his home and studio in the Caochangdi district of northeast Beijing, not far from the city's main airport, his project to collect the dead children's names was well under way: he had gathered more than 3,000.

"How many students do you think actually perished," I asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," he said, "but that is what we intend to find out."

The government had no idea either. They were all over the map: "between 6,000 and 7,000," they estimated once; then, "less than 10,000"; later still, "less than 20,000."

The trouble, Ai explained, was that Chinese media — all of which falls under the tight control of government — "has never sincerely pursued any truth, any solid facts."

As a consequence, there are sometimes gaps in Chinese people's understanding of contemporary history, particularly those events that are embarrassing to the ruling Communist Party.

"Nobody knows how many people died in the Cultural Revolution (from 1966-1976)," said Ai. "Nobody knows how many people died on June 4 (the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre). Nobody knows how many people died in Tibet (the 2008 riots). You know. Everything is a blur."

It is not at all uncommon to meet young Chinese people who have never heard of the Tiananmen Square massacre, or seen the iconic image of the mystical and defiant "Tank Man," who stood down an approaching tank on Chang'an Avenue and inspired the world.

This time, Ai Weiwei said, he wanted clarity, even if it meant going out into the field and getting it himself.

He had been "devastated" by his tour of the quake region and his first reaction was actually one of powerlessness. He was troubled by how the state, with its immense propaganda machine, had seemed to gloss over the deaths of the young children — airbrushing them out of the picture as it were — while simultaneously building a mythology around the People's Liberation Army's heroic rescue.

How would the dead children ever be remembered, Ai thought, if they were not even acknowledged by their names?

"Every one who died was an individual," he said, as we sipped tea. "The only real property they had was their name . . . So I said, 'Well, we can get those names. I can do that.' "

Government bureaucrats blocked him at every turn, scoffing at him, telling him that what he was looking for — the names and numbers of the dead — was "a state secret," and that he was "insane" to pursue it.

Undeterred, Ai Weiwei sent his people back into the field again and again to organize teams and search out surviving parents. The parents warmly welcomed them — and the government took notice.

As we spoke that day, an email dropped into Ai Weiwei's box, from a grieving mother. Only the day before she had given Ai the name, grade and school of her dead son, which Ai had posted on his website that afternoon.

The grieving mother wrote to say that the police had visited her at home that very morning, questioning her.

In his modest and persistent way, Ai was empowering people, and the government didn't like it.

The next time I visited, a few months later, the government had shut down his immensely popular blogs on the Internet and police

had installed surveillance cameras outside his gate, monitoring his comings and goings, and that of his guests.

It was the beginning of a confrontation.

The authorities were not ready to arrest him. Chinese authorities never move swiftly, or transparently, in such matters. They are, as Ai Weiwei himself has said, like good poker players. They bide their time, hide their strength. Then, they play their hand when people least expect it, sweeping up the chips.

Ai Weiwei knew his time would come.

Ai Weiwei speaks with journalist Bill Schiller in 2009 (Bill Schiller/Toronto Star)

3 Roots

His childhood affected him deeply and stays with him still. Given the fact that his father, Ai Qing, eventually became China's unofficial poet laureate, one might expect Ai Weiwei's upbringing to have been one of privilege. It was anything but.

Though Ai Weiwei is indeed a social-media-savvy, 21st-century original, it is obvious that he has inherited much from his father, most obviously his penchant for independent thought and his unbending spine.

"I work according to my conscience," Ai Qing told an interviewer in 1983. "I say what I mean."

Born in the coastal province of Zhejiang in 1910, Ai Qing began his artistic life as a painter, entering art school in the southern city of Hangzhou. But Paris was the centre of the art world then, and in 1929 at the age of 19 Ai Qing left China for the City of Light, studying there until 1932. Going out into the wider world would prove to be a seminal experience for the elder Ai, one that would strengthen his sense of individuality.

Shortly after his return to China he took up an interest in the circumstances of his time. He was appalled by the high-handedness and corruption of the then-ruling Nationalists, and within a year of his return he was sentenced to three years in jail for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government.

Unable to paint in prison, he turned to poetry and quickly found his voice.

By 1949, when the Communists toppled the Nationalists and finally came to power, Ai Qing had established himself as a respected national poet on the road to greatness.

He had met both Communist Party leader Mao Zedong and number two Zhou Enlai.

But in 1956 something fateful happened: Mao launched the "Hundred Flowers" campaign, calling for a blossoming of the arts and independent thought, and Ai Qing took him at his word.

He wrote an allegorical poem called "The Gardener's Dream," in which a gardener who cultivates only roses dreams of an animated throng of beautiful, variegated flowers assembling at his garden's gate at night, wanting in.

