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The interview: Ai Weiwei

Cultural revolutionary

He's China's equivalent of Andy Warhol, but the artist who inspired Beijing's Olympic Stadium won't be attending the opening ceremony. An outspoken critic of the government, he has never forgiven them for sending his father into exile. By Rachel Cooke

Rachel Cooke
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Ai Weiwei, China's most famous living artist, lives and works in Caochangdi, which used to be a village to the east of Beijing but is now, thanks to the city's endless creep - locals call Beijing Tan Da Bing, or spreading pancake - just another crowded suburb. It takes a long time to get anywhere in Beijing, and in our taxi, April, my translator, is getting more and more excited. 'He's like the king,' she says (she has met him before). 'And we will be like... the servants. The people who work for him, they're like his servants, too. If he doesn't want a drink, no one gets one.' She smiles. Being received by Ai Weiwei, you understand, is an honour, no matter how gnomic his pronouncements, nor how desperate you might be for a cup of tea.

In the West, Ai's name was once known only in art circles. After his collaboration with the architects Herzog & de Meuron on Beijing's Olympic stadium - it was his idea to make it look like a bird's nest - his fame spread, especially when he gave an interview in which he announced that he had 'no interest' in the Olympics or in the Chinese state's propaganda - and that, no, he would not be attending the opening ceremony. Even so, it remains hard to convey the extent of his fame in China. The New York Times has described Ai Weiwei as a 'figure of Warholian celebrity' in Beijing, but I'm not sure even this does him justice. Warhol did a few screen prints and hung out in a night club with other famous people, in a country where he was free to do pretty much as he liked. Ai Weiwei is not only an artist but also an influential architect, a publisher, a restaurateur, a patron and mentor, and an obsessive blogger (he is read by 10,000 people every day).

And then, on top of everything else, there are his politics. Ai Weiwei's father was Ai Qing, the great poet who, during the Cultural Revolution, was exiled to a desert labour camp for being the wrong kind of intellectual. For many years his son lived in another kind of exile, in America. Then, in 1993, Ai returned to Beijing to the bedside of his dying father. But if the authorities imagined he would now retire quietly to his studio, they were wrong. In the years since, he has been outspoken about issues like democracy, hoping that his international reputation as an artist would keep him safe but, even if his status doesn't protect him, caring for silence and complicity far too little to shut up.

Thanks to April, then, and to my reading - Ai can, I have learned, be monosyllabic in interviews - I'm in a state of anxiety by the time we reach the gate of his studio complex. An assistant - he seems to have dozens - leads us into a courtyard, where we sit and wait. Soon after, with no fuss, he appears: short, round, pink of face, unreadable. There is some polite hand shaking, then he takes me inside, into the studio, where we survey, silently, work in progress.

Given his fondness for working with found objects what this means is a collection of stuff: chairs, tiles, bookcases, urns. Ai says nothing but he sighs a lot and rubs his face. Then we go back into the main house, where a willowy woman in a white dress descends from a floor above: his wife, the artist Lu Qing. I am introduced. We go back into the courtyard, where we sit at a table in the liverish Beijing sun. Green tea arrives, and I start to feel better. But it is only when we begin to talk, and it occurs to me that Ai is using English, that I realise that this is going to be all right. When he speaks English, it's a good sign: he thinks you are OK.

He teases me a little about the possibility that I have come to ask him, yet again, about the stadium. 'You'll get me into trouble,' he says. His comments have, he thinks, been widely misunderstood. 'People say: this guy who designed the stadium, now he hates it. But it's not true. The product we designed is a perfect one: great for the city, great for the future of the city. People love it. The construction is quite fine, considering it is such a large, difficult work, and we put it up on time. But I had my [political] position long before the Olympics. That's just 20 days. They come, they go. It's what the stadium brings up that I care about: it reflects a lot of... problems.'

In fact, he doesn't give two hoots about the stadium now that it's done. 'To me, it's already the past.' This is a characteristic Ai position. While most artists and many architects seek to thicken the mystery that surrounds their work, he is apt to shrug, as if anyone could do it.

It was Uli Sigg, a former Swiss ambassador to Beijing and owner of the world's most complete collection of Chinese art, who introduced Ai Weiwei to Herzog & de Meuron, but ask him for specifics about his role, and all he will say is: 'They gave me a title like... expert consultant. We came up with the concept during our very first meeting. It was a very intensive brainstorm-type process.'

