

BY
ANDREW COHEN

AI

WEIWEI



(Previous spread)
Ai Weiwei with his son Ai Lao,
on the artist's installation *Sunflower
Seeds* (2010) in the Turbine Hall,
Tate Modern, London, 2010.
Courtesy AW Asia, New York.

(Opposite page)
The artist's studio in Shanghai,
built in July 2010, being demolished
by city officials on January 11, 2011.

All images in this article are courtesy
the artist.



It was inevitable: the scent of jasmine blowing east incited

China's government to arrest Ai Weiwei amid its fiercest crackdown on dissent in two decades. After three years of censoring Ai's work, bashing in his head, placing him under house arrest while later demolishing his Shanghai studio, the authorities abducted him at Beijing Capital Airport on April 3. For 80 days no word had been heard from him, save for a brief visit with his wife in an undisclosed location. Then, on June 22, a skinnier, frail Ai was released on bail, reportedly charged with tax evasion.

Many critics mistakenly claim he is a political activist, not an artist. Or that he has two faces: Ai the artist and Ai the politician. Government officials claim he is a tool used by Western countries to humiliate China, stir unrest and tarnish its international reputation, while others have called him a self-serving opportunist who craves the limelight. Whatever one's opinion, what is certain is that politics are integral to his art; they are inseparable parts of a whole that inspire and complement each other. Ai's work has been nurtured by a life lived in the shadow of totalitarianism, his formative years as a student and struggling artist in New York, a later engagement with Chinese art history, and his revolutionary roots.

Ai became known for taking artistic and political risks, just like his father, Ai Qing (1910–1996), one of China's most celebrated modern poets, did a generation before him. When he was 18, Ai Qing journeyed to Paris and spent three years studying Impressionist and Postimpressionist painting there. Heavily influenced by Communist doctrine, he returned to China in 1932 to fight for its liberation from the Nationalists. He joined the China Left Wing Artist Association—renaming it the more innocuous-sounding Spring Earth Painting Club (*Chundi huahui*)—that was led by revolutionary woodblock artist Jiang Feng. After Nationalist police raided the group's clubhouse in 1932 for running underground printing presses and exhibitions, Ai Qing was tortured in a Kuomintang (KMT) prison.

In captivity for three years, together with Jiang he organized hunger strikes to protest prisoner mistreatment, and turned the jail into a makeshift school with a schedule of art and literature classes. It was there that he began to write poetry under the pseudonym Ai Qing, as his real name, Jiang Haicheng, resembled that of KMT

leader, Chiang Kai Shek. Upon his release, Ai Qing became famous as a modernist poet writing about daily life in a simply worded, free-flowing style that gained him the proletariat's admiration. Using his privileged status after liberation, he championed the right of freedom of expression and the role of the artist as social critic.

However, Ai Qing was labeled a reactionary for not writing according to the Party's demands, and for supporting denounced writer Ding Ling. In 1957, just after his son Weiwei was born, the Communist leadership unleashed its first wave of antirightist campaigns. Ai Qing was "sent down" to the desert of western Xinjiang province. His wife and children followed him to this barren outback, where they lived in an earthen pit. Betrayed by the Communist Party he had fought and sacrificed his freedom for, Ai Qing was silenced for the next 20 years—reduced to digging toilets.

"It wasn't the kind of flushing toilets with a seat. It was in a pit in the ground," Ai Weiwei's mother says in Alison Klayman's documentary film *Never Sorry* (2011). "The winter was very cold, and the piss and excrement would freeze like stones. He had to take a shovel and break apart the ice, then move the excrement to another place. It was a hard life." According to Ai, his father attempted suicide on many occasions; the torment of his experiences in Xinjiang was at times too much to bear. Nevertheless, there was some hope. At the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Ai Qing was rehabilitated by the new government, and returned with his family to Beijing where he was given the honorable role of Vice Chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association.