Historians now say Mao's call was little more than a ruse meant to flush out and punish discordant voices, and in 1957 Ai Qing's poem was deemed a threat to the Communist Party and the poet denounced as a "rightist."

It was the year Ai Weiwei was born.

Writing "The Gardener's Dream" cost Ai Qing 20 years of his life. He was sent off to do hard labour.

Ai Weiwei went with him and consequently spent his formative years in labour camps.

The first stop was the remote northeast province of Heilongjiang, and then Ai Qing was moved to the even more remote Xinjiang province in the country's northwest, where he spent 16 years. There, the once-admired wordsmith was set to work cleaning public toilets, and when the decade of the Cultural Revolution dawned — a period when artists and intellectuals were even more seriously persecuted — conditions only worsened. He was assigned ever-increasing heavy labour.

Ai Weiwei still remembers those days — Mao's young Red Guards mockingly throwing ink on his father's face and children pelting him with stones, his father's multiple suicide attempts, his dad on what they both believed was his death bed, handing his son the names of key people to whom he should turn in the event of his death.

He also remembers his own deep, piercing humiliation: he was forced to destroy his father's beloved books.

"Those books were so beautiful," he told American author David Sheff in an interview this year. "I burned them all in front of him. We had to. Otherwise it would cost us our lives. I tore every page. Beautifully printed books. Art books he brought back from Paris. Page by page."

In the enclosed nightmare of Mao's Cultural Revolution, Ai Weiwei explained, he and others were made to memorize myriad Chairman Mao's slogans. Even today, like generations of other Chinese people, Ai Weiwei can still recite Mao's poetry and, only with serious prompting, launch into a Mao song.

In the cafeteria of his commune dorm, where Ai Weiwei went for lunch as a boy, there was a sacred daily ritual, similar in its way to Christians receiving the holy eucharist, the body of Christ, in the form of bread. Ai would approach the counter with his empty bowl, recite a line from Chairman Mao, then the cook would reply with his own saying from the Chairman and, finally, a ladle of food would be doled out.

"You don't even know there is another way," Ai said. "You've never read a single novel, poetry or other writing or heard a song that is different. It's like North Korea today."

Nor was Ai Weiwei's experience rare. To the contrary, it was typical.

This spring, revered Chinese film director Chen Kaige visited Toronto and told the International Film Festival's Noah Cowan how, as a child, he was made to denounce his own father in their Beijing home.

His father was a famous film director, too, and one day he was dragged off to detention, as many intellectuals were at the time. The young Chen was allowed to visit him once, but was unsure what to say, so he asked his mother.

His mother said, "You just say, 'Make a confession to the Party.' I said, 'What is that?' I was 13."

Later, after months of detention, some of the Red Guards dragged Chen's father back home where young Kaige, full of fear, was pressed into denouncing his father to his face.

"I still remember that moment that my father looked at me and I felt like I didn't know who he was," said Chen. "That's quite a painful experience."

It took years for the Chens, father and son, to reconcile.

Finally, with the death of Mao in 1976, Ai Qing was allowed to return to Beijing.

Ai Weiwei, Map of China*, 2006, iron wood (Tieli wood from dismantled temples of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)* *(Ai Weiwei photo)*

Ai Weiwei completed his high school diploma that year and by then had begun to take an interest in art. He briefly entered the Beijing Film Academy but found the atmosphere rigid. Instead, he joined a group of experimental artists known as Xingxing, or the Stars, who were bent on leaving behind the late Mao's dictates on socialist art and striving instead for artistic freedom and indi-

vidual expression. They were a controversial group — sometimes confrontational. When denied exhibition space inside the China Art Gallery, they organized an exhibition outside on the street.

Activists of the period also organized what would come to be known as Democracy Wall — a kind of Twitter of its time, but localized to Beijing, the political, cultural and intellectual capital of China, and reliant of course on the handwritten word. Anyone could post anything they wished on the wall but the conversation naturally focused on freedom and democracy.

For months a lively debate ensued. But in the end, one activist dared to contradict senior Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, who had recently pronounced that China needed to modernize in four areas: agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology.

Signing his own name, activist Wei Jingsheng posted a "Fifth Modernization," stating that this one mattered more than the others: democracy.

The Democracy Wall ended then and Wei Jingsheng was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Not long after, Ai Weiwei left the country in disgust. Later, many of the other Stars would decamp too, most heading to Europe.

Bu Ai would choose a different destination.

4 Exile

As his father had gone to the centre of the art world of his time, so did Ai Weiwei. But by 1981, that centre had shifted from Paris to New York.

