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F**k Off

An examination of the relationship between art and politics in the practice of Ai Weiwei

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between art and politics has been prevalent throughout art history. However, few artists have been so explicit in relating their work to a political situation as Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Ai Weiwei's conceptual ideas have informed his use of multiple types of media including sculpture, architecture and the Internet in order to draw attention to the political climate in China under a Communist government. Ai Weiwei has also commented on the politics of the international art world, questioning issues of authenticity, value and culture. It was because of his strongly anti-authoritarian art and increasing political activism that Ai Weiwei became an internationally renowned artist. This dissident art practice ultimately led to Ai Weiwei's high-profile arrest by Chinese authorities in 2011.
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation entitled *F**k Off* is an examination of the dissident practice of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and his anti-authoritarian nature. Ai Weiwei was a hugely influential figure in the contemporary art world. This was especially due to his political activism and use of multiple media in his work in order to draw attention to the corrupt nature of the Chinese Communist government and the politics of the international art world. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, one can see that Ai Weiwei becomes increasingly antagonistic in his practice, and the title of this dissertation reflects this as well as paying homage to his canonical exhibition of the same name in 2000.

The rise of China in the 21st century saw the increasing importance of Chinese art in the contemporary art world. International exhibitions in cities such as New York, Sydney, Berlin and San Francisco beginning in the 1990s highlighted the early international interest in Chinese contemporary art despite issues of government repression. International periodical exhibitions and the introduction of these in the Asia-Pacific region further illustrate the escalating significance of Chinese contemporary art worldwide. The growing nature of major international exhibitions saw the relatively recent introduction of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Queensland, the Shanghai Biennale and the Beijing International Art Biennale among others, all which have a strong focus on contemporary Chinese art.

It was in this burgeoning environment that Ai Weiwei worked as an artist whose activism was integral to his art. Disillusioned by the corrupt and unpredictable nature of the Chinese government that stemmed from the rule of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, Ai Weiwei used his artistic practice as a tool to convey his politically motivated ideas, resulting in a large body of anti-authoritarian art. One can liken Ai Weiwei's philosophy to Michel Foucault's idea that freedom and power are interrelated rather than oppositional, existing

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within the same discourse. This relates to Ai's art in the sense that his artistic expression can never be separated from the Chinese political situation, as well as the politics of the international art world in relation to this. His work is in direct response to politics and therefore art and politics are inherently linked when it comes to Ai Weiwei.

Ai Weiwei's oeuvre is conceptual in nature as he reconfigures various objects and questions notions of identity and objectivity. The growing interest in Ai's art and his significance as a contemporary Chinese artist has been increased due to his recent arrest. The heightened press coverage surrounding his mysterious disappearance in 2011 saw his international celebrity status rise. There is a growing number of newspaper and magazine articles about the artist after his arrest, yet little has yet been written about Ai Weiwei and his art in a scholarly capacity since his release. The 2009 monograph *Ai Weiwei* published by Phaidon, featured a survey of Ai Weiwei's life and work to date by Beijing-based curator and critic Karen Smith; an interview of the artist by the Serpentine Gallery's Hans Ulrich Obrist; and Bernard Fibicher, the director of the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne. The book provided a detailed overview of Ai Weiwei's major works and his artistic practice in general. The internet provided a wealth of information about Ai Weiwei. Exhibition reviews and newspaper articles provided material that allowed me to continue an analysis of Ai Weiwei's practice in light of more recent events than current literature has explored.

It is my aim in this thesis to examine aspects of Ai Weiwei's artistic practice and various events and experiences that have influenced him in the lead up to his arrest. In my first chapter I examine the historical background of the Cultural Revolution in China from 1966-1976. The policies of Mao as head of the People's Republic of China during the Cultural Revolution had a great impact on Chinese art in general. Ai Weiwei grew up in the Gobi Desert with his exiled family. I wish to examine the implications of this hardship on his artistic practice. I would like to explore the notion that the policies of the Chinese

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Communist Party during this time and in their attempts to restructure after Mao’s death provoked Ai Weiwei’s political dissidence and have had a direct and lasting impact on his politically motivated art.

My second chapter focuses on the significance of globalization and the effect this phenomenon has had on Ai Weiwei’s work. I will focus on the opening up of China to the West, which has played a huge part in Ai Weiwei’s practice. This allowed him to study and work in New York, which exposed him to avant-garde ideas that have been incorporated into his work, following the likes of Marcel Duchamp and conceptual artists. Furthermore, the advent of periodical exhibitions and Ai Weiwei’s involvement in these has promoted his art and political ideas internationally. This has seen his celebrity status rise and alerted the Chinese government to his dissident practice.

In my final chapter I shall investigate the immediate precursors to Ai Weiwei’s arrest in April 2011 and how his activity led to his disappearance. Ai’s artwork and activism regarding the devastating 2008 Sichuan Earthquake negatively commented on the Chinese government’s response to the disaster. In addition to this, Ai Weiwei’s increasing use of online social media in attacking the Chinese government through his personal blog and Twitter made him a high profile dissident. His arrest was part of the Chinese government’s crackdown on dissident behaviour. In this chapter I look at how Ai Weiwei’s outspoken nature and status as an international artist caused the Chinese government to see him as a dangerous dissident figure. I will examine how his arrest was an attempt at silencing his political views, and how it will be difficult for the Chinese government to truly silence Ai Weiwei’s passion for exposing the corruption and injustice found in China and his belief in the force of free speech.
CHAPTER ONE: THE IMPACT OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

There are references to the Cultural Revolution in Ai Weiwei's art throughout his career. His early family life was centered around the immediate consequences of the Cultural Revolution, and Ai Weiwei's work reflects the very language of the hardships of the time. The focus of this chapter is his work Sunflower Seeds (2010) which is an explicit reference to his life growing up in exile during the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution of the 1960s in China and reactions to this time of oppression have had a profound impact on Ai Weiwei's artistic practice. Ai Weiwei's father Ai Qing was a revolutionary hero famous in China for his modern poetry. He studied art in Paris during the early 1930s and the ideas he was exposed to there led to him joining a radical left wing party on his return to China. This saw the Chinese Nationalists jail him for three years for his anti-government ideas. When Ai Qing was released, Mao Zedong, head of the Chinese Communist Party, invited him to join. Ai Qing was a loyal member of the Chinese Communist Party, even standing on the podium near Mao when the declaration of the founding of the People's Republic of China was made at Tiananmen Square in 1949. However, in a Communist Party purge in 1958, Ai Qing was banished to the Gobi Desert in northern China as a 'rightist' with his young family.1 Ai Qing, like many other intellectuals, was forced into hard labour in the service of the state. Ai Qing had to clean the toilets in the labour camp, while his son Ai Weiwei was taught the ways of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party.

Sunflower Seeds

The impact of the Cultural Revolution on Ai Weiwei's art can be seen throughout his career. Perhaps the most striking of these works is his more recent Sunflower Seeds (2010) (Figure 1) that was purchased by the Tate Modern in London and exhibited in their great Turbine Hall. From a distance,

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the life-sized porcelain hand painted seeds appeared to be gravel-like, and it is in this way that Ai’s intention to give the viewer a sense of dislocation and altered perception. The sense of confusion that the viewers felt when first seeing the work parallels the confusion of the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution, particularly those like Ai Weiwei and his family who were exiled. The 100 million seeds that were each handcrafted using traditional porcelain methods in the China’s Imperial porcelain capital, Jingdezhen, are symbolic of the time of the Cultural Revolution.

The work plays on a common allusion from the Cultural Revolution that described Mao as the sun and his faithful followers were sunflowers constantly looking to him for guidance and wisdom, making the seeds a potent symbol of the time (Figure 2.). Ai Weiwei plays on this but imbues the work with a sense of sorrow and stillness. This was particularly clear when viewing the installation in the Turbine Hall. It paralleled the hope and disappointment that characterized the Cultural Revolution. The grey colour of the seeds can be likened to the colour of ash, the remnants of Chinese cultural history after the revolution. A further parallel is created regarding the Communist collective ideal. Just as individuals in Chinese society were forced to be a collective, the seeds are individual due to their handcrafted nature, yet to the eye they are identical under the communist ideal. The work also contains a more personal reference. Sunflower seeds were a luxury in Ai Weiwei’s exile in the north. One of Ai’s early memories is of his mother hulling the seeds, and there was a sense of solidarity in the community of sharing these seeds. These seeds represent the simple pleasures in an extremely politically complex time.

The work also contains references to Chinese cultural traditions such as porcelain. Ai Weiwei is fascinated by porcelain and its survival as a form of artisan production. Porcelain of high quality continued to be made even in the era of mass production and export. The value of porcelain as a cultural artefact

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3 Jervis.
4 Jervis.
also interested Ai Weiwei, as does the survival of, keeping the tradition alive after the cultural destruction of the revolution.

Ai’s practice in general is heavily influenced by the political and cultural repression of Mao’s reign and the Cultural Revolution in particular. He uses personal struggle such as his exile in order to give meaning to a wider audience, and his desire to promote the freedom of expression in the face of political censorship is seen in Sunflower Seeds. It is as if Ai feels a sense of responsibility to depict his struggles in order to highlight social and political injustice in the hope that this will initiate societal change.

**Art and Culture in Communist China**

In order to better understand his art, it is necessary to understand the cultural and political climate of the Cultural Revolution. The victory of the Communists in the post-World War Two civil war in China saw the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Mao Zedong, head of the Chinese Communist Party, was proclaimed leader. This had a major impact on all facets of life for the Chinese people, with art and culture being no exception. Mao believed that art should serve politics in a communist environment, and art that did not convey a distinctly political message was seen as in opposition to the communist cause. The Eurocentric ideal of art for art’s sake that had been prevalent since the nineteenth century did not apply in Communist China. The purpose of art was to act in service to the State.

Mao’s famed *Little Red Book* (published April 1964), essentially the only officially sanctioned text in the People’s Republic, contained Mao’s words and teachings on all aspects of communist life, including specific teachings on art development. It became an important source for ideas of the time. The authority of artistic ideas no longer lay with the artist; art was now made to satisfy the tripartite audience of peasants, workers and soldiers who were central to the communist regime:

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“In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above the classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics.”