At this point there began to emerge certain parallels in the life of Ai Weiwei and his father. In 1978, at the age of 21, Ai enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy. He received public recognition for his artwork a year later as a participant in the seminal Stars group, the first avant-garde art movement to jettison propagandistic Revolutionary Realism. Wang Keping, one of the leaders of the Stars group, tells me, "The key organizer of the show was Jiang Feng, a good friend of Ai Qing. Ai Weiwei was very young then, and he showed his Impressionist-style paintings. They weren't political, but the Impressionist style was forbidden."

Fed up with a system that had persecuted his father and that

continued to crush the hope of his own generation's New Democracy Movement with the jailing of fellow activist Wei Jingsheng, Ai left China in 1981 and moved to the United States on a student visa, echoing his father's migration to Paris 50 years earlier. On the way to the airport, he reportedly told his mother: "In ten years I'll come back home and you'll see the next Picasso."

In New York, he enrolled at the Parsons School of Design, where he worked with painter Sean Scully, his teacher. Speaking in a telephone interview, Scully remembers Ai "as an intense and earnest person, who was very serious about learning the traditions of politically inclined conceptual art." Scully introduced him to works by Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, Kurt Schwitters, Fluxus artists, Joseph Beuys, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth and Hanne Darboven, among others.

After a year he dropped out of Parsons because he found the art history classes difficult to follow with his rudimentary English skills, and, as he told New York's *Village Voice* reporter Gail Pellett in 1985, "I don't like to be told what assignments I have to do." Ai settled in Manhattan's East Village, thanks in part to the connections of Chinese expatriate artist Zhang Hongtu, who helped him secure an apartment and a workspace. As the son of one of China's most famous poets, Ai became known among Chinese expatriates living abroad, and his apartment on East 3rd Street became a hangout for many artists and friends passing through the city.

Beat poet and political activist Allen Ginsberg lived nearby, and became a sort of role model for Ai. Like Ai's father, Ginsberg had also been denounced for his poetry, which was censored and tried in the US courts. Ginsberg was devoted to eradicating the boundaries between his public and private personas, and just as importantly, between his politics and art—qualities that greatly appealed to Ai. Known for photographing the daily lives of his fellow Beat writers, such as Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, Ginsberg encouraged Ai's newfound passion for photography. In a similarly spontaneous style, Ai documented himself and the lives of his Chinese artist peers in New York. He photographed an impressive array of famous or soon-to-be famous Chinese cultural figures as they passed through his apartment, including Fifth Generation filmmakers Chen Kaige,

In a comment from 2003 that eerily foreshadows his persecution by the government, Ai said, "You know, maybe my life means nothing. But my enemies make it worthwhile."

Gu Changwei and Zhao Fei; Misty School poets Shu Ting and Bei Dao; and artists Xu Bing, Wang Keping, Chen Danqing and He Duoling.

Despite these connections, Ai still found it difficult to break into the New York art scene. His work went against the trendy Soho mainstream of Neoexpressionism and the new hip-hop and graffiti cultures exploding all over the city. “I didn’t feel right or connected to the New York art scene,” he told curator Charles Merewether in 2003. “The large paintings by Julian Schnabel and others were very beautiful but empty.” When he wasn’t working part-time jobs in construction, house-cleaning, babysitting, as a portrait artist in Times Square or playing blackjack in Atlantic City to supplement his income, he whiled away his time snapping photos and exploring museums, where he was repeatedly drawn to the works of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns—figures who became important to his creative process.

Profile of Duchamp, Sunflower Seeds (1983) foreshadowed the direction Ai’s work would take in his mature years. He bent a wire clothes hanger into the profile of Duchamp, mounted it flat on a wooden board and affixed empty sunflower seed hulls within the wire frame. During his lifetime, Mao would say he was the sun shining down on the masses that turned toward him like sunflowers. In Ai’s satirical profile, the masses cluster together to pay homage not to Mao, but to the founding father of the readymade.

