

CHALLENGING WORK

An Ai Weiwei retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Is Ai Weiwei a political artist or an artful politician? The question bemuses in "Ai Weiwei: According to What," a spectacular retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington. Ai could not attend the show's opening, because his passport was impounded by the Chinese authorities last year, when he was jailed, without charge, for three months. He has braved

imports to China derivative forms of American and European Pop, post-minimalism, and conceptualism. Not much about his sculptural installations, suites of photographs, videos, and performance japes is aesthetically novel. But they are always elegant, superbly crafted, and mightily theatrical. Ai broadcasts the jolting, even triumphalist, dynamism of a boom-

Among the artist's early memories, he has said, is the sight of his father cleaning toilets in northern China, where the family was exiled until 1976. Ai enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, and joined a fledgling avant-gardist movement, the Stars, which, among other sallies, diverted socialist-realist painting styles to satirical ends. In 1981, he followed a girlfriend to Philadelphia, but soon moved to New York, where he took classes at the Parsons School of Design and at the Art Students League. He lived in bohemian penury in the East Village—which, somehow, did not prevent him from making frequent trips to play blackjack in Atlantic City—and profusely documented the scene in black-and-white photographs that are displayed at the Hirshhorn. The pictures



Ai's "Colored Vases" (2007–10) and "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn" (1995/2009), at the Hirshhorn Museum.

periods of house arrest, a beating that caused a brain hemorrhage, prosecution for tax evasion, the shutting down of his popular blog, the revocation of his design firm's license, the demolition of his newly built studio in Shanghai, and around-the-clock surveillance. Does admiring his work enlist you in his struggles? And, if you consider him a victim of oppression, should the work's quality even matter? As an artist in many mediums, Ai, who lived in the United States from 1981 to 1993,

ing Chinese art world, on a grand scale.

A man of Falstaffian girth and panache, Ai lives in a compound in Beijing with his wife, the artist Lu Qing; dozens of assistants; and many cats. A mistress, with whom he fathered a son, lives nearby. He was born in Beijing in 1957, and grew up in circumstances of coerced misery. His father, the poet Ai Qing, though a long-time Communist, fell afoul first of the official Anti-Rightist campaign, of 1957, and then of the Cultural Revolution.

range from snapshots of friends, prominently including his neighbor Allen Ginsberg, to dedicated photojournalism. Ai was on hand, snapping away, at the Tompkins Square riot of 1988, when police cleared the park of homeless encampments. He found no buyers for his art, and returned to China in 1993, upon learning that his father was ill. (Ai Qing died three years later, at the age of eighty-six.) Ai was immediately a doyen of young artists, publicizing their work in a series of books. His

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Challenging Work." *New Yorker*, October 2012.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

own fame was spread by the art-collecting Swiss Ambassador to Beijing, Uli Sigg, and other influential patrons.

The earliest work represented in the show appears in a photograph from 1983: a wire hanger bent to Marcel Duchamp's profile. The first book that Ai read in English, as he told Evan Osnos, in this magazine, was "The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again)." The show's title pays homage to Jasper Johns, whose "According to What," without the question mark, is a philosophically resonant painting-assemblage from 1964. Ai distilled from such models a visual language of objects with attitude. The works in the show can seem like materializations of their explanatory wall texts, which, in turn, draw the mind to artistic precedents and to worldly issues and events. This quality makes for an experience of forced complicity rather than of voluntary absorption, but it's too emphatic to be deemed a weakness. It is the keynote of Ai's politics. Here a Westerner who, like me, has never been to China must tread carefully. We're told in the show's catalogue that photographs of Ai dropping a millennia-old Han-dynasty urn, which smashes on the floor, "captures the moment when tradition is transformed and challenged by new values." That likely reads better in Mandarin. The act strikes me as mere vandalism.