Before the Communist government’s reign, Chinese art academies were run along similar lines to major international Western art institutions such as L’École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In the 1950s, even before the Cultural Revolution, some art academics had been sidelined by the Chinese Communist Party because of their foreign art interests. However, the curriculum was largely unchanged, with a focus on the study of the Western canon. This did not mean that traditional forms of Chinese art were sidelined. While there was an emphasis on Western-style art in Chinese art academies, traditional forms of Chinese art such as ink drawing and wall painting were still studied.

The Chinese Communist Party representatives at these institutions such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art), had their formal grounding in Western art practice, and had a certain respect and appreciation for Western art. Many had studied Western art, with some traveling to European centres in the 1920s and 1930s in order to consolidate their knowledge. However, as the political strength of the Chinese Communist Party rose, the indoctrination of Marxist ideology began to infiltrate the fine art academies. Guidelines stated that the institutions were to:

“Advance political education and thought through the application of Marxist and Mao Zedong thought; to purge feudalism, comprador-like, and fascist anti-revolutionary thought; to establish a scientific viewpoint and methodology; to promote patriotism and the idea of serving the people; to use realist Chinese national and Chinese revolutionary art forms to advance theoretical and practical arts education; to implement all forms of the arts and integrate them with the current social struggles and the work of art for the masses; to achieve a unification of study and practice; to strengthen the connection with pragmatic application and with the working style and working ability of the masses.”

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8 Shetiang, 20.
There was a need to create art that was Communist in nature and aestheticism. Consequently, Soviet Social Realism was introduced into the academies as the primary model for painting style and subject matter. The political history of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party became compulsory in the institutions.9

The idea of art for the proletarian stemmed from the Soviet model with Marxist theory at the centre of the changing of artistic practice:

"Our literary and art workers must accomplish this task and shift their stand; they must gradually move their feet over to the side of the workers, peasants and soldiers, to the side of the proletariat, through the process of going into their very midst and into the thick of practical struggles and through the process of studying Marxism and society. Only in this way can we have a literature and art that are truly for the workers, peasants and soldiers, a true proletarian literature and art."10

The style of this art was realist in nature, depicting the Chinese proletariat using the model established in Soviet art in the 1920s and 1930s. The positive depiction of workers, peasants and soldiers working to strengthen the Chinese nation was intended to create a sense of accomplishment in terms of the success of the Communist political model. It was the promotion of communist ideals that saw many existing artists in China change their style, as well as the creation of a new artistic generation in the Chinese art academies.11

The Cultural Revolution

The 1950s saw a period of consolidation of Communist ideas and infiltration into cultural institutions. Cultural educators who opposed the policies of the government were purged; those who continued to practice Western style art that had no relevance to Chinese communist ideals were removed from their positions in art academies. However, students largely enjoyed a time of idealism and actively worked to create this new art for communist China.12 However, this changed with the advent of the Cultural Revolution that officially

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9 Shetiang, 20.
10 Mao Zedong in Brown and Hutton, 434.
11 Shetiang, 20.
12 Shetiang, 22.
lasted from 1966-1969. Mao's fear of becoming irrelevant in the eyes of the younger Chinese generation caused him to initiate The Great Proletarian and Cultural Revolution, and the revolution essentially began as a student revolution led by Mao's Red Guards. Armed with Little Red Books as bibles, the Red Guards began a systematic destruction of cultural relics, temples and monuments in an attempt to destroy the old and establish the new China.13

This also saw an attack on Chinese intellectual society. Artists and intellectuals, whether they openly criticized the communist government or not, were labelled dissenters and exiled to remote rural areas of China to learn the ways of the peasant, the worker, and the soldier.14 This was to be Ai Qing's fate. Ai Qing was punished for his anti-revolutionary poems and open criticism of the government. He and his family, including son Ai Weiwei, were sent to the remote northwest province of Xinjiang at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.15

Art that was created during this time directly reflects the various political campaigns that characterized the period of the Cultural Revolution. In his quest for a new China in art and literature, Mao encouraged production of propaganda posters (xuanchuanhua) and caricatures (manhua) in art tabloids that evolved to the deification of Mao, and what we now see as the 'cult of Mao'. His image became ubiquitous as countless portraits were created and mass-produced in order to promote this personality cult of Mao as father, as the ultimate leader of the People's Republic. The sheer scale of this production and promotion of Mao and the communist regime had never been seen before.16 Artists, alongside peasant, workers and soldiers, were instructed to wipe out the Four Olds: old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the 'exploiting class'. From this, new ideas, new culture, new customs and new

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14 Brown and Hutton, 432.
habits would be created. Portraits and propaganda posters of Mao acted as a visual tool to consolidate his power and the public's identification of him as the all-powerful leader of the communist state.

Artistic practice during Mao's reign was fragmented. There was a central tension between artistic freedom and political control, which was mediated with the exiling of artists who did not conform. However, officially approved Chinese art was constantly shifting between Western art forms of oil painting, national art forms of ink, and politicized and populist art, highlighting the contradictory nature of Mao's artistic policies. Even though there was a general consensus that art should serve the proletarian, there were discrepancies regarding the way this should be depicted. However, it seems that in general, Soviet Social Realism dominated artistic depictions. This period of artistic confusion with a focus on Russian influence resulted in around twenty years of displaced and arbitrarily produced Chinese art during Mao's reign. Chinese art had lost its roots, and there was a need after his death for artists to either revise and revive Chinese art in the late 1970s, or simply leave the country.

**Period of Liberalism in Art**

The party members who survived Mao's purges of comrades during the Cultural Revolution later spoke out against their leader, stating that Mao "had perpetrated an unmitigated political disaster" with the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping, who assumed leadership of the Chinese Communist Party after Mao's death in 1976 and the arrest of the 'Gang of Four', aimed to initiate the 'Four Modernizations' in order to reform the economy by way of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. In order to consolidate his power as party leader and to ensure the implementation of these policies, Deng Xiaoping needed the support of the intellectuals who had been marginalized during the Cultural Revolution. Deng was pragmatic in his approach; he gave the intellectuals freedom from exile and relative freedom of movement.

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17 Benewick, 437.
18 MacFarquhar, 60.
19 MacFarquhar, 41.
speech and expression as long as they did not directly undermine the Party. The government-controlled Chinese Artist’s Association released a statement that outlined this with regard to art:

“The Chinese Artist’s Association will legally defend the artist’s right to individual expression... as long as the artist does not subvert the goals of the Communist Party.”

Artists and intellectuals who had been humiliated and exiled during the Cultural Revolution were restored as experts in their fields. In terms of art, there was a focus on the unification of artists no matter what their ideologies were.

The brief period of liberalism in art in the late 1970s and 1980s saw a revitalization of Chinese art characterized by artistic experimentation. This was to have a very real impact on Ai Weiwei’s art. As China opened its doors to the West in the name of modernization, exhibitions of modern art signaled a more liberal reception of art. Major modern traveling exhibitions came to the main cities in China, especially Beijing, such as the 1980 ‘American Pictorial Posters and Illustrations Exhibition’ and ‘Exhibition of Original Picasso Paintings’ in 1982. These exhibitions marked a huge turning point in Chinese artists’ ideas in terms of aestheticism that was so different to the Chinese discourse of culture that had been created during the Cultural Revolution. The viewing of a greater range of style than Soviet Social Realism was a major coup for Chinese artists, as they had not had this kind of direct access to international art styles since before Mao’s reign and the Cultural Revolution.

There was a need for self-expression in art after the restrictions of the Cultural Revolution, and Deng Xiaoping’s Four Modernizations that opened China’s doors to the West fuelled this. Artists had to overcome the traditional Chinese culture of an aversion to individuality and sense of self – there was a need to break the conformity. Chinese art authorities looked down on self-

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21 Galikowski, 176.
22 Galikowski, 178.
23 Galikowski, 184.
24 Galikowski, 184.
25 Galikowski, 209.
expression in art as 'decadent individualism'. However, the open door policy to the West was necessary for modernization in other areas of Chinese life. Unfortunately for the communist government, this led to challenges to the rigid adherence to Socialist Realism as more liberal modern ideas on philosophy, psychology, politics and art theory and practice were let in. In the larger cities, there was definitely more of a laissez-faire attitude of authorities towards the systematic prevention of these liberal ideas from coming into mainland China.

These liberal ideas were a welcome alternative for intellectuals and artists in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and the general displacement of culture that caused an ideological crisis in China. This time of relative liberalism was a shift from the radical revolutionary politics that had characterized Mao's reign and the Cultural Revolution. This allowed for the revision of the rigid structure of artistic style that had been set out for artists by communist authorities in the past. This also allowed for an exploration of the artistic process in general, as well as the social function of art in Chinese culture and society. Art needed to follow and convey the feelings of those affected by the cultural and spiritual crisis in terms of where traditional Chinese values fit in to the modernizing society of the late seventies and early eighties, following the Marxist idea that any changes or developments in one aspect of society would affect other aspects of social life.

This brief period of toleration of modern ideas and art was used to comment on the Cultural Revolution and Chinese expression of this. Artistic leadership in the late 1970s allowed for the rehabilitation of the intellectuals and artists who had been shunned during the Cultural Revolution as enemies of the state. This revitalized China's art scene and encouraged younger artists such as Ai Weiwei to practice more freely in more experimental ways under the guidance of those who had been rehabilitated. It was a time of liberal experimentation against a

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26 Galikowski, 208.
27 Galikowski, 208.
29 Galikowski, 222.
30 Cohen, 24.
background of general cultural experimentation that was fuelled by these emerging Western ideas, and younger artists who were too young to remember or recognize the repression of the Maoist era were particularly experimental in their art practice.31

**The Stars and the Democracy Wall**

This saw the emergence of private art groups in the post-Mao period, and these groups are very important in the understanding of Chinese art at this time. These mere existence of groups highlights the ability to create organizations outside government controlled art institutions or associations. The private groups enjoyed about a year or two between 1978-1981 of relative freedom to meet, exhibit and exchange ideas relating to their art as a means for mutual support in their artistic aims. There was a need to explore opportunities outside the Soviet Social Realism that had dictated Chinese art throughout Mao's reign.