Another important work from his New York days, *Violin* (1985), combines two found objects—the body of a violin and the handle of a shovel—into a single assemblage. From the perspective of Karl Marx’s dialectical materialism, one could interpret this work as a humorous synthesis of the conflict between the violin (the bourgeoisie) and its antithetical shovel (the workers). *Violin* also poignantly evokes his father’s punishment as a toilet cleaner and his artistic vision of bringing poetry to the proletariat.

Ai continued to produce politically charged readymades as



the AIDS epidemic hit New York. In 1986, he created *Safe Sex*, a buttoned-up black raincoat with a hole cut into its lower half, from which an unfurled condom protrudes. A man could ostensibly have sex while wearing this item without having to unbutton it. Recalling the old joke, “wearing a condom is like taking a shower with a raincoat,” the work evokes the feelings of fear and estrangement that gripped the city’s inhabitants, who were suddenly faced with the reality that unprotected sex was no longer the luxury of the post-1950s era of free love but was now a potentially life-threatening act.

Ai’s influences were evident throughout his work of the 1980s. There are two photos of him, each taken in 1987—the year Andy Warhol died—showing him at the Museum of Modern Art. In one, he stands in front of Warhol’s *Self-Portrait* (1966), imitating the artist’s pose, and in the other he looks at Duchamp’s *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918). In Ai’s *One-Man Shoe* (1987), he clearly plays on the phrase

“one-man show,” combining Duchamp’s concept of the readymade with Warhol’s early Pop shoes. Like the mythical “Pushmi-pullyu”—Dr. Dolittle’s double-headed llama that cannot move forward or backward because both heads try to move in opposite directions—Ai’s double-toed shoe struggles with the same predicament. Perhaps he felt he was not progressing enough in New York. Or, perhaps the shoe represents the push and pull he felt between his Chinese roots and the American dream. Even though Ai had his first New York solo show, “Old Shoes, Safe Sex,” at Art Waves Ethan Cohen Gallery, in 1988, it didn’t fulfill his expectations. Zhang Hongtu told me, “After that show Weiwei said, ‘I don’t feel I have dignity in this country.’ He felt disappointed with the show; works didn’t sell, and he felt he couldn’t express his voice. He expected a lot and got nothing.”

Still searching for his artistic voice, Ai was increasingly drawn to the political conflicts in Manhattan’s Alphabet City. He told Stephanie Tung and Alison Klayman in an interview: “I was interested in individual rights, group rights and their relation to power in the form of police control.” In 1988, Ai took photos of the antigentrification riots of Tompkins Square Park; they were used in court by the American Civil Liberties Union to prove incidents of police brutality. Yet, despite his growing involvement in the East Village campaign, he seemed unable to establish himself among the multitude of rebellious artists and gonzo journalists. He said he was wasting his time in New York—feelings of ennui that were perhaps due, in part, to reports of the growing student democracy movement back in China. When compared to the institutionalized authoritarian crackdowns, imprisonments, torture and lack of freedoms throughout his homeland, Tompkins Square paled against Tiananmen Square. In reaction to the June 4 massacre, Zhang said that Ai traveled to Washington, DC, to participate in a mass protest. He also staged an eight-day hunger strike—an echo of his father’s tactics against his KMT jailers 50 years prior. And then, the fate of Ai’s father once again determined his next big life change: Ai Qing fell terminally ill, prompting Ai to move back to Beijing in 1993.

When he returned to Beijing, Ai was not the next Picasso, but a relatively unknown artist. “It wasn’t possible to be a successful artist at that time,” he explained to Tung and Klayman. “I wasn’t disappointed with America because I didn’t have too many hopes for it.” Nevertheless, all the knowledge and experience he gained in New York proved invaluable to his later mix of art and politics, as well as his many confrontations with the Chinese authorities. His fresh perspective on life in his homeland was particularly appealing to a newly formed group of radical performance artists living in a migrant-worker’s village on the east side of Beijing, coincidentally called the East Village. The visceral performances of Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Rong Rong and Zhu Ming, among others, were far more avant-garde and daring than anything Ai had encountered in the United States; their activities led to arrests and ultimately their group’s forced disbanding. Immediately recognizing their talent, Ai applied his acquired practical and theoretical knowledge to helping them organize publications of their work.