As the plane circled about the city shortly before 9 on a February evening, Ai gazed down on the lights of the metropolis, a city until now he had only imagined in his dreams, and was electric with hope and possibility. He was 23. He would stay for a dozen years.

Ai had followed a girlfriend who was studying in Philadelphia. But it was New York that would become his home. His basement apartment neat East Seventh Street and Second Avenue on the Lower East Side, which by all accounts was sparsely furnished, would become a destination for other Chinese artists who followed.

Eventually, Ai would have his first solo art exhibit in New York.

But in the beginning, his American period was all about observation, and he captured as much as he could with his cameras.

"A lot of the photographs taken by him (of himself) or by others, are of him looking into the camera," says Greg Hilty, of London's Lisson Gallery. "He has this very piercing stare. He was watching everything. And I think that this was the real quality of his years there. He was voracious . . . trying to understand everything."

It is a character trait that still defines Ai today.

"In any situation," says Hilty over coffee at the Art Gallery of Ontario, "he wants to understand. He is hungry for information."

As Hilty sees it, Ai was taking the measure of things during his New York period and the measure of himself.

His mature work would eventually come to reference his influences from that time, from French-American conceptual artist

Marcel Duchamp, to Jasper Johns and pop artist Andy Warhol, who was then enjoying something of a renaissance.

"But Ai Weiwei was his own person," says Hilty. "He wasn't following anyone."

Ai was impressed by the freedom and openness of American life, from street level all the way up to the highest echelons of power.

He was captivated, for example, by the Iran-Contra hearings, which were broadcast live on TV in the late 1980s.

"He was so excited about the idea that the government would go through this cleansing, this agony, this ripping itself apart," art historian Joan Lebold Cohen told Evan Osnos in a 2010 New Yorker profile. "He just couldn't believe that this was all done publicly."

Ai told me he was dumbfounded, too, by the fundamentally trusting nature of Americans, particularly during a period in which he was cleaning private apartments in Manhattan to make ends meet.

"They did not even know me. But they would hand me the keys and go off to work and leave me behind with all of their belongings. I was amazed by the trust."

Besides housecleaning, Ai kept himself financially afloat with a variety of jobs: he was a gardener, a babysitter, a handyman. He supplemented his income by mastering the art of blackjack during occasional runs to the gambling dens of Atlantic City.

When his girlfriend enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley, he moved cross-country and enrolled in a six-month English program there.

Then he was back to study at the Parsons School of Design in Greenwich Village, but again, the rigidity of academic structures and the requirement to study art history in particular — why would he want know who Picasso's mistresses were, Ai Weiwei asked — rankled.

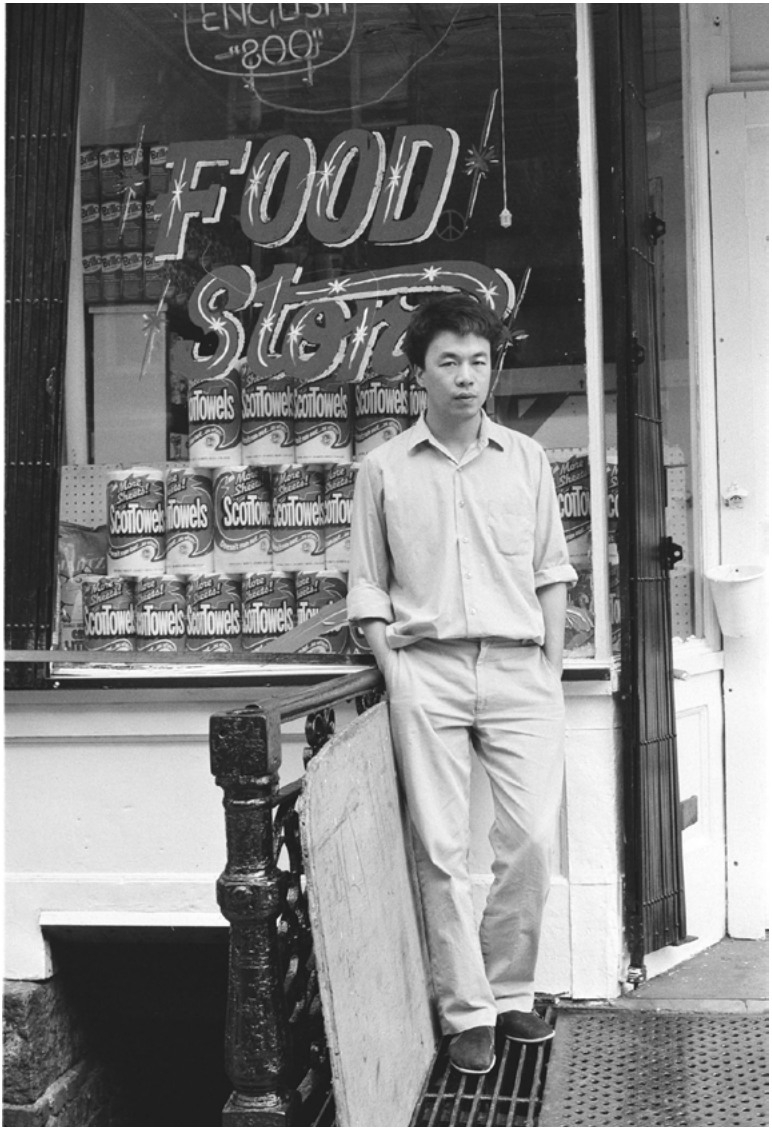
From 1983 to 1993 he documented New York street life, sometimes capturing the famous and the soon-to-be-famous with his lens: the poet Allen Ginsberg, friend and film director Chen Kaige, the yet-to-be-famous Chinese composer Tan Dun, as well as occasional news events, including the 1988 Tompkins Square riots in which New York City police clashed over a period of days with street people occupying the East Village park.