Ai Weiwei was a junior member of the Stars group that formed in the late seventies in Beijing. The group comprised of mostly young, and predominantly male Chinese artists. They were a rather disparate group, brought together by the collective aims of supporting democracy and revitalizing Chinese art.32 The Stars were closely associated with the Democracy Wall movement that centred around along brick wall on Xidan Street, in Beijing's Xichen District, as a forum that allowed political dissidents to explore, discuss and create publications of intellectual and cultural ideas, with the main focus being on the promotion of democracy in all areas of Chinese life. There were strong links between the Stars and other artists, writers, poets and political activists such as revolutionary poet Huang Xiang and critic Wei Jingshen. The Democracy Wall prompted the need for political change in China, with activists posting their

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31 Cohen, 24.
32 Galikowski, 213.
experiences of injustice during the Cultural Revolution and China's need for a move to a democratic state.\textsuperscript{33}

This saw the political nature of many of the Stars artists' works come to the fore. The aim of the group was to create art with social meaning by commenting on political themes that stemmed from the oppression of the Cultural Revolution, and by promoting artistic freedom through the modernization of style. The group originally tried official channels in order to create an exhibition, but their ties with political dissidents and their overtly political art did not make them ideal candidates for this.\textsuperscript{34} Unorthodox artistic work was problematic for the Chinese government authorities, no matter how liberal they wished to appear. Therefore, the Stars organized their own dissident exhibition in the park outside the China Art Gallery in the Spring of 1979, coinciding with the official National Exhibition for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic at the gallery. This provided them with publicity in the form of crowds as well as a good contrast with the government-sanctioned show. The show attracted 33,000 visitors before it was shut down after less than a week on orders from the Artists Association of the Ministry of Culture.\textsuperscript{35} Although the government at the time had publicly denounced the Cultural Revolution, the themes of political subversion in the Stars' works relating to the Revolution was combined with elements of current issues of social meaning in their attempts to challenge the Chinese viewers.

Ai Weiwei's Cézanne-like watercolours produced during his time with the Stars drew attention to Cézanne's role as the father of modern art and the need to celebrate this in Chinese modern art, even though he was a European master (see Figure 3.). This can also be seen as a celebration of Ai's artistic freedom in this controlled State. In these works one can see Ai Weiwei's interest in educating the Chinese public in terms of outside influences on art. This, in turn,

\textsuperscript{34} Galikowski, 214.
\textsuperscript{35} Galikowski, 215.
also alluded to the existence of other political ideas. Although the Chinese
government did not want the influence of democratic states and their ideas
relating to all aspects of life, in this period of relative relaxation, foreign ideals
certainly trickled through into Chinese culture, especially through art. Ai
Weiwei's early work fit into the general ethos of the Stars group centred
around the Democracy Wall. The Democracy Wall was instrumental in the
sharing of any information that came from outside sources. During Mao's reign
and especially at the time of the Cultural Revolution, education focused solely
on the study of the politics of Mao, Lenin and Marx.

Ai Weiwei grew up in a politically charged situation because of his father's
exile. Authorities had burned all foreign material such as books of art and
literature that his father had collected on his overseas trips to Paris and other
European cities. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, China was essentially
devoid of books. Ai was able to get some literature from a translator friend who
had a German wife. He saw that Ai enjoyed art and handed on these extremely
valuable books on artists such as Van Gogh, Manet and Jasper Johns. Any books
that could be sourced were shared and devoured by the group of artists.
Following the Cultural Revolution, there was little access to information about
anything after Cubism and therefore the post-Impressionist work was
especially influential. As Ai states, at the time "Picasso and Matisse were the
last heroes of modern history," and these artists had no knowledge of artists
such as Duchamp or Johns and their modernist ideas.

Even though there was little information or knowledge of overseas art
movements and ideas post-Revolution, there was still a vibrant avant-garde art
movement in Beijing in the late seventies and early eighties that centred
around the Democracy Wall. The artists were young, but still had an awareness
of what had happened before Mao's rule. They knew what their elders had
fought for in the 1920s and 1930s – for the modernization of Chinese culture
and society. Even though this was quashed, especially in the art academies.

during Mao’s reign, this younger generation of artists revisited the idea of modernizing China in the 1970s and 1980s. In the post-Revolution era China needed to modernize not only agriculturally and industrially but also culturally. It was this idea of modernization that caused artists such as Ai Weiwei to look to international resources as artistic inspiration. A more democratic way of thinking was adopted in order to ensure China did not lose its identity due to a lack of freedom like had just happened with the Cultural Revolution. There was a distinctly self-conscious and self-aware approach to art in the pursuit of personal freedom through art which Ai Weiwei prescribed to.

Compared with China’s overall population, the artists and intellectuals at the Democracy Wall were a very small group of about 100. However, the influence of this group on art, literature and culture in general was great. As previously stated, thoughts and writings were posted on the Wall, discussions held, and books and sources of information were shared. These ideas were further shared with the general public in the production of art and literature that came out of the Democracy Wall movement. Deng Xiaoping’s attempt to regulate the freedom of these intellectuals and artists, however, did not go to plan. He was afraid of too much social change sparked by art and literature and on the bottom line did not want a threat to the communist model. They say knowledge is power, and the group was becoming too knowledgeable and spreading this further in their respective fields. Therefore, he denounced the movement and the Wall in 1980.

Ai Weiwei was an instrumental member of the group in terms of sharing these democratic and socially aware ideas. He was active in the production of handwritten and illustrated magazines that were posted on the Wall in order to share ideas and knowledge. Ai Weiwei’s illustrations that accompanied the text in these magazines were central to the avant-garde movement in terms of visually supporting these influential ideas. At the same time, after coming to Beijing to attend film school, Ai began painting. There were no art schools or

39 Cohen, 51.
models available to him, and he therefore sat and worked in public areas such as train stations and drew who and what he saw.

The end of the Democracy Wall pushed Ai Weiwei to move to New York. The short period of relative liberalization in China allowed him to travel internationally. For Ai, it was no longer enough to rely on artistic influence from foreign material that had made its way into China; he could not realise his ideas in such a controlled environment. He was increasingly disillusioned by the state of Chinese culture and society under the communist model. In a sense he was very naïve in his decision to leave Beijing. He had no English and no money, but felt that this was where he needed to go in order to continue his practice and conquer the contemporary art world.42 Activists from his group of contemporaries in China were being jailed, and leaders from the movement were denounced as spies for the West. If he stayed he would surely face the same fate, and there was a sense that there was now no hope for China and he had to get out while he could. By his own admission, his confidence got him to New York, and this turned out to be an invaluable experience.

CHAPTER TWO: A GLOBAL ART WORLD

Globalization has played a major role in the art and practice of Ai Weiwei. He is an international artist with celebrity status due to his artistic practice and outspoken nature. He is unique as a Chinese contemporary artist; no other Chinese artist is as well known worldwide. In this chapter I examine the impact of globalization on Ai Weiwei's artistic practice with regard to his time living in New York; the rise of international periodical exhibitions and Ai’s work at Documenta 12 and his controversial exhibition ‘Fuck Off’; and his role as creative consultant for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Stadium. These aspects of Ai Weiwei’s career demonstrate how this theme of globalization plays out.

Globalization in Art, Politics and Economics

The term 'globalization' is widely used in various sectors of politics, economics and culture. Globalization in the general sense can be used in today's society when talking about the increasing interconnectedness of the world. It is a rather elusive concept and a concrete definition is yet to be confirmed. The general consensus is that it can be explained by technical and economic determinism. In economic terms globalization is central to the capitalist ideals of growth and increasing profit.

In terms of art, 'globalization' can explain the complex set of relationships that make up the contemporary art world. Julian Stallabrass, from the Courtauld Institute of Art, explains that new artistic content is fuelled by relationships between artists, critics, curators, dealers, museums, auction houses and international biennials. These relationships and the focus on the commercial culture of contemporary art have contributed to the relatively recent notion of the artist as a celebrity figure. This complex network of relationships constitutes the globalized nature of the contemporary art world in which Ai Weiwei is working.

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As Stallabrass stated, “the ‘new world order’ caused the art world to refashion itself by globalizing its operations.” Politically and economically the world became increasingly interrelated. The effect on the art economy saw a shift in cultural and artistic practice. The effect of globalization on culture can be seen in Ai Weiwei’s work in terms of a projection of Western values onto China and Chinese society. The globalization of art culture is at the cost of understanding local lives as the art world can be very detached from daily life. There is a lack of knowledge of foreign cultures despite this ‘globalization’ and Ai Weiwei’s art attempts to bridge this disparity or at least draw attention to it.

The Chinese Communist Party leaders and theorists have accepted the inevitability of globalization in political and intellectual discourses, and “globalization has thus become an important theoretical determinant of the Chinese state’s policies; and the dominance of the Chinese Communist Party within the Chinese political system has guaranteed the dominance of this ontological perspective on globalization.” Beginning with Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Reform and Open’ policy after Mao’s death, the Chinese government have transformed the nation by employing economic strategies of ‘opening to the outside’ and ‘going global’ in order to keep up and in line with the rest of the globalized world.

At 1.3 billion people, China is the world’s most populous nation, with the third largest economy in terms of GDP, and is a global investor. Since 1978 China’s economic policy has been centered on the idea of opening the Chinese economy to trade, technology and investment with Western countries. It was only a short step from Deng Xiaoping’s opening up policy of the late 1980s to globalization. It was therefore inconsistent to reject globalization even though the capitalist groundings of the concept go against the central tenets of Marxism and Leninism on which current Chinese ideology is modeled. The

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3 Stallabrass, 73.
4 Knight, 53.
6 Yeoh, 4.
globalization that transformed China’s economy in turn affected their cultural identity. This caused deep suspicion among many Chinese intellectuals and government officials. The growing European and American interest in art and culture beyond their region caused unease in China. This element of skepticism and fear of cultural insignificance is a reason why Ai Weiwei’s art and its place in Western society is seen as a threat to Chinese cultural identity by Chinese intellectuals and authorities.

**New York**

Ai Weiwei’s art and its place in Western culture stems from the twelve years he lived and worked in New York. During his time there from 1981-1993, Ai was introduced to the ideas and work of Marcel Duchamp. His New York works used the readymade object as an art form, thus giving value to an otherwise banal object. *Profile of Marcel Duchamp in a Coathanger* (1983) (Figure Two) is a direct homage to the artist with the manipulation of a wire coathanger representing the facial profile of Duchamp. In New York, he strived for anonymity in his work. He did not want to make any bold statements, distancing himself from any specific cultural, social or political agendas after the disillusionment of the impact of the Cultural Revolution and the political life that he had escaped from. By his own admission it was an unbearable situation to be living in Beijing but not daring to question the state of society especially after the defeat of the Democracy Wall movement.