Recalling this period, Li Xianting, the art critic who first supported the 1979 Stars group and the East Village artists, tells me, “The first thing Ai Weiwei did when he came back to China was publish three booklets, in black, gray and white, for the independent artists based in the East Village—he was a much wealthier man than we were. Inside were photographs of the artists staging their performances, and he distributed these booklets, helping to promote those artists.”

Echoing this perspective, Xing Danwen, a photographer who had her studio in the East Village, describes Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming as very close with Ai: “He was doing his ‘Black Book’ then, and he had more experience and vision. They needed his support. They had no name, no power, no money—just their ideas. He offered a publication. He influenced the young artists. He practiced his New York experience on the blank page of China.”

While Ai and Feng Boyi were publishing these three *Cover Books*

(Opposite Page)
**PROFILE OF DUCHAMP,
SUNFLOWER SEEDS,**
1983
C-print, 20 x 28.5 cm.

(This page, top)
American poet and activist
Allen Ginsberg and **Ai Weiwei**
in New York City’s East Village
in the 1980s.
Photographed by Ai Weiwei.

(This page, bottom)
A camera crew captures a police
officer confronting rioters, during the
August 1988 riots at Tompkins Square
Park, New York. Photographed by
Ai Weiwei.





(Opposite Page)
Members of the experimental East Village artist community in Beijing, 1994. Photographed by Ai Weiwei.

(This page, top)
HAN DYNASTY URN WITH COCA-COLA LOGO
1994
Paint on Western Han Dynasty urn (206 BC – 24 AD), 25.4 x 27.9 x 27.9 cm.

(This page, bottom)
STUDY OF PERSPECTIVE – TIANANMEN SQUARE
1995–2003
Black-and-white print, 90 x 127 cm.

Ai developed a more overtly aggressive and confrontational stance by the beginning of the 2000s, when he collaborated with Feng Boyi to curate the “Fuck Off” exhibition, held in a Shanghai warehouse.

(1994–97), offering critical guidance and support to the East Village group, Ai’s father’s health was deteriorating. In the interview with Merewether, Ai recalls, “I always remember my father saying before he passed away, ‘This is your country. You don’t have to be so polite. You can do whatever you want to.’”

This sentiment set the tone for the more overtly aggressive and confrontational stance that Ai developed by the beginning of the 2000s, when he collaborated with Feng Boyi to curate the “Fuck Off” exhibition, held in 2000 in a Shanghai warehouse operated by Eastlink Gallery. Billed as an alternative exhibition opening simultaneously with the state-sanctioned Shanghai Biennale, it stole the limelight by featuring antiestablishment performance artists from Beijing. The radical show, which presented photographs of Zhu Yu cooking and eating what was allegedly a fetus, and Ai Weiwei himself raising his middle finger to icons of global power—such as the White House and Mao’s portrait hanging on the main gate of the Forbidden City in Tiananmen Square—offered the public an independent view of contemporary art. The authorities, of course, soon closed it down, as they already had with the East Village.

Reconnecting with his personal and cultural roots in China, Ai’s use of the readymade in his art evolved accordingly. “After my return I became interested in classical Chinese art,” he told Merewether. “I had nothing to do, so I was going to the antiques market. Before I left I had no interest. But later I became interested in how within each dynasty there was a clear definition of shape, color and markings they wished to put on every object.”