Four works in the show advance Ai's public campaign of remembering, counter to governmental silence, the more than five thousand children who died in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, most of them when their school buildings collapsed. A huge ceiling-hung snake is made of children's backpacks. The names of the dead cover a wall and are read aloud by recorded voices. Finally, forty tons of steel rebar, salvaged in twisted condition from the ruined schools and hammered straight again, form a vast topography on the floor. I suppose that the sculpture's rhetorical intention—like that of the millions of hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds that Ai showed at the Tate Modern, in 2010—involves the fantastic labor-intensiveness of its making. The strenuous handiwork of innumerable assistants suggests a ghostly mass demonstration. The same goes for a work that is still in progress: "He Xie," a pile of fired, painted, and refired porcelain crabs; there are more than three thousand of them in the show. The backstory is intricate. In 2010, Ai announced a party in

Shanghai, at which the seasonal dish of river crabs would be served, to observe (not to protest, he insisted) the destruction of his studio there. He was arrested before he could leave Beijing. *He xie* means "river crab," and sounds like the Mandarin word for "harmonization," a Communist Party euphemism for censorship.

Milder works in the show include beautifully carpentered sculptures in ironwood, formed to the contours of the map of China. Videos give views from overpasses of one of Beijing's Ring Roads, and along a street that bisects the city. The literally titled "Teahouse" (2009) presents large house shapes made from compressed, and still fragrant, tea leaves. A gigantic, glowing, cubic chandelier parodies Communist-style modern design. A circular construction of forty-two Foreverbrand bicycles memorializes Beijing in the time before motorized traffic replaced the crowds of quiet pedallers.

At the Smithsonian Institution's Sackler Gallery, two blocks from the Hirshhorn, there is a concurrent display of a loopy walk-in structure fashioned from antique furniture and parts of destroyed temples. All these works infuse outward-looking, Western modes with introspective, national content. They are hybrid, in a word—perhaps making up in splendor what they lack in fertility. They are impressive, smart, and often gorgeous, but unaffected. Just about everything that Ai uses, materially or formally or symbolically, he uses up.

How can you know for sure that you're free? You do or say something, and, if nobody punishes or muzzles you, you are free to that extent. Such seems the logic of Ai's continual testing of the permissible in China. Considered in one way, he is a freelance clown bidding for status as an entitled court jester. Considered in another, which I expect to prove decisive, he embraces the serious destiny of either a historical hero, if the walls that he rams ever come down, or a historical martyr, if they don't. Any verdict on his art will be incidental to the fateful outcome of his life. But, since a judgment is in order, here's mine: Ai Weiwei, the artist, is good enough. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM/GO/OUTLOUD

A conversation with Peter Schjeldahl and Evan Osnos.

GRAD SCHOOL EXPO & OPEN HOUSE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2012

55 WEST 13TH STREET, NEW YORK CITY
10:00 A.M.–2:00 P.M.

ADMISSION FREE

REGISTRATION BEGINS AT 9:00 A.M.

FOR A SCHEDULE OF EVENTS AND
TO RSVP, VISIT:

WWW.NEWSCHOOL.EDU/GRADEXP013

THE NEW SCHOOL



PEARL PUDDLES
A KATE HINES COLLECTION
800-561-5509
WWW.PEARLPUDDLES.COM

SecondChances ForTeens.com

Therapeutic Boarding
School in the Catskills

French & Italian Holiday Rentals

Live like a European in your own chateau, villa or farmhouse. Weekly rentals. Most regions.



www.villeetvillage.com
(510)559-8080

VILLE ET VILLAGE®

The Retreat at Sheppard Pratt

- ♦ Treating all psychiatric conditions
 - ♦ Intermediate length of stay
 - ♦ Elegantly appointed environment
 - ♦ NEW: TMS for depression
- Baltimore, MD 410-938-4040 www.retreatatpp.org
The Retreat does not accept insurance.

Makers of the Cashmere Watchcap
Never the slightest itch. Perfectly Warm and Soft.

GolightlyCashmere.com

opera-length arm warmers • neck gaiters
hats • scarves • mittens • berets • shawls • baby

\$70 to \$165 Made in Taos, NM 575.776.8287

Margaret W. Wong Immigration Center

www.imwong.com
1-866-254-0687

Preeminent Immigration Lawyers

Green Cards, H-1B, Deportation, Motions,
Criminal Aliens, Work Permits, US Citizen

Author, *The Immigrant's Way*