Ai Weiwei studied at the Parsons School of Design. Although he did not complete a course at the school, his time at Parsons saw Ai become interested in ideas surrounding conceptual art. He became a participant in the New York art scene and met a variety of artists and intellectuals such as the poet Alan Ginsberg. In New York, Ai wanted to focus on the banal. This gave him an emotional release as he was able to create art detached from and indifferent to emotion. He was attracted to conceptual art as it was very straightforward in

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7 Knight, 54.
perspective, and allowed him to view art in a very different way. He saw painting as "a dead end form of expression" and instead focused on creating sculptural works such as his One Man Shoe (1987) (Figure 3). The work shows Ai's remarkable craftsmanship as he joined at the instep the front halves of two leather shoes. This work was part of his first New York solo exhibition 'Old Shoes, Safe Sex' in March 1988. The show was reviewed in Artspeak by Sean Simon who praised this relatively unknown Chinese artist and his neo-Dadaist approach to art. Ai Weiwei was interested in the use of readymades as "it opens up questions about the authority of the work of art... this is important always as he [Duchamp] challenged the authority of the author." The concept that art could be disengaged from historical complexity was attractive, and although this is not so much his aim now, the influence of Dada and in particular Duchamp is evident in his use of found objects that renegotiate ideas of function and identity – it is a conceptual redefinition of objects.

Dropping the Urn

On his return to Beijing in 1993, because of his father's ill health, Ai Weiwei continued to use readymade objects, but for very different ends. He focused on commenting on areas of Chinese cultural identity and issues surrounding the perceived threat of the West to Chinese culture. However, what constituted Chinese cultural identity? To say that globalization and its justification of capitalism had eroded Chinese cultural identity is farcical. Chinese cultural identity was already challenged by the Cultural Revolution. So much was destroyed and shunned by the Cultural Revolution that this 'vacuum' period seemed the perfect opportunity for artists to use the concept of globalization to aid their art practice. Ai Weiwei has explored the ideas of authenticity, value and Chinese culture in general in his art. This is seen by examining his ceramic works. Ai moved from using ordinary objects with little monetary or cultural value, to using valuable antiques such as Neolithic vases and furniture. A shocking example of this is the photographic triptych Dropping a Han Dynasty

10 Ai Weiwei with Charles Merewether, 24.
 Urn (1995) (Figure 4) where he dropped and smashed a 5000 year old Neolithic vase from the Han Dynasty and recorded the action, resulting in three black and white photographs of the event. The work shows the disposable nature of a valuable historic artefact in the name of performance or conceptual art.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn signaled a shift toward a more overt political motivation in his art, looking at the disposable nature of a valuable historic artefact for the sake of art. Ai Weiwei has a love-hate relationship with ceramics. He dislikes the medium yet this makes him more intrigued by ceramics and its history with regard to Chinese culture and society. He has an interest in the time periods from which the artefacts came from. The Han Dynasty (25 BCE – 220 CE) was seen as a 'golden age' for China, as “the perfect embodiment of China's central plains culture” and the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) was a time of total Persian rule. However, in current Chinese culture there is far more enthusiasm for Tang Dynasty culture and cultural relics when it is totally alien from traditional Chinese cultural values.

Does it matter then, that Ai Weiwei destroyed and repainted Han Dynasty objects? Firstly, there is a ‘perverse’ relationship in dynastical cultural artefacts between the refinement and quality of such objects and the degree of power of a single authority that dictated the conditions for their production. This questions the notion of keeping Chinese skills alive when they were developed under such harsh autocratic conditions. The vases were created in ceramic factories and are the result of an early instance of mass production in China. Furthermore, the people already dismiss Chinese culture, and Ai Weiwei is simply following this notion, bringing up questions of value both culturally and in monetary terms. It is still unknown whether the Han Dynasty urn was really

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14 Ai Weiwei with Charles Merewether, 29.
5000 years old or if it was one of the many well-created fakes. Either way, the artwork now exceeds the value of the original urn, fake or not. This makes the audience question ideas surrounding authenticity and value.

Ai Weiwei engages with contemporary Chinese issues concerning the rapid modernization of the nation, which has resulted in the loss of historic artistic culture; as well as the effects of globalization economically on traditional modes of production. He addresses the fear of some Chinese that authentic culture will be swamped by international art. Works such as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Coca-Cola Vase* (1997) (Figure 5) where Ai painted the Coca-Cola logo onto a Neolithic vase, also engage with broader ideas regarding mass production and the perception of value. In terms of changing an original or replicating a design, the cultural and monetary value can change and, “by changing the meaning of the object, shaking its foundation, we are also changing our own condition. We can question what we are.” It is fundamentally about perception rather than value or authenticity. These ceramic works focus on the disparate ideas of an art market obsession with antiques versus China’s willingness to destroy the past. Ai Weiwei’s rejection of the newly found value of Chinese art is a subtle attack on globalization in this sense.

One of the issues surrounding the perception of Ai Weiwei’s art is the commodification of art in capitalist and communist society. Ai Weiwei is by no means interested in preserving Chinese culture or heritage, as his aim as an artist is to subvert the role of culture in the creation of art, and the role of art in culture. Much like Duchamp and conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, he questions the value and deification of art. The idea that ‘culture sells’ is relevant here. Most of his ceramic works now exceed the value of the original antique pots which themselves are relatively cheap and commonplace in Chinese antique markets because they were mass produced at the time.

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15 Clark.
16 Ai Weiwei with Charles Merewether, 30.
17 Smith, 62.
Capitalist society has created an idea of owning ‘culture’. This links art to capitalism and commodification in society, as owning art can be seen as owning a part of culture. This is not necessarily a negative thing for Ai Weiwei, as regardless of the process he is still getting his message across. The process itself is even conveying his ideas surrounding value and commodification. This backs up the idea that Ai Weiwei’s art is political in nature, and art and politics in general cannot be separated. From the patronage of the Old Masters to the global art market today, art has been a commodity and has been used for some form of political means. Whether promoting a political leader or state power, or feeding the capitalist art market, art has a political nature.

**dOCUMENTA 12**

Perhaps the most significant example of the effects of globalization on Ai Weiwei’s artistic practice is the work he created for Documenta 12 in 2007. Of the approximately 140 art biennials in the world today, Documenta is one of the most prestigious. The success of these exhibitions has contributed to a major expansion of international art exhibitions. Thierry de Duve coined the term ‘glocalism’ to describe the contemporary art scene and art biennials. That is, the local or singular in a global environment, which makes for a new era in art in this increasingly globalized world. This glocalism is evident Ai’s *Fairytale* (2007) (Figure 6), which was one of the works he created for Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany. The “conceptual extravaganza” saw Ai organize a group of 1001 Chinese people to travel to the small German town in order to make up a ‘live’ installation.

There are two main elements of globalization that can be seen in this work. First, it brings together two disparate cultures. Kassel is the birthplace of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm who published a set of children’s fables from classical German literary and oral tradition in order to record a rich heritage of

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19 The term ‘biennial’ is used here to cover this type of international periodical exhibition, whether it be every two, three, four or more years.
20 Dimitrakaki, 305.
storytelling. Similarly, there is a rich Chinese tradition of storytelling. Fairytales, folk stories, myths and legends are a major part of Chinese culture. Ai’s underlying idea was that China’s rapid expansion in the past few decades could seem fairytale-like. The increasing strength of China’s economy and the impact this had on cultural and social aspects of Chinese life needed to be consolidated internationally, as this expansion was still isolated from the West.

Documenta was the perfect backdrop for this. The small town with a population of 195,000 was to be invaded by five groups of Chinese ‘tourists’ during the course of the exhibition who would interact with people at Documenta. The groups roamed the town and the exhibition as themselves, as tourists. They came into contact with other tourists as well as the people of Kassel, sharing their experiences of the exhibition and how they came to be there. Ai Weiwei wanted participants and visitors “to confront each other with their ordinary lives,” at “one of the most important contemporary art events.”

This direct confrontation would provide a meaningful sense of cultural exchange with the process illustrating globalization on a baseline level. This also comments on the transient nature of biennial exhibitions. Although the art world seems coherent and collective within the biennial, the conclusion of the exhibition signals a return to the everyday disparate nature of art.

The second major element of globalization in the work relates to the logistical process of putting the installation together. Ai posted a call for applicants on his personal blog and due to the unprecedented amount of interest; submissions were closed after a few days. An unprecedented number of Chinese citizens wanted to experience a culture they had for the most part never heard of, let alone experienced. From the outset it seemed that each side would have a major influence on the other in Kassel. Within three days there

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were over 3000 applications. Ai did not want to disappoint people, so he took down the announcement.24

The process of applying for passports was difficult. Some participants were granted passports with little hassle, yet some were outright denied by Chinese authorities. The process, Ai explains, "made people realize what it means to be a man or woman as an identity and with a nation: you have to go through the system, and the system can be simple or more complicated."25 Ai set up a temporary travel agency through his studio FAKE in order to facilitate the project due to the huge scale of the event. The visas required for each traveller proved to be even more complicated. It was a global matter of foreign affairs, and Ai met the German Ambassador to China Volker Stanzel who, as a culturally astute man, was very supportive of the project.26 Without his involvement and the help of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the project may have never been realized to its full potential. These processes were all documented via film, and were included in the final documentary film Fairytale (2007) that depicted the entire live installation work. Each application made was seen as a work of art, and Ai Weiwei was especially interested in the individual’s encounters with the state.27 This process of the individual rubbing up against the state is such a major part of his artistic practice, showing the political nature of his work.

Participants said that the process leading up to the event was a fairytale in itself and if they did not get to travel in the end, the process was such an eye opener that they would forever think differently about the rest of the world.28 Ai Weiwei gave the people a chance to experience true globalization in a social and cultural sense rather than just the government and the wealthy elite. Many participants were farmers, ethnic minorities or retired people, and all participants ordinarily would not have the chance to travel overseas. One possible result of so many people travelling was that some might not want to

24 Colonnello.
25 Colonnello.
26 Colonnello.
27 Colonnello.
28 Colonnello.
return to China after experiencing the outside world.\footnote{Smith, 53.} Therefore, negotiations with the German authorities were vital to the realization of the project that would eventually see the Chinese tourists return home.