Ai doesn't think architecture is such a big deal. He constructed the building we're sitting outside today in 2000, from the same traditional blue-grey bricks that were used in old Beijing's hutongs, and has since worked on 60 projects. He wrinkles his nose. 'They told me it was architecture, but I just built my house. We do these things

so lightly. They take us two weeks. One took me just an afternoon to design. To me, it is a natural ability to think about space or volume. We've done more work than many architects do in their whole lifetime.'

While some gasp at Beijing's extraordinary new skyline, with its statement buildings and rows of cranes, Ai remains singularly unimpressed. 'It's like another revolution,' he says. 'The speed of it. But if you look at the scale of it, you can tell that no time has been devoted to thinking. It has not been done gracefully. It's rough and short-sighted and temporary. Cities always reflect human history. We can't really judge it now but I'm sure there's going to be a lot of saying sorry later. [What we need to know is] who's building it? How do the developers get the land? It's so political. In 1949 most properties lost their owners. They were either kicked out or killed. The nation owned the property. Since then the state has just sold it to people who can afford it. So property should be [according to the government] for the whole nation, yet the government takes the profit. No political, philosophical or moral aesthetic is involved. It's just: let's be rich first. Except that people are finally starting to question: who is getting rich?'

In the past Ai has likened the government to the Mafia. Does he worry about saying such things? He looks quietly dismissive. 'I will not be held back. Not saying things is not good for anybody. I believe every citizen should state their mind. China has never been a democratic society, so candour and responsibility have never been encouraged. People feel hopeless, even about trying to take part in the political process, and they have done for generations.'

More than anything else, Ai believes that the nation is still paying a price for having collectively punished the intellectual classes during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. 'The nation is in bad shape,' he says. 'We are still paying the cost in terms of public discussion. We are still paying in every respect.'

The first time his father was exiled, Ai Weiwei was just one. The second time, when Ai Qing was sent to a labour camp in the remote deserts of north-west China's Xinjiang region, he was 10. 'He was to clean public toilets. A way to insult him. It was terrible but life at that time was terrible for everyone. There was no humanity and no wisdom. He was just a little younger than I am now - what should have been his best time as a writer - yet he was not allowed to write a word for the next 20 years.'

When the family first arrived in Xinjiang, they were given a room. 'Then, later, we had to live underground, in a hole, bushes on top [for a roof]. To me, it was fine. Wherever you can sleep is fine! But for my father it must have been difficult. He had been to Paris in the 1930s; he loved art; he was a poet. But the worst thing was not the living conditions, not that we had no meat or even a drop of oil, and only one kind of vegetable: potatoes, or onions. The worst is when you are accused of a crime that isn't a crime: to be hated and insulted. You can't imagine the insults. Everybody wanted to join in. Children threw stones at him, their parents poured ink on his face. He was the enemy. He hadn't done anything to those people. His writing was not even political. But you cannot give an excuse if you are deemed an enemy of the people. So we felt ashamed, even though we had nothing to be ashamed of.'

In 1978 his father was exonerated by the state, though no one ever apologised. 'They

announced that what they had done to millions: oh, that was a mistake. Just one sentence. My father said: for you it was a mistake, one word, for me it was 20 years. But he wrote a lot after that. It was as if he was a young man again. Those things didn't leave a shadow. He was so strong.'

Ai Weiwei enrolled at the Beijing Film Academy as a contemporary of Zhang Yimou, now among the most famous of Chinese film directors (last August Ai expressed his disgust at Zhang's involvement in the choreographing of the opening ceremony of the Olympics). In 1981, aged 24, however, he left for the US, helped by a girlfriend who had relatives there. It was, he says now, surprisingly easy to make his escape. 'I went to the American embassy and I told them I was going to study. The man asked if I wanted to go to Disneyland, and said, yes, OK.'

Was it painful to leave? 'It was a big relief. My parents were worried. I spoke no English, and I had only $30 in my hand. On the way to the airport I told my mother I felt as if I was going home. She couldn't understand it.'

He didn't feel he was brave, but it was somehow shocking. 'Before you land [in New York], you look down, you see the lights from the city, it looks like a basket of jewellery. Twenty years of [state] education is destroyed. You're young. You feel anything is possible.'

He took a series of temporary jobs, first working as a cleaner, later as a carpenter. He remembers his cleaning job fondly. 'You walked into a house. You didn't speak English, but they trusted you. They showed you all kinds of different powders and liquids to clean all different kinds of materials. People were really nice. I made three dollars an hour, and often they'd give me more. Keep the change! They were generous.'

He knew he wanted to be an artist from 'the second' he arrived. Until he reached America, the only modern art he had seen was in a Post-Impressionist catalogue that belonged to a translator friend of his father. 'Then I started to know Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp. I felt so excited. They completely changed the way I thought about art. I thought it was a final product. Then I realised it was a lifestyle, a philosophy; I realised it could be more conceptual.'