In May and June of 1989, Ai was spellbound by American news coverage of another set of demonstrations — those in Tiananmen Square.

In New York he joined demonstrators outside the United Nations headquarters and briefly went on a hunger strike. During calls home to his parents, he learned that Ai Qing had attended one of the rallies in his wheelchair and signed a petition in support of the students while his mother, like many Beijingers, had brought them food. But the end was brutal and the popular demonstrations that had begun with students and spread to other sectors of society were finally crushed on June 4 by government tanks. The theme song of the Tiananmen Square demonstrators spoke of the yearnings of a generation, not just for democracy, but also for the fundamental right to express themselves freely, for their own individuality.

Without that, Chinese rock 'n' roll star Cui Jian sang, they were left with very little.

The song's title was "Nothing But My Name."



New York Photographs, *1983-93. Ai Weiwei, Williamsburg, Brooklyn* *(Photo courtesy Ai Weiwei)*

5 Return

In 1993, having received word that his father was ill, Ai Weiwei flew back to China. His American period over, he landed back with a stronger sense of self than ever before and, if he was not exactly ready to rumble, he was poised to make artistic mischief. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, avant-garde groups like the Stars had fractured and dispersed; among Chinese contemporary artists, outside of official state-approved circles, there was an organizational vacuum. Ai, along with a small group of friends, moved into that vacuum and published a triptych of books from 1994 to 1997 that gathered up and publicized the works of a new core of young Chinese experimental artists who had been working independently. The books, privately published and secretly circulated, caused a stir and established Ai as an influential figure on the contemporary Chinese art scene.

In 1999, without a smidgen of architectural training, Ai designed and built a spacious home and studio in Beijing's Caochangdi district that resembled, with its stark grey bricks and simple lines, a sort of sleek, modernized version of the *hutong*, or Qing dynasty laneway house, so typical of old Beijing. Soon, other art studios began to gravitate there and, as an unexpected bonus, Ai was commissioned to design dozens of other architectural projects.

The next year he caused a sensation, co-curating a daring, landmark exhibition called "Fuck Off," as part of the third annual Shanghai Biennale. The aim was to introduce a new core of 46 contemporary artists to the Chinese public.

Included in the exhibition were a set of Ai's own iconic photographs titled *Study of Perspective* in which — mimicking the artistic practice of posing one's thumb against a distant object — he

instead gives the finger to some of the world's most powerful political and cultural monuments: the White House, the Eiffel Tower and Tiananmen Square, among others. It was the kind of playful and irreverent act that would inspire Holland Cotter of the New York Times to refer to him as a "scholar-clown." Ai Weiwei would not deny it. Anyone who knows him will tell you that he has always had an outrageous sense of humour and, despite the seriousness of his cause, he is a man who loves laughter. His version of the international pop hit "Gangnam Style" on YouTube makes that clear.

The authorities shut down "Fuck Off," but the show resonated and inspired.

By now Ai had made his mark as an artist, architect, photographer, designer and curator.

He had yet to establish himself as a writer, let alone an activist.

But in 2005 he discovered the Internet, and that made all the difference. At the time he barely knew how to type, but his first blog, written on Nov. 19 on Sina.com, China's biggest Internet portal, was classic Ai Weiwei: "If to express oneself one needs a reason," he wrote, "let me say that to express oneself is the reason."

Weiwei-isms would pour forth unabated for the next three and a half years, 2,700 blog posts in all, until the state could no longer stand it and, in May 2009, shut him down — typically, one might add, wiping clean any sign of the blog's existence.