His first piece in a series of historical readymades was *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* (1994), for which the artist painted the brand’s cursive logo onto the ancient artifact. Again we see Ai’s synthesis of Duchamp’s readymade with Warhol’s Pop, but now with distinctly Chinese characteristics. With *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), he took this concept a step further and, in a photo-documented performance, let the antique fall to the floor,



satirizing the blind obedience paid by the Red Guards to Mao’s dictum, “Destroy the Old.” Uli Sigg, Ai’s close friend and a collector of his work, says in the documentary, “He will always go 180 degrees against the mainstream. We talk about the vase, we may raise it to a pedestal; he drops it to the floor.”

Meanwhile, in the “Blue and White” series, Ai employed workers in a porcelain factory to create accurate imitations of the highly treasured Qing Dynasty blue-and-white porcelain in order to question what is real and what is fake in relation to value, authorship and authenticity. Similarly, in his “Furniture” series (1997–2000), Ai reassembles Qing Dynasty furniture into radiating abstractions, absurdly reshaping history in a society whose government is forever revising the past for its present needs.

In contrast to the country’s haphazard and environmentally unfriendly urbanization policies, Ai’s growing interest in architecture would emphasize common logic, utilitarian use of space, and simplicity of design and material to create structures that harmonize organically with the surrounding environment. Studio House, the loft-like home and studio, with its gray brick façade, built in 1999, became one of his signature styles. “He designed some artists’ studios, and supported Caochangdi Workstation from the beginning,” says Li Xianting. “It has now become one of the most active art spaces in Beijing.”

In 2003, Ai opened his own architecture and design studio, which he named Fake Design. Harkening back to the days of his father’s banishment, Ai blogged, “My earliest experience with architecture was when I was eight years old, and we were sent down to Xinjiang; as punishment we were forced to live in an earthen pit . . . On one occasion, because there was no light, my father was descending into our home and smashed his head on a roof beam. He fell with a bleeding forehead. Because of this, we dug out one shovel’s depth of dirt, an equivalent to raising our roof twenty centimeters. Architecture requires common sense, a ton of common sense.” (March 24, 2006)

Ai worked as a consultant with Herzog & de Meuron to design the Beijing National Stadium, popularly known as “The Bird’s Nest,” for the 2008 Summer Olympics. However, he later held the propagandistic nature of the project in low regard; speaking to students at Cornell University in 2006, he said, “To design a stadium requires as much passion as to design a toilet seat.” He distanced himself from the entire Olympics, saying he wanted nothing more to do with this fake smile of China. He felt that the ceremonious pomp surrounding the games was, as he wrote on his blog, “a visual crap pile of phony affection and hypocritical unction. It was a phony scene of cultural prosperity, one that runs counter to reality.”

Becoming increasingly outspoken and confrontational, Ai used his blog to deliver opinions to a mass audience in China and abroad. “The internet can do more to accelerate China’s reforms than any other thing,” he told journalist Rebecca MacKinnon in 2009. The ideas poured forth. Ai wrote profusely, often using humorous analogies to highlight his points—he once compared Beijing’s convoluted new architecture to wearing high heels while hiking. Likewise, he employed biting metaphors: “The relationship of any good government to its people is that of a dog to its master . . . But in China . . . this dog is always in the position of master. To make matters worse,” his post continues, “this dog often bites its master—we frequently see citizens who have been crippled by their government, beaten black and blue.” (March 16, 2007)

Discovering the potential of the internet, Ai found his breakthrough voice, reinventing performance art in China. He altered the course of art history by mobilizing the silenced public to actively participate in creating art that reflected on the current affairs that affect their daily lives. “I can imagine using my artistic skills entirely for political ends,” he told architect and writer Mathieu Wellner in 2009.

Documenta 12, held in Kassel, Germany, in 2007, provided the stage for Ai’s marriage of internet activism and performance



(This page)
FOUNTAIN OF LIGHT
 2007
 Steel and glass crystals on a wooden base, 700 x 529 x 400 cm.

(Opposite page, top)
 Researchers and volunteers traveled across Sichuan province as part of the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, an effort for which Ai's personal blog served as an online platform.