To Ai Weiwei, the project was all about the individual. Even the number of participants, 1001 explains this. The additional one promotes the idea of the individual and the independent experiences of the individual as part of the project as a whole. Each participant would have an individual experience in Kassel, and Ai Weiwei had to cater for the needs of each individual in terms of accommodation, activities, food, and clothing, essentially making sure that each participant's individuality was not compromised. The coordination of the project was as much a part of the work as the time each participant was in Germany.

Dealing with such a wide range of individuals reflected the social, economic and political factors in China. Elements of Communist Chinese society are evident in the work with the socialist aspect of the large group and the communist ideal of the group as a greater force than each individual.\footnote{Smith, 53.} It was a foreign experience for all involved. Although China is booming and 'open' to the West in terms of participating in a global culture the Chinese people are still kept separate. Western media constantly report on the economic rise of China yet rarely experience the true culture of its people. Fairytale certainly attempted and to some extent succeeded in bridging this gap even if it was only for a short amount of time. Ai Weiwei saw this need to connect the disparate cultures on some level as, “There is such hype around China... There are a lot of fantasies and concern about this country. I think that it is now time that all these fantasies about life and art can meet.”\footnote{Colonello.} We have these ‘fantasies’ about each culture, yet each culture is a reality, and in this increasingly globalized world the East and West will continue to come into contact.

Funding for the project was not an issue because of the global nature and weight of Documenta and the global nature of Ai Weiwei’s artistic reputation.

\footnote{Smith, 53.} \footnote{Smith, 53.} \footnote{Colonello.}
The Swiss Leister and Erlenmeyer foundations alongside Ai’s Beijing-based Galerie Urs Meile funded the piece which cost approximately 3.1 million Euros overall.\textsuperscript{32} This is in contrast to the lifestyle of the rural areas from which Ai’s participants came; even though China was and still is experiencing an economic upturn, this has not had an immediate effect on the poverty of rural China. This was their chance to get out and experience the international nature of culture that was transforming their nation. \textit{Fairytale} can be seen as an extravagant waste of money and Ai Weiwei could have created a more useful project that involved ‘ordinary’ Chinese citizens.\textsuperscript{33} Ai Weiwei is primarily an artist, however, not an aid worker. His standing in the art world and his role as a highly politicized artist does promote the reality of these ideas, as aid and politics are inherently linked especially in the incredibly corrupt nature of the Chinese economy that causes this abject poverty. Therefore, as his art is highly political in nature, the idea of globalization and its role in art and politics is brought to the fore.

\textbf{Fuck Off}

Ai Weiwei has led the way for Chinese contemporary art with his confidence in speaking out against the government through his art and his actions. Internationally, his reputation rose with his exhibition entitled ‘Fuck Off’ in Shanghai, curated with Beijing-based Feng Boyi in 2000. Contemporary art in China has only become apparent and accepted in the past decade due to the opening of China to the West, as the reform of China’s economy has unwillingly let in aspects of Western lifestyles and the materialism that underpins it. This has fuelled the contemporary art scene and ‘Fuck Off’ is a prime example of this. The exhibition was hugely controversial in its name as well as its purpose.

The globalization that has seen the creation of worldwide biennials contributed to Ai Weiwei’s rise in an unconventional way, as ‘Fuck Off’ was created as an unofficial add on to the Shanghai Biennial in 2000. In China, he was damned for his provocative nature, yet he was lauded by Western art

\textsuperscript{32} Dyer, 779.
\textsuperscript{33} Dyer, 779.
circles for his politically driven practice. The sheer provocation of the exhibition was underlined by its anti-authoritarian foundation, and the 48 participating Chinese avant-garde contemporary artists tackled the political and social issues relating to the state of Chinese contemporary society. There was no set theme for the exhibition, however as the catalogue states: “Perhaps there is nothing that exists ‘on-site,’ but what will last forever is the very uncooperativeness with any system of power discourse.” The one thing these artists had in common was the desire to undermine the current political situation, and this is essentially the underlying element of Ai Weiwei’s practice in general.

Ai Weiwei’s artistic contribution to the exhibition was the display of the photographic triptych Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn and Study of Perspective (1995-2003) (Figure 8). The exhibition of Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn reinforces Ai’s ideas surrounding authenticity and value. Study of Perspective is a series of photographs that Ai took of his arm stretched in front of the camera ‘pulling the finger’ at famed cultural sites such as Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the White House in Washington DC. In these works, Ai Weiwei said ‘fuck off’ to the prescribed political and cultural centres of the world, aligning with the anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment nature of the Shanghai exhibition in relation to the concurrent international biennale. The exhibition was not only challenging to China, it was also a challenge to the sacredness of the Western art market.

As much as the Western world attempted to applaud and accept Chinese contemporary art as an important facet of contemporary art globally, the world still viewed the art coming out of China with Cold War-tinted glasses. Ai Weiwei’s art especially was seen as anti-establishment, which was true, yet this produced a very simplistic understanding of Chinese culture and its contemporary developments. There was a misinterpretation on both sides, as Ai Weiwei saw Chinese contemporary art in general as still immature in the

34 Smith, 49.
manner in which it grasped political issues. The chaos and arbitrary nature of the art produced can be seen as a reflection of the political nature of the communist state surviving in a capitalist society.

**Olympic Stadium**

The political nature of Ai Weiwei’s art practice can be further demonstrated by examining his collaboration with Swiss architects Herzog and De Meuron in the creation of the Beijing National Stadium for China’s hosting of the Olympic games in August 2008 (Figure 7). The architects employed Ai as the creative consultant for their design, which was entered into the worldwide competition to design the stadium. On talking to the former Swiss ambassador to China Uli Sigg, Jacques Herzog stated: “When we invited Ai Weiwei we originally hoped to take a step forward, we never expected we would take two.” Ai’s was very involved with the design of the stadium, and was an indispensable aid in terms of creating a structure suitable for Beijing.

The original plan for the stadium was constantly altered in order to meet national interest and government ideals. However, by working for a Swiss company this was done in a liberal working environment and those involved enjoyed the process. This is in contrast to the conflict between the foreign architects and the Chinese governmental officials. There was a constant fear that the whole project would be abandoned as at any moment anyone could decide there was a problem, which indeed is a common factor when dealing with the arbitrary nature of the Chinese governmental system. The project was almost not realized as there was great domestic opposition and doubt regarding the idea of foreign architects creating the centerpiece for the most important international event China had hosted. A group of Chinese architects signed a letter of opposition citing that the design was the result of colonialism.

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in architecture and that China was "becoming an experimental ground for foreign architects."³⁹

The Chinese government often claims Ai Weiwei as the ‘Chinese consultant’ for the stadium as he was the only Chinese national on the design team. The attempt to claim the Bird’s Nest as their own is futile, as it is well known that a Swiss company designed the stadium. The Swiss company approached Ai Weiwei – it had nothing to do with the Chinese government. Ai himself stated, “I have nothing to do with ‘the Chinese side’. I’ve never worked on your side.”⁴⁰

The ‘Chinese elements’ in the stadium’s exterior attributed to Ai Weiwei include the cracked ice patterns from traditional pottery glaze. This formed the lattice-like effect of the exterior of the stadium’s walls. Ancient pottery painting patterns are also referenced in the design. However, these artistic elements were only discussed after the design had been completed in order to appease the Chinese government. Ai Weiwei saw it as ridiculous to say he was the Chinese consultant that brought Chinese elements to the design. This was not his purpose as he was simply an architect doing his job, who happened to be Chinese.⁴¹ It was therefore inevitable that these elements would arise as his reasoning and modes of thinking were developed within the Chinese culture.

To Ai Weiwei, the lattice structure was more about a call to China to be more open. He saw China’s hosting of the 2008 Olympic games as an opportunity for greater transparency. The arena opens up to the exterior, and as Ai stated:

“It is intended to be a statement about the need for a more open society, open discussion. Architecture will always relate to ideology. And I do not see ideology as a matter of left and right or east and west anymore. I see the tension in ideology as being between a more interesting state of mind and a more dreadful state of mind. The artist should be for the interesting against the dreadful.”⁴²

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There is a long history of architecture being used to promote certain ideologies, and this is especially evident under autocratic or totalitarian regimes. China is no different in this, yet Ai Weiwei is against the communist regime despite being a Chinese national. He is very vocal in conveying his political ideas, especially here with regard to the Olympics held in Beijing. His role as creative consultant for the Bird’s Nest gave him slightly more freedom to speak out against the communist regime, as he was the respected architectural muse for the great stadium, central to the Olympic games in Beijing. It seems he saw himself as untouchable, or did not really care about the potential backlash. On the night before the August 8 Opening Ceremony he show publicly commented that he felt “outraged at the Chinese government,” and was “disgusted by the way power is abused in this country.” He was appalled by the spectacle of the event in terms of its principles and the form it took. The show demonstrated the complete lack of political transparency in China. It was a hugely politicized display that tried to project a sense of unity, joy and culture to the rest of the world, and in response to the Olympic idea of different worlds sharing ‘one dream’, Ai simply said, “dream on.” The absence of ordinary Chinese people from the Olympics and the militant nature of the Chinese Olympic ambassadors ensured this ‘dream’ could not be realized.

Under the corrupt nature of the Chinese government, there was a denial of individual creativity and culture in general, which derives from the fraudulent nature that underpinned Communism in China. This lack of integrity made it increasingly difficult to promote a creative culture that only existed under duress because of the autocratic governmental system. The spectacle of the Opening Ceremony that was performed in the very arena that Ai Weiwei had helped to create in order to promote the idea of political transparency was a

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43 Vulliamy.

In taking on the role as creative consultant for the Olympic Stadium, Ai Weiwei was not aligning himself with the government. He told the German magazine \textit{Der Spiegel} that, "the Games are a propaganda show, a giant masked ball... The outcome will be endless nonsense and boredom."\footnote{John McDonald, "Destruction and Creation: Visual Art," \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, May 17, 2008: 16.} In vocalizing his contempt for the Chinese government and actively promoting his political ideas, Ai Weiwei is leading the way for a new generation of artists. He subscribes to the notion that art and architecture cannot be separated from politics as politics have always influenced artistic ideas and practice, and will continue to do so. Ai is unusually depicting his ideas through his art as much as voicing his opinions publicly. Although this has had serious ramifications for the artist, there is no denying that he has utilized social media platforms and his status as an internationally recognized artist to consolidate his ideas and convey these views to the outside world.

