

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

An Artist Takes Role of China's Conscience

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The Chinese artist [Ai Weiwei](#), who disappeared into police custody in Beijing after he was arrested on Sunday while trying to board a flight for Hong Kong, is a fully 21st-century figure, global-minded, media-savvy, widely networked. He is also the embodiment of a cultural type, largely unfamiliar to the West, that dates far back into China's ancient past.

In a 30-year career he has combined, often at calculated personal risk, both aspects of his persona to create a role as an outspoken critic of the Chinese government, delivering his most stinging rebukes from within China itself. In light of his arrest and detainment, however, his ability to sustain this role, in China at least, would seem to be in serious doubt.

From a Western perspective, Mr. Ai's career fits a familiar profile. We tend to like our contemporary Chinese artists to come across as aesthetic tradition-busters. (This is one reason that Pop-style Mao paintings by the likes of Wang Guangyi remain big-selling auction items.) In this regard Mr. Ai has not disappointed. In the 1990s he painted Coca-Cola logos on ancient Chinese pots, broke up classical Chinese furniture and photographed himself making a single-digit rude gesture in front of the White House, the Eiffel Tower and Tiananmen Square.

But gradually such Duchampian moves have given way to large-scale, socially critical projects. For a conceptual piece called "Fairytale" at the 2007 Documenta in Kassel, Germany, he placed 1,001 antique Chinese chairs, available for use, throughout the exhibition. He built an outdoor structure from 1,001 doors salvaged from Ming



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Ai Weiwei, with one of his "Zodiac" heads. [More Photos »](#)

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[Ai Weiwei, Chinese Dissident Artist](#)

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and Qing houses that had been eliminated by rampant development in Chinese cities. Through the Internet he recruited 1,001 Chinese citizen-volunteers to come to Kassel to live for the duration of the show.

In short, he brought a sense of China that was at once inviting, puzzling and pathetic. The chairs were nice to sit in. It was hard to know what to make of the mini-army of temporary residents, who seemed equally uncertain of why they were there. The structure built from old doors finally just collapsed. Over all, "Fairytale" was not a winning picture of his homeland.

Politically, he was coming to be known to the Chinese authorities as a loose cannon with a suspect history: a late-1970s free-speech agitator, later a member of renegade art movements, and a full-time resident of New York from 1981 to 1993. But as an international celebrity he was still a feather in China's cap at a time when the country was making an all-out effort to become a major cultural presence prior to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics.

With this in mind the Chinese government asked Mr. Ai to collaborate with the Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron on the design for the Olympic stadium, known the Bird's Nest. He did so. The result was a triumph.

Then something startling happened: He denounced the Olympics as a feel-good whitewash on China's repressive, market-hungry government. And after the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, which killed thousands of children who were crushed when their shoddily built schools collapsed, he became an intrepid antiestablishment activist.

As China's official news channels broadcast upbeat videos of earthquake rescue operations, Mr. Ai was in Sichuan making his own films of the destruction, talking with distraught parents of dead or missing children and using his widely read daily blog to accuse the Sichuan officials of financial corruption that resulted in structurally faulty schools. His accusations of a cover-up extended to the highest levels in Beijing.

To anyone familiar with China's hardball official politics, Mr. Ai's aggressive words sounded suicidally aggressive and the silence from the government in Beijing was perplexing. But at this juncture, both parties were almost ceremonially enacting ancient roles. In Chinese culture, going back to Confucius, there has been a tradition of individual scholars and intellectuals denouncing rulers for wrongdoing that was bringing disharmony to society, and particularly if that wrongdoing was injurious to innocence.

Examples of such face-offs recur in traditional literature and painting. And often, but not always, the self-sacrificing honesty of the accuser has rendered him immune to retaliation.

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