(Opposite page, bottom)
CIRCLE OF ANIMALS / ZODIAC HEADS
 2011
 View of the installation before its unveiling at the Pulitzer Fountain, New York, on May 2, 2011. Photo by ArtAsiaPacific.

art. In *Fairytale* (2007), he used the internet as a means to refresh Beuys' concept of social sculpture—the notion that all of society is one great work of art to which each individual contributes. Through questionnaires on his blog, asking about religion and East-West cultural differences, he chose 1,001 Chinese citizens (the 1,001st person emphasizes the individual over the group of 1,000) and flew them out to Kassel to participate in an improvised art performance centered around their lives and their relations to travel, to each other, to viewing and being viewed in the context of an art exhibition. "It doesn't require things to be represented in artistic form, but requires art to be life, normalized," Ai said in a 2007 conversation with Fu Xiaodong.

That same year, integrating conceptual sculpture with his interest in architecture, he created *Fountain of Light* (2007), a tongue-in-cheek attempt to realize Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's unrealized utopian architectural project, *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20). Commenting on the work, Li Xianting told me, "Ai employs the style of ludicrous mocking or cynical imitation. His tower is built with glass instead of steel, and it looks like an awkward tower of lights. The Chinese government constructs a lot of public projects with lights because it makes the city look instantly modern at night. Like these projects in China, Tatlin's Tower was also a propaganda tool for international Communism. Ai's tower wittily makes fun of the two."

In 2008 and 2009, Ai's blog posts became more and more politicized, directly calling into question the authorities' official accounts of public affairs. When a major earthquake rocked Sichuan province in 2008, killing 70,000 people, the local government refused to release the names of the children who died. Ai launched a call to action on his blog, demanding the freedom of information. He and others believed shoddy construction of schools caused the majority of the children's deaths, utilizing "tofu-dregs" engineering that neglected officially mandated safety standards. The investigation involved 300 citizen volunteers, chosen through another blog-posted questionnaire that asked about fear of authority and the importance of truth. Their brave efforts resulted in the documentation of over 5,000 children's names, which Ai posted on the web (and also made into a DVD in collaboration with *ArtAsiaPacific*, which was distributed for free in 2010). This tragedy inspired Ai's interactive art event that allowed a nation to properly mourn the loss of its children without the indignity of anonymity.

Ai incorporated the results of this research into *Remembering*

(2009), an installation of 9,000 children's backpacks affixed to the façade of Munich's Haus der Kunst. With this work he recalled the horrific images of children's backpacks lying in their mass grave of collapsed schoolhouses. The colorful new bags spelled out words uttered by one young victim's mother: "She lived happily in this world for seven years."

Of course, to openly mobilize people in China is a huge risk. As he posted on his blog, "Just speaking the truth would be 'subversion of the state.'" (April 13, 2009) The Sichuan investigation would prove the death knell for his blog, with the authorities regularly censoring posts. Ai's home was under surveillance and his phone was tapped. But these constraints only fueled his resolve.

"My opinion," says Li Xianting, "is that these actions are actually his art performing in life, although the government sees them as political activities. Ai's investigation is not led by any organization, nor does it have any political principle. It shows only his emotion and anger. Therefore, I see this as an act of art. He is good at using the media. I call him 'The internet headline party' (*Biaoti Dang*)—it's a slang expression that I borrowed from the internet."

Almost inevitably, as the 20-year anniversary of Tiananmen approached, in May 2009 the authorities shut down Ai's blog—an act reminiscent of their clampdown on art magazines in 1989. Undeterred, Ai responded by adapting his writing to Twitter. "In the Chinese language 140 characters is a novella," he said in an interview with editor Lee Ambrozy. "I'm often thinking of something Allen Ginsberg told me: 'The first thought is the best thought.'"