But it was hard to make a living from it. He moved often, and every time he did he had to throw out his work because it was too heavy to take with him. Still, he was used to that. 'Growing up, we had to throw out everything: I burned all my father's books.' Besides, he had no desire to be 'hired' as an artist, preferring physical labour to commissions he did not truly relish.

It wasn't until 2004, when he had his first exhibition in Switzerland, that he started to sell. Ai's work is so varied, I could not hope to sum it up here. But if I had to pick out a theme it would be his preference for 'readymades' in the form of Chinese antiquities, which are destroyed at the same moment as he creates something new, a way of satirising our obsession with possessions. In 1995 he photographed himself shattering a Han dynasty urn (Dropping A Han Dynasty Urn). In 2006 he covered 39 neolithic vases with brightly coloured paint (Coloured Vases). Fragments (2006) is a strange canopy made of beams from destroyed Qing dynasty temples.

In 1993 Ai returned to Beijing. His father was ill. Was it a hard decision? 'Not at the

time. I wasn't scared any more. My father and I had never had a strong father-son bond, but he was still my father. It was sad. He said: "This is your home; why are you discourteous to it?"'

What did Ai make of the new China? 'Friends had told me how it had changed. Yes, there were new roads, more products, cars. But some things had not changed. No freedom, no exchange of ideas. It's still like that today, and it makes me sad. I don't mind material change but how people's minds change is the most precious thing.' Will this ever change? 'Eventually.' In his lifetime? He grins. 'I will never die when there is not democracy!'

The best he has been able to do so far as minds go was to encourage the resurgence of contemporary Chinese art that followed the 1989 crackdown. His move to Caochangdi led to the creation of what is now known as Beijing's East Village, an enclave of artists and photographers; Ai's architectural practice, Fake, designed several of the area's galleries and studio spaces. He also published three books featuring interviews with artists from the underground - now considered seminal texts - and established the first non-commercial venue in China to show conceptual art projects. In the decade since his return, of course, Chinese art has come to command crazy prices. In his view, this isn't wholly a good thing. Too many artists are now rushing to produce. 'Art is made of caring,' he says. 'The Beijing art school only accepts 200 students. There are 400,000 applicants. They think that to be an artist is to be a star.'

Ai sips his tea ruminatively. Will he stay in China? He thinks so. But he has a lot of work to do; suddenly a good deal is expected of him. 'It's pressure,' he says. 'But it's sweet pressure.'

He has shows coming up in Japan and Germany, and there is the bizarre project he is working on in Mongolia. In Kangbashi, a local tycoon and descendent of Genghis Khan, Cai Jiang, is in the process of creating a billion-dollar cultural district to include 100 houses designed by 100 international architects. Ai Weiwei is one of the organisers of the project, with the result that some of the bewildered foreign architects, amazed at the freedom involved in the commission, have occasionally wondered if they are not just performers in another of his pieces. 'Yes, in the desert,' says Ai, 'it's like a fairytale.'

His face is now Sphinx-like. We stare at each other for a moment, until he whips out a tiny camera from under the table and, before I can protest, takes my picture. 'Black and white,' he says. 'You'll hardly recognise yourself.' Is this photograph for his blog? 'Maybe.' With Ai Weiwei it's sometimes hard to know where life ends and art begins; but perhaps, for him, they are the same thing. He follows me outside to my waiting taxi, and we kiss. It's odd. Ai Weiwei might be a conceptual artist, as hard to pin down as a dandelion clock in a breeze, but in my arms he feels as solid and as reassuring as the trunk of an ancient tree.

Living art: Ai's lifeline

Personal life

Born in Beijing, 1957, the son of poet Ai Qing, he spent five of his formative years with his father at a labour camp. Married to artist Lu Qing .

Career

1978 Enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy. Classmates Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou went on to become celebrated directors.

1981 Moved to the US and became involved with performance art and conceptual art.

1993 Returned to China to be with his sick father.

1997 Co-founded the Modern Chinese Art Foundation.

2000 Conceived the bird's nest design for the Olympic Stadium in Beijing.

2008 Lifetime achievement award at the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards.

Controversy

One of China's most significant cultural and social commentators, Ai's political views are never published. His anti-Olympics views are ignored by the Chinese media, although ripples of dissent have appeared on the internet.

He says 'An Olympics held without freedom and against the will of the people will be nonsense because no totalitarian regime can play at being a democracy. It is a pretend harmony and happiness.'

Rafi Cooper