But soon, like many Chinese, Ai applied the requisite technical tricks to scale China's Great Firewall — the electronic means by which the Chinese government controls the Internet — and signed on with social media beacon Twitter which, like Facebook and YouTube, is banned in China. Only the most determined and technically savvy can access them.

"Words can be deleted," Ai tweeted. "But facts won't be deleted."

He also took to giving interviews to Western journalists — he is effectively silenced in the Chinese media — and writing occasional

columns for newspapers, most frequently The Guardian in London. By now, Ai was unswervingly on the activist road.

"We are living under massive government controls," he explained to journalist-turned-academic Rebecca MacKinnon. "We can't say 'art for art's sake.' Art is about life. And our life is political."

Artists, he stressed, have a unique responsibility in the search for truth given their privileged position, especially in China where the Party controls all media.

"There is no way the Party leadership will relax censorship," Ai would write. "Their lives depend on the denial of freedom of speech and democracy.

"This fight is not about me," he clarified. "It's a fight for simple principles: freedom of expression and human rights — the essential rights, like sharing opinions, that make us human and not slaves."

In the spring and summer of 2009, Ai was growing bolder and bolder. That August, he travelled to the Sichuan capital of Chengdu to be a witness in the trial of activist Tan Zuoren, who had fallen afoul of the authorities by gathering information about what he had coined as the "tofu schools."

In the early hours of Aug. 12, 2009, while asleep in his hotel room, Ai was awoken by a knock on his door. In the dark he turned on his digital recorder and when he opened the door, police officers attacked him and knocked him to the floor, one clubbing him on the right side of his head. Ai and his small team were then taken to a room at another establishment and kept under guard until the trial was over.

Tan got five years.

But that wasn't the end of it.

One month later, while preparing for an exhibition in Germany, Ai had to be rushed to hospital for emergency neurosurgery to deal with a cerebral hemorrhage that had developed precisely

where he had suffered the blow to his head. He would eventually upload all the gory details to the Internet.

But worse was to come.

Ai Weiwei in the elevator when taken into custody by the police, 2009 *(Ai Weiwei photo)*

On April 3, 2011, as he was about to board a plane in Beijing for a meeting in Hong Kong, China's historic and vibrant port city, which still cleaves to freedoms non-existent on mainland China — including unfettered air connections to the West — Ai was arrested and his passport seized.

He was disappeared.

He was denied access to a lawyer or the right to call his family; indeed, his family was not even informed by authorities of his arrest until days later.

He had a black hood placed over his head, was put in the back of a vehicle and was driven off by car for two hours to an unknown

location. To this day he still does not know where he was taken.

When the hood was pulled off he found himself seated in a simple room measuring 3.6 by 7.2 metres with a toilet, shower, bed and armchair. He was immediately handcuffed to the chair.

Thereafter a rotating shift of two military police officers would stand next to him for 24 hours per day, every day, for 81 days, until he was finally released. It did not matter what Ai was doing — sleeping, showering, defecating. The soldiers watched.

Each day of his incarceration, Ai paced the floor for five hours, walking, by his own estimation, "over 1,000 miles." At that length he could have walked all the way to Chengdu — and partway back.

During repeated interrogations, Ai learned that the authorities had read every word he had ever written on the Internet — his blogs, his tweets, his emails — and they accused him of trying to subvert state power.

As a consequence, they warned him, he would be jailed for years, possibly decades, and he should think carefully about that. They said he would not see his then 2-year-old son again until Ai was a very old man.

That prospect shook him. He had never wanted children, but when his mistress insisted on keeping the child Ai Weiwei had fathered, he was compelled by the guidelines of his own philosophy to "take responsibility."

Because of the state's ceaseless surveillance, authorities were well aware of the personal details of Ai's sometimes complicated life: that he had met his wife, the artist Lu Qing, in 1994 and married her in a simple ceremony in New York in 1997; that he had recently fathered a child with a younger woman — and saw both mother and child every day; that he was considering an extended work period in Germany, where the art community and the government were enthusiastic supporters.

Ai was a doting father, fascinated by the growth of his young

son and completely smitten. The prospect of being put away, possibly for years, saddened him.

While in custody, Ai was denied access to art materials — including pen and paper. For an artist and communicator who sometimes spent six to 12 hours per day on the Internet, to be held incommunicado in a small room with nothing but his mind and memory was torture. Ai responded by memorizing every detail of his room, measuring it and every object within it with a mathematician's precision.

Meanwhile in the outside world, international condemnation of Ai's detention was swift. But so was worry.

