



## NEWS

33 Ai Weiwei Takes on China 35 Nam June Paik Archive Goes to DC  
35 Labor Abuses in UAE 36 Murakami Prints in Dispute 37 Major  
Donation for Auckland 37 Kiyoshi Awazu (1929-2009) 38 Round Up

## OPINION

41 June 4, 2009 Censorship  
Is a New Game, Twenty  
Years Later By Ai Weiwei

## CULTURAL CURRENCY

43 Auction Report By Elaine W. Ng  
47 Art Fair Report By the Editors

artsiapacific | ISSUE 64 | JUL/AUG 2009

news



## Ai Weiwei Challenges China's Government Over Earthquake

By Katherine Grube

**BEIJING**—The Chinese government rarely makes concessions to its citizens, especially when it involves allegations of governmental mismanagement and the actions of artist Ai Weiwei. However, the government's unexpected announcement on May 5 that 5,335 students died in last year's Sichuan earthquake appears to have been in response to efforts by Ai Weiwei and other Chinese activists to call the government into account for the deaths. This was the first official figure released in what has become a politically sensitive issue following accusations from parents that substandard construction caused the collapse of more than 7,000 classrooms in the region.

China's release of the number, without any names attached, was a major concession

to activists whose escalating calls for official statistics fueled an international media frenzy during the one-year anniversary. The official toll of the earthquake is 68,712 dead with 18,500 listed as missing and presumed dead. Following the May 12, 2008 earthquake, the Chinese government pledged to publicly investigate the schools' collapse, but subsequently reneged on that promise, even suggesting that the student deaths were the result of natural causes rather than faulty construction.

On May 29, at shortly after midnight in Beijing, Ai's personal blog [blog.sina.com.cn/aiveiwei] was shut down by authorities in the middle of the two-day Duanwu ("Mid-Summer") Festival holiday, when many businesses and government offices in greater

China were closed. Ai's posts on May 26, 27 and 28 recounted several incidents of police surveillance, including the tapping of his phone and his being followed by police.

Ai's 76-year-old mother recently became a target of police attention as well. Four plainclothes policemen entered her home in eastern Beijing and interrogated her about Ai's residence near the airport. She then phoned her son, who was attending a reception at the American Embassy for United States congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. After receiving her call, Ai rushed home. When the officers in his mother's house refused to present identification, Ai dialed the emergency number 110. Additional police officers soon arrived and all parties went to the local police station to file a report, a copy of which was never provided to the artist.

Ai vented his frustrations with the opaque proceedings of the police in a short statement posted on his Google Group "Citizens' Survey"—which he uses to post ▶▶

**Ai Weiwei** with his list of names of schoolchildren who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, posted on the wall of his office at FAKE Design in Beijing, May 2009. Courtesy Ai Weiwei.



Volunteers in Yingxiu, China, in March 2009, as they research the names of local schoolchildren who died in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, as part of the Ai Weiwei-led Sichuan Earthquake Names Project. Courtesy Ai Weiwei.

► articles deleted from his personal blog—on May 27. Ai writes: “Citizens aren’t soft persimmons, and who you offend today may not be so easy to push around tomorrow. Don’t take and eat, and then turn around and feign ignorance.”

As previously reported in *ArtAsiaPacific* 63 (May/June), Ai’s blog served as an online platform for the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, an effort conducted by more than 50 researchers and volunteers to collect the names of the deceased students in towns across Sichuan province. Affiliated researchers traveled extensively within the affected region, recording their findings on Ai’s blog. Ai had originally planned to use this documentation in an artwork or an event to commemorate the earthquake.

While no specific event was held on May 12, as of May 23, the project has recorded the names of 5,190 students. Ai notes that the majority of those deaths—around 3,500—occurred in just 18 of the 14,000 damaged schools. He is quick to point out the discrepancy between his figure and the government’s, and he openly questions the veracity of the government’s numbers in light of their reluctance to release a list of names. A May 23 entry on Ai’s blog, which details the project’s methodology and findings to date, was meant to contrast with the government’s silence about its methodology. The artist believes his current figure represents 80 percent of those killed.

Foreign and Chinese journalists, initially allowed into the affected regions in the weeks after the 2008 earthquake, have since been subject to heavy restrictions. In the weeks surrounding the one-year anniversary, reporters from *The Economist*, *The New*

*York Times* and other media outlets were repeatedly denied entry to affected areas. Researchers, including volunteers affiliated with the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, became targets of police harassment, or were arrested and detained. One researcher in Sichuan reported being arrested 15 times. The significant international coverage of the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project may have contributed to volunteers’ difficulties.

For nearly four months after Ai began reporting his findings, the artist’s blog remained uncensored—a remarkable feat given his harsh criticism of the regime’s handling of the disaster. However, in the week leading up to and following the May 12 anniversary, his blog entries were systematically censored or deleted. Access to the blog remained open until May 28, but posts related to Sichuan were removed within hours. All internet portals in China, whether Chinese-owned or international, are required to remove or block web content deemed illicit by the government. Censorship had been uneven and blog content related to the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project remains accessible in English language translation on numerous news aggregators. Beginning May 21, Ai circumvented censors by creating a public Google Group forum where he posted previously deleted blog entries. The forum was accessible via a hyperlink in the sidebar of Ai’s sina.com blog.

The blog’s content changed to reflect the experiences of Ai’s researchers, and the increasingly strident editorial tone of his posts leading up to and since May 12 might have triggered recent censorship. Throughout April, Ai’s posts assumed a more

journalistic and increasingly frustrated tone.

On May 16, in a post that was deleted within hours, Ai accused Chinese authorities of widespread negligence and malfeasance in Sichuan. Speaking to the victims and about the government, he wrote: “Your suffering and despair are yours alone . . . Their main task is to corruptly squander your wealth while sternly ordering you to keep secrets, misleading you to preserve your unhappiness. Because your misfortune is their great fortune.” Like earlier user-replies that included letters of thanks and stories of hardship, Ai’s May 16 outcry elicited sympathetic responses from readers. One commenter writes: “I support you, you are my single thread of hope in the darkness.”

A post on May 17, which was removed within hours, records researcher Zhao Ying’s efforts to recover two laptops, a camera and other personal effects confiscated by the Qingyang District police office in Sichuan’s capital city, Chengdu. Identifying the policemen by name and badge number, Zhao details the hours he spent at the station, which concluded with the police chief asking: “Are you still investigating the official statistics?” and “Who do you work for?” before summarily dismissing him. On two separate occasions, researchers by the last name of Lu and Yang were beaten in the towns of Qingchuan and Jiangyou. Victim’s families and foreign correspondents unrelated to Ai’s project have reported similar treatment when investigating the aftermath of the quake.

Ai’s studio is discussing how best to memorialize the student deaths. Currently, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, is exhibiting a memorial work, entitled *Snake Bag*, which consists of 360 grey and black backpacks that create a 15 meter-long snake. In its upcoming solo show, “According to What?” which will open on July 25 at Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum, will include a materially similar work, *Snake Ceiling* (2009), in which coiled snake bodies will hang from a gallery ceiling. Munich’s Haus der Kunst also has plans to unveil an artwork related to the research project at Ai’s solo show, “Is There Going to be a Title?” which will open on October 12.

On the morning of May 26, a post on Ai’s blog called for volunteers with engineering and technical expertise to aid in a “construction standards investigation,” a future Sichuan earthquake-related initiative. The post suggests that the privately conducted, state-sponsored investigations have been deeply flawed. Volunteers are asked to contact FAKE Design Studio to assist with their ongoing inquiry into the collapsed schools’ structural integrity. ■