As he had also learned from his father's poetry, simplicity is the best way to communicate with massive audiences. His Chinese Twitter feed, which has more than 85,000 followers, reached Chinese web users, who can access programs that enable them to jump the great firewall. "Every delight we had on Twitter is a death of dictatorship and totalitarianism," he tweeted in September 2009. As his fame and popularity grew, he became a virtual, cult-like figure: people started calling him *Ai Shen*, or "Holy Ai."

In a comment from 2003 that eerily foreshadows his later persecution by the government, Ai told the late art journalist Jonathan Napack, "You know, maybe my life means nothing. But my enemies make it worthwhile." In August 2009, when Ai went to Sichuan to testify on behalf of fellow activist Tan Zuoren, he was woken in the middle of the night, beaten on the head and taken into police custody. That September, while setting up his exhibition at

the Haus der Kunst in Munich, he began to suffer headaches and spells of dizziness. A brain scan revealed that he needed emergency surgery to repair a cerebral hemorrhage. Months later Ai—walking more slowly, and slurring his speech due to the physical ordeal—traveled back to the police station at Chengdu to exercise his right to file a citizen's complaint against the cops who had beaten him. "I take the constitution and the political situation in China as a readymade," he told Wellner.

Ai knew that the more he pushed the boundaries, the more the authorities would clamp down on him, and yet he persevered. In November 2010, on the eve of his release from house arrest, Ai wrote in the *Guardian*: "I think [British prime minister] Cameron should ask the Chinese government not to make people 'disappear' or to jail them merely because they have different opinions. China should have an open society to discuss different issues and ideologies. It cannot just put its best minds behind bars. There are too many cases where this is happening."

Ultimately, his self-fulfilling prophecy was realized with his arrest and disappearance on April 3. Silencing him, however, had only served to give him and his work greater voice. This was clear in May at the London and New York openings of his *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* (2011). New York City's mayor Michael Bloomberg, art-world professionals and the general public all called for his freedom, while officiating at his installation that parodied the looting and repatriation of the original Beijing Summer Palace heads. The mobilization efforts had been well orchestrated—US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, directors of museums such as the Tate and the Guggenheim, Amnesty International, artists, intellectuals and campaigners worldwide, including his blackjack buddies, all called on the Chinese government to release Ai Weiwei.

For many years it was assumed that Ai had escaped the full wrath of the government because he was the son of Ai Qing. However, with the approach of next year's Central Committee meeting and its expected administrative reshuffling, Party leaders, jockeying for power, have become intolerant of dissent due to the fear that the social network-fueled Arab Spring may spread to China. There was no easier scapegoat—no one more actively outspoken, and with such a loyal following on the internet in China—than Ai Weiwei.

In an unusually transparent effort to save face in front of international human-rights campaigners, with Ai's release, the Chinese government is propagating the illusion of following a legitimate system of justice. Taking its lead from Western countries—tax-evasion charges were leveled against civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. when the US government wanted him silenced, and recently Russia has made similar charges against political prisoner Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky—China is playing the same game, under the pretense of constitutional rule of law.

But this elaborate show is taking place only because of his status. For the lesser-known victims of the crackdown—Ai's four associates who disappeared with him, along with various lawyers, human rights activists, writers and, most recently, activist Zhao Lianhai, who went missing in late May for his inquiries into compensation for the victims of the melamine-tainted milk powder episode in 2008—there is not even the slightest pretense of due process, at least not by the time this story went to press.

Ai has a two-year-old son, Ai Lao, whose name means "Old Ai." More than any other high-profile artist, Ai's uncompromising political art have helped pave the way for the next generation to enjoy their lives with more freedom. "We shall terminate totalitarianism by our own hands," Ai tweeted in August 2009, "and therefore take this honor for granted to avenge the generations of our fathers and grandfathers. We will pass on to our offspring a brand-new reality, which is bright, lively and totally different." Let's hope Ai Lao will grow up in a more open China and not have to tell the world he is continuing the struggle for human rights and civil liberties because, as Ai Weiwei once said, "My father's generation didn't do a good job."