Jerome Cohen, a New York University professor and internationally recognized expert on Chinese law, lamented the Chinese authorities' propensity for abuse of power. Chinese officials often like to say that "China is a country of the rule of law." But as Ai's beating in Sichuan and his disappearance at the Beijing airport serve to illustrate, the "rule of law" has yet to arrive.

The Sichuan assault, Cohen wrote, "revealed the misconduct that is typical of China's public security force." Ai's disappearance served to illustrate even more deeply "the abject helplessness of the individual" before the authorities' unchecked power.

In hindsight, Ai had been forewarned. Exactly one month before his arrest, a government spokesperson warned at a public press conference that "the law is not a shield" when it comes to dealing with people "creating trouble for China." The words were chilling and prophetic, and also served to underline an undeniable truth: if you are deemed by those in power in China to be a troublemaker, there is no law.

Ten days after he was nabbed at the airport, Ai's lawyers still had not seen him. And police were busy issuing themselves search warrants and scouring his premises.

Meanwhile in Hong Kong, the former British colony where free

speech is still tolerated under an agreement by which the port city was returned to China in 1997, something mischievous was under way, something of which Ai Weiwei himself would have approved. Graffiti made with stencils and showing the sage-like visage of Ai Weiwei were turning up all over the city. Underneath Ai's iconic image were the mocking words: "WHO'S AFRAID OF AI WEI-WEI?"

Popular T-shirt from Hong Kong supportive of Ai Weiwei's activism

The answer, of course, was obvious: those in power.

Finally, shortly before midnight on June 22, 2011, Ai was released and returned home, wearing a favoured blue T-shirt, looking leaner but relieved. Video showed him alighting from a car in darkness outside his gate, smiling.

Ai was released on a year's parole on condition that he not post on the Internet, not write articles, not speak to journalists, not reveal what happened while he was in detention and certainly not associate with other activists.

He would later be charged with tax evasion.

Exactly one year later, when his probation and restrictions expired, his passport had still not been returned.

Ai was free and yet not free.

In time, on the other side of the world in Toronto, this would prove to be a conundrum for Matthew Teitelbaum.

6 Ai in Toronto

Early on a weekday morning beneath the window of Matthew Teitelbaum's office, on the fourth floor of the Chalmers wing of the Art Gallery of Ontario, where he serves as CEO, two people in a park perform the silent, delicate dance of tai chi.

Teitelbaum will soon face the challenge of performing his own.

A major retrospective of Ai Weiwei's work opens on Aug. 17 at the AGO, arguably Canada's most prestigious art venue, but the artist cannot attend. The Chinese government will not allow Ai Weiwei to travel outside the country. The prohibition, Ai says, is part of his punishment for his continued activism.

As a consequence, Teitelbaum faces a situation unprecedented in his gallery's history. The AGO will present the artist's work in the absence of the artist.

"How can you present an exhibition of a contemporary artist and not have the artist present?" he asks. "The artist owns his or her work, owns the ideas, owns the public presentation, owns the interaction with the audience."

One of the very things that makes the art world so exciting, he explains, is having the artist on hand to engage the audience, "to explain, to defend, to advocate."

That responsibility will now fall to Teitelbaum. And in the interest of doing that and doing it well, he boarded a plane this spring and flew to China to meet the artist in his Beijing studio.

Teitelbaum wanted not only to meet Ai Weiwei but to try to gain a deeper feeling for the conditions of Ai's day-to-day existence. Once there, Teitelbaum understood that the artist's campaign for freedom of expression was real and palpable.

"You walk in the front door and you're under surveillance."

Cameras are permanently posted atop hydro poles nearby, and

no one moves in or out of Ai's home and studio without the police knowing.

Teitelbaum wanted to bring back Ai Weiwei's voice — maybe even Ai Weiwei himself — for the exhibition in Toronto.

Ai wants to come, the AGO wants him here, and efforts are now under way to see whether they can pull it off. But the AGO's CEO, ever the diplomat, won't discuss the details.

If the Chinese government were to relax controls and allow Ai to make the Toronto trip, the soft power dividend for China would be considerable: it would generate positive headlines around the world. But China experts and betting artists say the odds of that happening are slim. Beijing marches to its own unforgiving drummer.

Inside Ai's studio, Teitelbaum gained a quick appreciation for the life of an artist-in-captivity in China: to a large extent Ai is silenced, cut off and confined.

Chinese media cannot write about him, he is prohibited from exhibiting and his name is banned from the Internet in China.

And yet he is not totally silenced, not completely disconnected or entirely isolated.

It is a world of contradictions. Visitors come and go, and Ai has access to email and the Internet most days through his own ingenuity — he has had to use 100 different IP addresses in a single month. He can make and take overseas phone calls at will, very likely monitored of course.