In the past thirty years, China has become a major figure in the global economy and political system and, "China and the world were mutually astonished to discover each other, and this has forced both parties to rediscover themselves, and to refigure the world's spatial hierarchy as well as the structure of all its systems."\footnote{Ai Weiwei, "Problems Facing Foreign Architects Working Within a Chinese Architectural Practice: January 10, 2006," in \textit{Ai Weiwei's Blog: writings, interviews and digital rants, 2006-2009}, ed. and trans. Lee Ambrozy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011), 3.} The opening up of China to the West was a political inevitability, and the impact on Chinese art is yet to be fully explored or realized. However, it can be said that the art and practice of Ai Weiwei directly reflects the changes in Chinese culture and society, and the advent of globalization has aided him in commenting on the political in his art, subscribing to the notion that politics and art are linked.
CHAPTER THREE: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF AI WEIWEI

Ai Weiwei's increasing dissidence in his artistic practice and personal activism was the underlying reason for his eventual arrest in 2011. Although his art until this point had predominantly been politically motivated, it was his work surrounding the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake that alerted the Chinese authorities to his rebellious disposition. Ai's extensive use of social media in this technological age further fuelled his attack on the corrupt nature of the Chinese government, promoting freedom of expression and transparency in his home country. This chapter examines the range of media and forms Ai Weiwei's art took around his disappearance.

The 2008 Sichuan Earthquake

Ai Weiwei's work surrounding the Sichuan earthquake marked a new direction for him in his artistic practice. Ai has continually pushed the boundaries with his art and questioned the fine line between art and activism through his politically motivated works. Ai's idea of 'art as activism' can be clearly seen in the work he did relating to the Sichuan earthquake in 2008.

The May 12 earthquake killed an estimated 68,000 people, with the Chinese government confirming a rather uncertain figure of 5,335 students in this toll. The earthquake devastated the province with many structures being destroyed including approximately 7,000 school classrooms and dormitory rooms.1

Ai Weiwei, well known through his Chinese web portal sina.com blog at the time, could not bring himself to blog in the days following the disaster, as it was too shocking to comprehend. The Chinese media coverage of the event troubled him, as the 'hope' generated by showing the rescue effort and miracle survival stories took the focus off the poor accounting of the dead. The repetitive run of hopeful images and survival stories transformed into governmental propaganda, and after ten days Ai finally posted on his blog a

damning criticism of the praise given to government officials and the 'motherland'. The propaganda of compassion projected by the state was taking advantage of those dead and affected by the disaster. Less fuss and more respect and reverence for the dead was needed. Ai traveled to the Sichuan province and visited the devastated areas. The images he took while there are "saturated with a deep and mournful tonality," and are far from the usual detachment in his everyday prolific photography. The images are of devastated buildings in the province and the desperation of those trying to find their loved ones in the debris alongside official rescue teams (Figure 9). There is a sense of suffering and humility in the photographs of the earthquake, yet they are still documentary in nature. They are powerful images as a result of their dual purpose as documentary and artistc works.

In the months following the disaster, Ai Weiwei used his blog to condemn the government’s lack of transparency regarding the unsafe construction of the school buildings that were destroyed in the earthquake that resulted in the unprecedented number of student deaths. Children ranging from age two to age eighteen were killed in the earthquake, either immediately or during the rescue because they were trapped under the rubble of these 'tofu dregs' schools as Ai Weiwei and actively concerned parents began to call the failed structures. The tragedy of a loss of so many children whose deaths could have been prevented by stricter building regulations fuelled his activism and saw his art become more explicitly politically driven. This began his collision course with the Chinese authorities.

In a blog post titled “Silent Holiday” on June 1 2008, Ai spoke about his distress at the lack of information available regarding the missing or deceased children in the Sichuan province following the earthquake. He wrote:

Twenty days have passed since the earthquake, and still there is no roster clearly listing the names of missing children, and there are no accurate counts of the dead. The public still don’t

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know who these departed children are, who their families are, who neglected to reinforce the schools with steel, and who mixed inferior concrete in their foundations and concrete supports when they were constructed.4

He went on to directly address the Chinese government and the way they had handled the disaster thus far:

"Don't be too anxious to boast that disasters strengthen the nation or to brag about "unprecedented unity", and don't use conceited words to cover up the cold, hard facts.5

Ai actively condemned the government’s process of reporting on the disaster and the way officials had attempted to turn the earthquake into an event that promoted the unity of China in the wake of a disaster, therefore reinforcing the strength of the communist regime.

The Sichuan Earthquake Names Project and Artistic Response

On March 20 2009, two months prior to the first anniversary of the earthquake, Ai launched the Sichuan Earthquake Names Project (Figure 10) via his Sina blog. It was a call to compile an exhaustive list of the children who were either missing, presumed dead, or confirmed dead following the earthquake almost a year earlier. This was after the Sichuan government had repeatedly failed and refused to investigate the situation. Government policy was to continually state that the deaths were unavoidable and inevitable in the situation. The reasoning was that the magnitude of the earthquake exceeded the earthquake-proofing standards and therefore all losses are deemed ‘natural’ and this would have happened regardless of the prior state of the schools’ construction.6 Ai attacked the government’s reaction to the earthquake by reprimanding it for the way fact is concealed to keep the peace and ‘stability’ of the nation intact. Over fifty volunteers and researchers dedicated their time to the ‘Citizen’s Investigation’, traveling to the Sichuan Province and personally collecting the names, ages and other personal information of the deceased or

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missing children. As of May 2009, the names of 5,190 children had been collected and Ai believes that was approximately 80% of the total count. On May 29 2009, Chinese government authorities shut down the blog, which had been periodically reporting findings of Ai’s investigation.

Researchers and volunteers for the *Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* (2009) were repeatedly detained and arrested, and were targets of police harassment during the investigation. Leading up to the anniversary of the earthquake itself, blog posts were methodically taken down by authorities, as the content was deemed illicit. This also saw a general increase in surveillance of Ai and his associates. Security cameras as well as personnel monitored his movements around Beijing, and indeed around the country. However, this did not halt his art production.

The earthquake in the Sichuan province signaled a major change in Ai Weiwei’s purpose as an artistic provocateur, to a highly effective cyberactivist. His original position as mediator between the Western art world and Beijing’s underground experimental art scene has developed, with Ai’s major role now being an outspoken activist using new media and politics to bring attention to the corrupt nature of the Chinese government. Alison Klayman, who directed the 2012 documentary film *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, believes the government’s refusal to take any responsibility for the student deaths in the earthquake “radicalized him.” His response to this event saw his political activism merge with his aesthetic art.

The first major work that appeared in response to the earthquake and the government’s response to the student deaths was exhibited in Ai Weiwei’s solo exhibition at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo in July 2009. *Snake Ceiling* (2009)

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8 Grube.
9 Grube.
(Figure 11) was a sculpture created using 1,000 children's backpacks in a winding snake form, suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space. The work references the dead children from the earthquake, with the backpacks representing school children. The work also employs formalist ideas from minimalist and conceptual art, with the backpacks representing the idea of the deceased children and each bag relating to the child that may have once carried such a bag. Furthermore, aspects of Chinese cultural history are referenced with the snaking form of the hanging backpacks. The snake in Chinese culture can denote malevolence, control and mystery.\textsuperscript{11} This can be seen as a metaphor for the Chinese government itself in the handling of the situation, as well as the control the government has over the Chinese state in general.

In terms of Ai Weiwei’s political activism present in his art, he claims that, “As an artist I will never be satisfied if I cannot reach... the nation’s problems... My activism is part of me. If my art has anything to do with me, then my activism is part of my art.”\textsuperscript{12} He sees himself as a political activist. His art is an extension of the self and therefore his art is politically engaged. This is further evident in the solo exhibition following Tokyo. ‘So Sorry’ was a major retrospective of his work exhibited at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany that ran from October 2009 until January 2010. It was his most ambitious exhibition in both scale and complexity. The exhibition was planned to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The title ‘So Sorry’ was an ironic response to the Chinese government’s tendency when censured to say that criticism ‘hurts the feelings of the people’.\textsuperscript{13}

The message found in the exhibition was bolstered by the fact that it was in the Haus der Kunst, drawing on the gallery’s own history as the major German art gallery of Hitler’s failed authoritarian Third Reich. The monumental architecture of the building was a place to display the strength of the State’s cultural ideology. As a reminder of a failed autocratic state, the Haus der Kunst

\textsuperscript{12} David Frazier, “Ai Weiwei’s Year of Living Dangerously,” Art in America 97, no.8 (September 2009): 28.  
\textsuperscript{13} Jeff Kelley, “Ai Weiwei,” Artforum 48, no.7 (March 2010): 238.
was the perfect setting for Ai Weiwei’s exhibition created to mock the corrupt nature of a present day single-party state.

The exhibition included Ai’s earlier ceramic, furniture and photographic works. He also created a new site-specific work for the exhibition that related directly to his activism regarding the Sichuan earthquake. The façade of the Haus der Kunst was turned into an exhibition piece extending ideas first explored in *Snake Ceiling*, this time using 9,000 coloured backpacks to create a mural depicting the Chinese phrase: “She lived happily on this earth for seven years”. This was a phrase taken from a letter Ai received from the mother of a young girl who died in the earthquake, which was the inspiration for the work named *Remembering* (2009) (Figure 12). The mother, from the Beichuan district, wrote:

Today we had a meeting, they talked about maintaining stability... They say that stabilizing our families will stabilize Beichuan. But I just want people to know about my darling daughter [name omitted] who once lived happily on this world for seven years.14

The work represented the general aim of the investigation, the need for each child, each deceased person to be seen as an individual rather than a vague number. It focused on the conceptual rather than the visual, aiming to show people they could be individuals within this society. Nothing could ‘stabilize’ the nation without the support of truth, transparency and the acknowledgement of each person, who until that day was a living being that contributed to the perceived ‘stability’ of the nation. The work itself reflects the notion of a dictatorship in China, as well as the corrupt nature of the government and politicians whom he blamed for the substandard construction of the schools, which caused student deaths. Ai claimed that, “The poor are neglected and have no rights... It’s the character of a dictatorship in the 21st century.”15 By displaying the work at the Haus der Kunst, Ai Weiwei drew on the theme of dictatorship and used it to form an opinion and make a judgment

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of the Chinese regime to show he was not a part of it – "If I don’t say anything, I’m part of it – it’s that simple. I’m forced to be quite active or politically unaware." In order to truly convey his political standing, he needed to show it through his art, and ‘So Sorry’ was a blatant accusation of the Chinese government all the way from Germany.

