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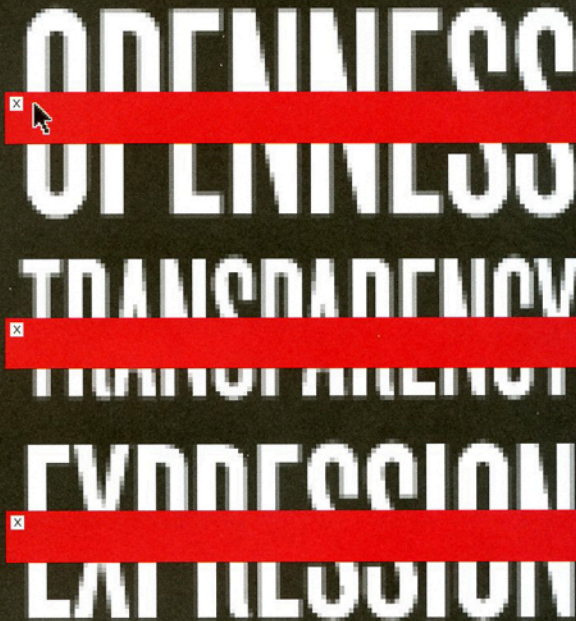
## Censors can't keep up with the web

By Ai Weiwei

Freedom of expression in China remains fragile. A long-running dictatorship has chilled the free exchange of ideas, and a prevailing social ideology tends towards punishing individualism. One would imagine that in the wake of events of global concern, such as the Beijing Olympics and the Sichuan earthquake, the Chinese state would have grown more comfortable coexisting with the foreign press and media exposure. This is not the case. If there's any change, it's not from the state's greater understanding of the importance of transparency in contemporary society. Rather, the state has been unwillingly required to change its tactics to address the particular events of our time.

Censorship policies in China have not changed since 1989. The state's objective is still to limit information and rights of expression, especially in the realm of the public media. All Chinese media remain subject to careful surveillance by the state; there's practically no information to be found outside of state-owned news agencies. The Ministry of Information Industry is the central organ that controls all media entities including print, broadcast and online media; it is in charge of all policy, directives and the implementation of propaganda and information. Every day, the Ministry indicates to the media which news topics can be discussed, in what manner and whether a topic should appear on the front page of the paper, somewhere else or not at all. Journalists or editors who don't toe the line will lose their credentials, and all news articles and opinions must go through three levels of approval before they can be published or broadcast. The punishment for disobedience is severe, so very few dare to go against the grain. Among the citizenry, self-censorship is strongly ingrained in the older generation because of the power of collective ideology and social conventions built up over decades. The younger generation raised in the 1980s is different: the collapse of the education system has pushed them to the internet, which offers them a new kind of wild life.

The internet is the only exception to state-controlled media: it is the best thing ever to happen to world culture. Technology has made it impossible for the government to practice censorship in the same manner. The internet



is having profound effects on contemporary China, and is helping China's transition to a more open civil society. It offers Chinese people a great opportunity to obtain information and to express their individual ideas.

I have a blog that posts articles by volunteers and students working on our investigation of the child victims of last year's Sichuan earthquake. The project is considered controversial; more than 500 posts have been deleted by the internet police. On some days over 100 posts are taken down, but we just repost them, and we have a significant following. As an artist, I think it is important to bear personal responsibility and to exercise one's consciousness and awareness in political struggles. Art is about questioning values, and is always about individual expression. That expression is intimately

connected to other people's minds and rights.

In the past two years we have already seen dramatic change: there's much more information available from foreign sources, and many opportunities for the exchange of ideas. But open discussion is dangerous to the state as it creates fissures in the very foundation of the state and its structure. So the state needs to protect itself, and such protection engenders further corruption and decay. It is a delicate balance between exercising responsible power on the one hand and protecting individual rights and guarding against abuse and corruption on the other. Our future society needs openness and transparency if it is to have any chance for profound, positive change involving intellectual discourse and social development that is meaningful, inclusive, and challenging. ■