The visit lasted a couple of "intense" hours, says Teitelbaum, while seven or eight artist assistants busied themselves at computers nearby. Teitelbaum is not presumptuous enough to pronounce on Ai's character. But he found the encounter totally engaging.

Earlier in his career, Ai Weiwei had made waves with a piece of performance art in which he took ancient Han dynasty urns, 2,000 years old, and dropped them on concrete, smashing them to bits.

The simple, daring, destructive act, captured on film, was meant to symbolize the moment when traditions burst and make way for new forms and values. The artist's view is that the best and purest way to honour the brilliance of tradition is to build ever new ones. Still, some were scandalized.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Um, *1995, triptych, b/w print*
(Ai Weiwei photo)

"I asked him, if there was only one such pot left in the world, would he drop it? He thought for about 20 seconds, which is a long time, and he said it wouldn't matter. If there was only one pot there is no history." Teitelbaum then pauses in the telling.

"It was such an interesting response and clearly showed that he knows that history is about tradition, history is about legacy, it's about preservation.

"This is a man who loves his country," says Teitelbaum. "This is not someone who has turned his back on what he sees as the great traditions of his country, which he clearly cares about deeply.

"He is deeply embedded and committed to Chinese history."

Teitelbaum knows that in exhibiting Ai Weiwei's work, giving it a venue and allowing him a voice, the AGO is taking a stand for

freedom of expression.

He calls it "an honour."

"Maybe there is nothing more important in the context of contemporary culture than preserving the artist's right to speak."

The show, which began its trek around the world in 2009 and continues to evolve as it does, will have special resonance in Toronto, where today large numbers of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese immigrants reside. They follow the daily news from China intently and are well aware of both the tragedy and controversy surrounding the Sichuan earthquake.

One of the most controversial and moving pieces in the show, certain to cause a stir, is *Straight,* 38 tonnes of steel rebar from the very schools that collapsed during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which powerfully evokes the heartbreak of the "tofu schools" disaster.

Ai Weiwei, Straight, *2008-2012, steel reinforcing bars, installation view, Zuecca Project Space, Venice, 2013* *(courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery)*

Ai and his team bought them from recyclers who had gathered them up for resale.

Greg Hilty of London's Lisson Gallery calls the work "a piece of genius."

"When you get a piece that fuses artistic traditions, material presence and meaning, then you have something truly amazing. I think you'd be wrong to say, 'This is art, not activism,' because actually it is the perfect fusion of both."

Hilty, whose gallery handles the artist's work in London, calls Ai a fundamentally reflective person, endowed with a deep sense of morality, but says he is above all an artist and his activism gains strength from the power of his art.

"He has a passionate sense of righteousness, of what's wrong, what's right. When things are wrong he wants to make them right. There is a strong sense of moral integrity that runs through everything that he does."

Taking those once horribly bent and distorted pieces of rebar and making them straight again is more than just Ai's wishful thinking; it is the artist's act of finally setting things right.

Even the painstaking act of installing the piece in its various venues around the world — workers must take mallets and hammer each piece of rebar into its precise place — brings added value and meaning, Teitelbaum believes.

"The act of doing that, it almost becomes ritualistic, becomes part of the meaning of the work . . . the repetition of it, the care of it, the laboriousness of it. It is a sort of 'giving back' through labour to mark the tragedy.

"I believe works of art can do that," he says.

Daringly, the AGO intends to go one step further than any other artistic venue where the exhibit has shown: on Aug. 18 the gallery will hold a special remembrance for the children who perished in

the quake, and each of the 5,212 names that Ai Weiwei and his teams unearthed will be read out loud by members of the public.

"Some people say, 'Oh, that's a pretty aggressive thing to do,' " says Teitelbaum. "But it's an interpretation of a work of art. It is bringing to life an idea embedded in the artist's work."

Ai is said to love the idea and is encouraging it.

But is he an artist or a dissident, Teitelbaum is asked.

"If I didn't take him seriously as an artist, we would be hard-pressed to do this exhibition," he says. "If you are going to give over real estate and do a major project like this, you better believe in the art."

The AGO does.

"Seldom does an institution have an opportunity to make the case for art and its ability to change the way people think as this exhibition allows us to do," says Teitelbaum.

In a sense, this is Ai Weiwei's Toronto summer. Suddenly — passport or no passport — his presence is everywhere. His majestic *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* are drawing public audiences daily in Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square, emerging from pools of water beneath the city's Freedom Arches. Not far away, inside the AGO, the gallery has already installed *Snake Ceiling*, a brilliant, thought-provoking, green-coloured snake comprising nearly 900 schoolchildren's backpacks, once wriggling with life, now frozen in time across the ceiling. Also, on a beautiful June night, Ai made a surprise appearance from China via Skype, on monitors suspended above David Pecaut Square, joining the American performance artist and musician Laurie Anderson for a performance of their co-authored *Greetings from the Motherland*.