**Ai Weiwei and Social Media**

Ai Weiwei was a true contemporary artist in terms of his use of current and popular technology in his artistic practice. Ai Weiwei insisted, "Art is about social change." He embodied this notion through the use of social media, which began with his previously mentioned blog at the Chinese portal Sina.com. From 2006-2009, Ai managed to overcome ‘The Great Firewall’ in China with his blogging, which was increasingly censored by the Communist government due to the nature of the text as well as the popularity of the blog – at its height it gained over 100,000 hits per day. In order to subvert official restrictions, Ai’s blogging had evolved to include social media platforms such as Twitter and Google+. Although these social media sites are difficult to access in China, it is not impossible for Chinese ‘netizens’ (the young, technological generation of China) to support and follow Ai on these platforms. Furthermore, the rapid increase in popularity of social media in Western culture sees that Ai’s international support is maintained and even amplified.

Through his original blog, shut down by the Chinese government in 2009, his Twitter account and his Google+ account, Ai successfully criticized the government in thousands of online posts. The subject matter is varied, but the underlying call for freedom of expression and government transparency in China remained the same. Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator of London’s Serpentine Gallery and major supporter of Ai, saw the blog as, “one of the greatest social sculptures of our time.”

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16 Ai Weiwei in Silke Ballweg and Anne Thomas.
17 Strickland.
18 Sala.
19 Strickland.
actions as an artwork. It is in this way that Ai Weiwei’s blogging could be seen as a social ‘sculpture’. As official state media in China presented only the view of the state authorities in order to promote stability and harmony, the Internet was the best vehicle for directly expressing his views to a wide range of people. Ai’s art in the physical sense is still very important for expressing his political views in an aesthetic manner, yet his ‘social sculpture’ in cyberspace was vital in terms of reaching a greater audience in an immediate manner.

**China’s Fear of a ‘Jasmine Revolution’**

Social media has become a galvanizing element in political protests overseas. The Jasmine is the state flower of Tunisia. It was used to refer to the 2010 Jasmine Revolution uprisings in Tunisia. It is also the common term used to encompass the ‘Arab Spring’, which has seen a wave of revolution by way of protests and government overthrow in areas of North Africa and the Middle East. There were fears in China of a similar Jasmine Revolution and authorities were especially concerned with the effects of social media on these revolutions.20

This saw a major crackdown on Chinese dissidents including human rights lawyers, activists, bloggers and artists since 2011. The threat of an uprising sparked by these outspoken Chinese citizens was too threatening to the power monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party. Many of these dissidents were imprisoned or reported missing, including Chinese literary figure and human rights activist Liu Xiaobo who, while still imprisoned, was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize “for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China.”21

Ai Weiwei’s blogging and social media use was prolific and aggressive in damning the Chinese communist government. This was a key reason as to why

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Ai was targeted by the government as a political dissident. Lee Ambrozy, translator of Ai’s original blog into a book, explains the blog “became more daring and inflammatory,” which made it “a troublesome issue for the central government,” because his blog was not only read in China, but also reached the wider Western world.22

The international interest sparked by Ai Weiwei’s artistic activism caused the government to monitor his movements more closely. They began to systematically remove his more dissenting blog posts and eventually deleted his blog. He was followed wherever he went, his telephone was wiretapped and his residence was under surveillance.23 In August 2009, Ai traveled to Chengdu in order to give evidence to support activist Tan Zuoren who was on trial for subversion due to his advocacy of transparency regarding the Sichuan earthquake deaths.24 Like Ai, Tan wanted a full investigation into the deaths and public disclosure of the findings. The night before Ai was set to give evidence at the trial he was detained and beaten by Chengdu police and this stopped him from attending the trial. He was essentially silenced on government orders. It was not until the following year that the full effects of this incident of police brutality were realized. When installing ‘So Sorry’ in Munich in 2010, Ai complained of increasing dizziness and constant headaches. He went to a doctor in Munich and was immediately admitted for surgery to relieve a brain haemorrhage resulting from the Chengdu beating.

This was the beginning of a series of events that culminated in his eventual disappearance in April 2011. Ai had been invited by a “high Shanghai official” to build a studio in the city in their plans to create a cultural and artistic centre. However, when the structure was near completion, the government informed Ai that it had been illegally erected and was to be demolished. “It’s definitely some kind of political issue,” Ai admitted, and was a result of his increasingly

22 Strickland.
dissident behaviour in the promotion of human rights in China. In early November, senior Chinese Communist Party officials in Shanghai ordered his arrest in order to stop a ‘celebration party’ he was holding to mark the forced demolition of his studio. In response to the impending demolition, Ai wished to put on a feast of river crabs for 10,000 people at the unfinished site. River crabs in pinyin are ‘he xie’ which can also mean harmony. This was a direct insult to the central government’s rhetoric of creating a ‘harmonious society’ in China. Ai refused to cancel the party and so was placed under house arrest for three days and missed the celebrations that were held by his associates and supporters.

Ai joined the party via his Twitter feed, reinforcing the notion that the Internet is his most powerful tool in terms of his political activism. At this time, Ai was protected to an extent by his international fame. This incident allowed him to employ a humorous element, which was a major aspect of his artistic practice in general. As he stated, “Humour is a necessary ingredient when you’re living under an authoritarian society. I’m in a battle against any system that tries to limit our imagination. Only with this humour and art do we have a superior advantage, and we will win every time.” Peng Feng, professor of aesthetics at Peking University, sees Ai’s mockery of officials and authority as unusual in China. “Ai Weiwei is very special because there is no artistic tradition in China of using humour to challenge the rulers. If you mocked an emperor you would probably be killed.” The Chinese central government had no precedent to follow with regard to Ai Weiwei’s artistic, dissident methods. Therefore he was treated as an explicitly political dissident. This supports the notion that Ai’s art is inherently political in nature; art is simply a vehicle for portraying his ideas.

27 Anderlini and Pilling.
28 Anderlini and Pilling.
Disappearance and Arrest

After Ai was placed under house arrest in November 2010, police told him he was very close to being imprisoned. Ai did not want it to come to this, but said he was "ready for it" because he saw the "core value of an artist must be to express yourself freely and fight for the freedom of others." Ai had been constantly commenting on the arbitrary nature of the Chinese government, which led to the prophetic blog post the day before his blog was shut down by authorities.

What can they do to me? Nothing more than to banish, kidnap or imprison me. Perhaps they could fabricate my disappearance into thin air, but they don't have any creativity or imagination, and they lack both the joy and ability to fly. This kind of political organization is pitiful.

On April 3 2010, Ai Weiwei was seized at Beijing Capital Airport as he was clearing immigration in order to board a flight to Hong Kong and on to Taiwan for business purposes. His home and studio in Caochangdi was raided by police. Ai's wife, staff and volunteers were questioned and Ai's friend and former reporter Wen Tao also disappeared. Ai was not heard from during his 81 day disappearance.

Four days later, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei released a statement via the state-controlled Xinhua News Agency saying Ai Weiwei was under investigation for economic crimes and the arrest had nothing to do with human rights or freedom of expression. Ai was further accused of tax evasion, plagiarism, bigamy and Internet pornography, as well as being a 'third grade artist' who only wanted media attention. Most of these accusations remain unfounded and uninvestigated. There was no mention of Ai's activism regarding the Sichuan earthquake and his arrest was justified by the statement: "Ai's criticism of the government became increasingly open and magnified in..."
the past two years due to his increasing exposure in the media.32 Ai was arrested and held on extremely vague charges.

The timing of the disappearance occurred at a time when there was considerable attention on Ai Weiwei’s work. Several exhibitions of Ai Weiwei’s work were due to open at the time of his arrest. Sunflower Seeds (2010) was on display at the Tate Modern when Ai was arrested. He also failed to attend the opening of two major London exhibition openings; a sculpture exhibition at the Lisson Gallery and Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads (2011) (Figure 13) at Somerset House which commented on ideas of identity and integrity with regard to Chinese Zodiac symbolism. Italian artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) originally created the bronze heads at Somerset House as a water clock for a Qing Dynasty emperor. The heads were pillaged in the nineteenth century, and the current Chinese government has been trying to retrieve them.33 The exhibition was an example of Ai Weiwei’s inflammatory and politically dissident behaviour, extending the general theme of his work that led to his arrest. It also commented on the claiming of Chinese art and artists by the West.

Press was heightened due to his absence from these international exhibitions. There was a global outcry for the liberation of Ai Weiwei, or at least information as to his whereabouts. Many online petitions surfaced worldwide calling for his release, which indeed reflected Ai’s own ‘social sculpture’. Alexandra Monroe, Senior Asian Art Curator at the Guggenheim in New York, instigated an online petition as, “We felt compelled to do something, and we felt Ai Weiwei would do this for us... It’s a totally Ai Weiwei action to effect an Ai Weiwei liberation.”34 Most Chinese citizens were largely ignorant of Ai’s existence and therefore arrest. The outcry surrounding his disappearance was mainly from Western supporters of the artist, with the exception of his

34 Strickland.
mainland supporters and ‘netizens’ who Ai was able to reach with his social media art activism.

In a digital world, it is becoming increasingly impossible to control ideas. The Great Firewall in China is strong but not impenetrable, and the Internet provides a platform for likeminded people to be reasonably anonymous or impervious to reprisals in terms of supporting people such as Ai Weiwei and their dissident ideas. Although the major crackdown on influential dissidents in China continues, it would be unfeasible to silence each individual who has ever spoken in support of these figures. Throughout the 2012 documentary film Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry, Ai was constantly seen with his cellphone or digital camera, filming and taking photos of everything he did and uploading them onto social media sites. These electronic devices served as Ai’s diary, documenting the banal as well as various activities such as encounters with authorities. This showed the unpredictable logic and bullying tactics of some Chinese authorities. It was remarkable that the documentary filmmaker Alison Klayman was allowed into the country to make a film about his work on the Sichuan Earthquake and the increasing use of social media that led to his detainment.