The duet showed that neither government threats nor geographic distance can prevent Ai from reaching out and crossing borders. Despite occasional technical glitches, the performance demonstrated that Ai has lost none of his vigour or commitment

in his pursuit of free expression.

One of Ai Weiwei's Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads *at Toronto city hall (Chris So/Toronto Star)*

While Anderson's jazz ensemble played the rhythms of a slow, exhausted train rolling through a dreamscape, Ai recounted his dark days in detention.

"Two-thousand-and-eleven, April 3rd, I was arrested and detained for 81 days," he began as the train rolled. "The detention cell was in a secret location . . . and no one was supposed to know . . . "

Hundreds of people jammed into the square to listen to Ai recount in telling detail the circumstances of an artist in the 21st century having a hood placed over his head and being chained to a chair.

"Oh that's China," Ai sang. "No one has a voice/ No one has a ticket . . .

"They brainwash you . . . can arrest you anywhere . . .

"That's China."

Anderson told me after the show, "I am a great admirer. He has really been through a wringer."

Anderson, who for her part in the duet decried the decline of American leadership and life — "What's wrong with America?/ What's happening here?/What war is this?" — was acutely aware of the differences between her and Ai.

"I can be openly critical of the United States — I'm a privileged person in that way," she says. "But I haven't been sent to Guantanamo. I have not been sent to detention."

If Chinese authorities were hoping that 81 days in detention would silence Ai, they were sorely mistaken. In the same way that the Sichuan earthquake proved to be a watershed moment for the artist, so too has his detention allowed him to take his art and activism to the next level.

The experience of detention has proven rich fodder for Ai's artistic mind: it became the basis of his Toronto Skype performance, the main narrative for *Dumbass*, his first-ever, heavy-metal music video and, perhaps most sensationally, the foundation for six arresting dioramas installed at this year's 55th Venice Biennale.

Ai Weiwei's dioramas, called *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, drew commentary from across the Western world.

Installed in the deconsecrated Church of St. Anthony, where painted saints and statuary look down from above, the dioramas are six black metal boxes showing figures of Ai in the various stages of his detention, monitored by two soldiers who are always by his side, through interrogation, defecation, showering, meal time and sleep.

Viewers are allowed to peer into the boxes like voyeurs, through small slots, to witness scenes the Chinese authorities would rather no one saw.

The exteriors of the boxes are flat black. There are no windows. While in detention Ai had no idea what lay beyond the walls. It was only upon his release, as he was leaving, that he noted a number on the outside of the door: 1125.

Ai's mother, Gao Ying, attended the show's opening and wept.

But at the other end of the spectrum, some critics have taken umbrage, saying Ai is portraying himself as a saint and martyr.

Hilty begs to differ.

"I believe it is the opposite," he tells me. "He is not saying that he is a saint. But in a way, he is bringing the saints back to life as contemporary figures.

"These were real people who had real faith and followed their convictions to the point that they were crucified or tortured."

Hilty feels the work suggests some very simple, very human, down-to-earth questions.

"What do you believe in? How strong are your convictions? What are you willing to go through? That is the kind of strong moral core that lies within."

Over the course of Ai Weiwei's 56 years China has undergone enormous change.

He was born on the cusp of the worst catastrophe in China's history: Mao's Great Leap Forward, a disastrous experiment, launched in 1958, aimed at fast-tracking China's economy. It trig-

gered tyranny and famine across China and left 45 million people dead in just four years.

Still more tyranny followed, first the Cultural Revolution and then, of course, the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Ai has come through turbulent times to arrive at today's China, a country that has, on one level, emerged as an economic powerhouse. But some things have not changed. China retains its familiar authoritarian rule. The Party still prevails.

If there is one thing the artist wants for his country, New York art dealer and personal Ai Weiwei friend Larry Warsh says, it is a more humane country, a country led by a government that respects and cares for people.

"What he wants isn't complicated at all. It's very simple things, and there is nothing at all revolutionary about it," says Warsh. "He doesn't want to overthrow the government. This is about basic human principles: the establishment of the rule of law and a basic way to behave."

Very few people in China openly demand anything. Given the turbulence that has marked modern China, very few dare.

But Ai has a privileged position as an artist and he knows that with privilege also comes responsibility.

"Ai Weiwei is human, caring, compassionate and sincere," says Warsh.

Will Ai's vision of that better China come to pass in his own lifetime, or perhaps in his son's lifetime?

"We are not sure when," says Warsh. "But it will happen."

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