The Chinese government did not agree with the international support of Ai Weiwei and the impact this had on the younger ‘netizens’ in China who supported him. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei protested that the international support for the artist was confusing and angering to Chinese citizens as he was arrested for criminal activity. He questioned why Western countries treated this criminal suspect as a hero when speaking out against one’s government was far from heroic.\textsuperscript{35} Ai Weiwei’s international standing had no bearing on his treatment while imprisoned. Vice President of the European Commission Catherine Ashton called on the Chinese government to release Ai Weiwei and other dissidents who were detained for exercising their right to freedom of expression. She held grave concerns for the

deterioration of the human rights situation in China, including the increasing restrictions placed on foreign journalists reporting on dissident issues. The arbitrary disappearances of dissidents in China violate international human rights standards. Ai Weiwei’s former influence as the famed ‘Chinese consultant’ for the Olympic Stadium in Beijing was irrelevant due to his increasing dissident tendencies generating from the Sichuan earthquake controversy.

Release from prison

Ai Weiwei’s release after 81 days of detention was a humiliating backdown for the Chinese government. His disappearance caused Chinese leaders to unintentionally make Ai an international cause célèbre. His arrest epitomizes the struggle of the individual against the power of the autocratic state. The imprisonment was certainly a political silencing posing as punishment for a tax crime in order to repress his popularity as a dissident. This gave the state power over Ai and his defense. However, the pressure on Chinese authorities from international protests and foreign governments saw his release on bail on June 22 2011.

Ai Weiwei initially could not comment on his arrest, simply telling journalists, “I’m on bail. Please understand.” Xinhua News Agency reported Ai was released due to his “good attitude in confessing his crimes” as well as because of his chronic diabetes. On his release, Asia researcher for non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch Nicholas Bequelin stated his belief that:

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36 Simpson.
His detention was political and his release is political. It is the result of a huge domestic and international outcry that forced the government to this resolution... I think Beijing realized how damaging it was to hold China’s most famous artist in detention.\(^{39}\)

Patrick Poon, the executive secretary of the Chinese Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group, echoed this notion by tweeting:

It’s good news for Ai Weiwei and for all of us who support Ai Weiwei and other human rights defenders but the Chinese government’s handling of Ai Weiwei’s case once again proves that China is miles away from the real ‘rule of law’.\(^{40}\)

Ai’s release was a concession by the Chinese government, yet his bail terms saw that he was not completely free to return to his dissenting conduct.

Ai was banned from using his Twitter account, as well as from talking to journalists or foreign figures about his arrest. Although he initially adhered to the limitations placed upon him by the government, in the months after his release Ai became frustrated by the lack of outside communication. He needed to reconnect with the world as his activism and artistic practice thrives on the interconnectivity of people and ideas. Ai began to use Twitter again, and has spoken to foreign journalists about his detention.

**Ai Weiwei’s reaction to his detainment**

Ai Weiwei became increasingly vocal about his disappearance in the months following his release. When imprisoned, Ai was cut off completely from the outside world and was subjected to daily interrogations. The lack of information he received was distressing. “When there is no information, you’re already dead. It’s a very, very strong test – I think more severe than any physical punishment.”\(^{41}\) He found himself wishing he would be beaten in order to have some form of human contact and to experience some emotion even if this was anger. It was very threatening to be in a setting devoid of emotion, and

\(^{39}\) Nicholas Bequelin in Tania Branigan, “Ai Weiwei Released From Detention.”

\(^{40}\) Patrick Poon in Tania Branigan, “Ai Weiwei Released From Detention.”

with regard to how this has changed his artistic process he will only say, "I
know what it’s like inside. It’s like a dark world."42

His return to microblogging and denouncing of the Chinese government has
resulted in a US $2.4 million fine for the ‘tax evasion’ for which he was
originally jailed. The police told him, “You should have no illusions. If the nation
announces you have a tax problem, you have a tax problem.” He was further
threatened with the imprisonment of his wife and associates if he does not pay
and, "They know I will never let that happen. So the game is, they know me...
It’s a hundred departments, you can’t fight them... The tax bureau and the court
and the police are the same person with different faces. You know this from the
beginning. If you play a chess game, and play two or three moves, they throw
the board away."43

Ai Weiwei was legally required to pay the US $2.4 million fine. In order to
raise the money, he opened an account with the social media platform Google+
and invited followers to loan his company money to assist in paying the fine,
promising they would be paid back in full. There was an overwhelming
response to this request. In the first week US $1 million was donated by tens of
thousands of supporters, both international and Chinese, by transferring funds
online as well as simply dropping money off at the gate to Ai’s home and studio
in Beijing. One Chinese student who did not want to be identified for fear of
repercussions had traveled for 22 hours to see Ai and to donate money. She
was “terrified to be here,” but “wanted Ai Weiwei to know that when he was
imprisoned we didn’t forget about him.”44

By using social media as well as speaking to foreign reporters in the
aftermath of his release, Ai directly challenged the authority of the Chinese
government. He forced the government to choose between detaining him again
and leaving him to encourage future dissidents. Ai accused Beijing authorities
of illegally detaining people in secret locations without informing their families,
which is exactly what happened to him. The only reason he was released as

42 Fish.
43 Fish.
44 Fish.
opposed to other dissidents was due to his international profile as an artist and the international pressure for his release. Ai saw the entire world as partly responsible for these human rights issues in China. In the wake of China's economic rise, Western countries contributed to the power of the Chinese government by borrowing money and indirectly supported the sacrifice of human rights in China. With regard to the silencing of people who have spoken out against the Chinese government, Ai believed, "This kind of country has no future, if things like this happen. Aesthetically, morally, you've already failed. You win the battles because you have power, but you've lost the war."\footnote{Fish.}

In the aftermath of Ai Weiwei's arrest and subsequent release, the artist continued to denounce the Chinese government and advocated for the basic right to freedom of expression in China. Although he was restricted to residing in Beijing, his international reputation increased exponentially. An exhibition of Ai Weiwei's recent sculptural work at the Lisson Gallery in London was on display when he was released. Incidentally, a central piece of the exhibition was a marble surveillance camera that referenced his pop art tendencies as well as the blatant fact that he had been monitored by the Chinese government for years. The popularity of the 2011 exhibition generated by the attention surrounding his detainment was summed up by a gallery staff member saying, "It's kind of backfired, hasn't it? The government wanted to shut him up and now he's more popular than ever."\footnote{Elizabeth Renzetti, "China hoped to keep Ai Weiwei quiet. Instead it shone a spotlight on the artist," \textit{The Globe and Mail}, 23 June 2011: A.12.} After Ai Weiwei's high profile arrest, there was a growing focus on the artist and his work. This saw his international celebrity status increase exponentially, allowing for him to continue his mission in promoting a more transparent and less corrupt China.
CONCLUSION

Ai Weiwei’s art is anchored in a sense of political dissidence. When his family was exiled due to his father’s, poet Ai Qing’s ‘anti-revolutionary’ writings, Ai Weiwei grew up as a political outcast. Indoctrinated with Mao Zedong’s teachings, yet aware of the suffering of his family in exile, Ai Weiwei was a product of the Cultural Revolution. In the years after Mao’s death in 1976, Ai’s artistic and activist involvement with the Stars and the Democracy Wall Movement somewhat remedied his disillusionment with the Chinese Communist regime.

His move to New York in the 1980s provided a respite from the constant political manoeuvres of the Chinese Communist Party and their policies regarding contemporary art. It was an escape, a chance for Ai Weiwei to experiment with artistic styles never heard of in China at the time due to the restrictions of the Cultural Revolution and the implications of Mao’s regime. It was in New York that Ai was introduced to the world of conceptual art and pop art, veins of which are seen in his art throughout his career. His work was imbued by ideas emerging amongst artists who were exploring Duchampian ideas.

The ongoing ramifications of the Cultural Revolution that met Ai on his return to China mean that his work constantly references the politics of his country. With his grounding in the New York conceptual art era, Ai’s work has provided a bridge between East and West in terms of contemporary art.

Ai Weiwei could have been hugely successful as a commercial artist, but that was not his primary concern. Transparency is his liberty, it is what he is fighting for in China. His talent is then better used in an anti-governmental capacity in order to try and save his homeland from the inconsistencies and injustices of the communist regime. His work, especially surrounding the Sichuan Earthquake, attempted to show people they could be individuals within this society and could make a difference. This was echoed in his perhaps best-known work, Sunflower Seeds (2010). Although the seeds appear to be
uniform, they are in fact individual objects, representing the sheer diversity of ideas that exist within China.

Ai Weiwei is an eternal optimist. He believes in the possibility of China. Ai is becoming an international trademark of liberal thinking and individualism. By documenting his every move and sharing his experiences through social media, Ai epitomizes the notion of a truly international contemporary artist. His online 'social sculptures' are a way of exploring and promoting democracy through art by speaking out for average Chinese citizens. The government has power, yet Ai Weiwei's international standing gives him a different kind of power. He has the power of the international art community behind him. Although this did not stop Ai from being detained by the Chinese government as a political dissident, the manner of his release was orchestrated by the sheer amount of international exposure his arrest received and subsequent pressure to release him.

Ai Weiwei is a very significant individual. Through his art and its politically active nature, Ai has triggered changes in the Western world's perception of China and Chinese art. Within his own country, through such artworks as *Fairytale* (2007) and his *Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* (2009), Ai has opened up new possibilities and ideas for ordinary Chinese citizens, who alone are swallowed up by the state. Ai Weiwei gives a voice to the proletariat, promoting the individual in China's communist regime. Ai Weiwei's political activism is inseparable from his artistic practice. His art is the vehicle for his politically motivated ideas, and his use of conceptual ideas in this technologically advanced age has promoted his ideas worldwide. Ai Weiwei has prompted many questions surrounding contemporary political issues in China, using his personal struggles to give his work meaning to a wider audience. He embraced both traditional forms of art as well as using new media to both communicate and create art. Ai Weiwei continues to provoke and his desire to promote freedom of expression in the face of political censorship and repression highlights the possibilities of changing society.
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