Ai Weiwei's Path From Cultural Prankster to Enemy of the State

by Ben Davis
02/05/11 8:29 PM EDT

It takes a government as lawless and paranoid as China's to give an artist the kind of popular relevance that Ai Weiwei now has. The detention of Ai — we still don't know his whereabouts, though authorities have issued a one-sentence statement that they are investigating him for "economic crimes" — has become an international cause célèbre, splashed across news channels and sparking high-profile diplomatic reactions.

Of course, there is something exotic about this story that feeds the furor. In our neck of the woods, artists — even very political artists — are tolerated as either Cassandras or clowns. Art in general functions as a zone of imagined freedom, whose outsize, libertine character is in exact inverse proportion to any consequences that it might have for the artist.

But a key point for me is that this has historically also been true of the Chinese contemporary art world, at least in the period of its huge flourishing of the last few decades. Certainly, a few bohemian enclaves, like Beijing's East Village, were tolerated outside state supervision. But the early market for most of this art was not really in China. Its patrons were the circles of Western diplomats and capitalists who were there to take advantage of China's rising status as go-to place for foreign investment.

Received critical wisdom has it that the Chinese "cynical realist" painting of Fang Lijun andYue Minjun reflects the alienation of the New China, with its consumerism and lack of political options. This is part of its selling point. But the bottom line is that its "critical" mystique has a real limit, because it simply had no broad audience in China. On the other hand, the artist-as-dissident is an easy and exotic marketing hook, and a story outsiders wanted to hear. Interest in this archetype fed the early Chinese contemporary boom.

I am a late convert to Ai Weiwei's work. His early stuff always seemed to me to be too familiar, made in the slick mode encouraged by an American and European art market looking for easily digestible "commentary" on another culture (he studied at Parsons, after all, assimilating the Duchampian love of irony and the readymade). "Han Dynasty Urn With Coca-Cola Logo," for instance, is exactly what its title indicates it might be. The idea behind the piece — tradition meets consumerism! — seems glib, a hip cultural prank.

Yet there has been an unfolding to his work, which has increasingly turned to public spectacle under the pressure of his growing international fame. It has become more social, testing the walls of the zone of liberty he occupied. Most famously, he staged "Fairytale" for Documenta in 2007, flying 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel as a social art experiment. This piece evidently offered up a sly commentary on travel restrictions that Chinese citizens faced: for most of the people he flew to Germany, the experience was a true "fairytale," an unbelievable experience of international mobility. But it was also yet another demonstration of the rather privileged place that Ai Weiwei occupied, a performance made possible only because of the lavish resources that he could marshal from foreign investors. It was funded by huge grants from two Swiss foundations.

If Western observers were hungry for Chinese artwork that could be framed as dissident — in however vague and intellectualized a way — the free-wheeling contemporary art scene came to play a role for China's authorities themselves. The toleration and assimilation of rebel artists, within a carefully prescribed sphere, was a way for China to sell "an in-tune, culturally savvy version of itself to the world," in the words of an extensive 2009 article by Murray Whyte. Thus, as late as 2008, Frieze could run a critique of the way Ai's antics seemed to inhabit the fantasy space of art, saying that his "provocative remarks and his critical and irreverent stance towards authority run the risk of becoming an empty gesture or harmless role-play."

But by then, in fact, the role-playing was becoming more and more real. Ai Weiwei had been retained by Herzog & de Meuron to help design the "Bird's Nest" stadium for the all-important Olympics spectacle in 2008. At the end of 2007, he denounced the Games, saying that he would not be involved in the spectacle because of the "disgusting" political situation.

Just a few months before the Olympics, the terrible tragedy of the Sichuan earthquake hit, leading to the deaths of scores of children — an unnecessary toll, as Ai saw it, due to the shoddy construction of the province's schools. He launched a campaign to catalyze volunteers to investigate government malfeasance and gather names of the dead youth. In some dark ways this can be seen as social sculpture, growing out of the line of "Fairytale" but taking a new and urgent form. It was his persistence at carrying on this project that led to Ai's near-fatal beating by authorities. The project was also the inspiration for what is, to my knowledge, his most tangibly political artworks to date, "Snake Ceiling" and "Remembering," shown in Japan and Germany. Composed of backpacks, these assemblages were inspired by the pathetic crushed bags of children found among the rubble.

Now Ai Weiwei has vanished into detention. Chinese officials will accuse Western commentators of hypocrisy for saying anything about human rights in China, and to a certain extent they are right. Western criticism of China is often opportunistic. Economic pundits talk of "Chimerica," the fatal symbiosis of the Chinese and U.S. economies. U.S. capital needs cheap labor to produce its iPads and tchochkes; to keep that labor cheap, you need an authoritarian government holding it down. Thus, China's arrest of its most famous artist doesn't merely show how lawless the government has become. It also demonstrates that Chinese authorities believe that

because of the co-dependent relationship, any reproach from the West will be purely symbolic, as a recent Bloomberg article about the questions raised by Ai Weiwei's arrest pointed out. Ai himself has expressed this dynamic succinctly, in the context of rising concerns about Internet censorship: "I don't think there is international pressure anymore," he told Lucy Birmingham in 2009. "Because of the economic crisis, China and the United States are bound together. This is a totally new phenomenon, and nobody will fight for ideology anymore. It's all about business."

I have been warned from some quarters that I should be careful about writing too much about this subject because Ai Weiwei's arrest is "not an art story." This is to take a narrow view of art, and miss that it is the space opened up by art that got us here. It may be true, as Holland Cotter argued today, that Ai has simply stepped into a symbolic role with a long history in Chinese society: the intellectual who speaks truth to power. He is certainly driven by what is by all accounts a robust, almost super-human, sense of self-purpose. But he is also an international individual, and he has inhabited more directly than almost any other artist I know the contradiction of our world, where the fantasy of freedom and dissent depends on a situation that is ruthlessly unfree. This is the world that we all live in together — which makes Ai Weiwei, today, as close to a universal artist as we have. We have been part of the story that brought things to this point, and in that sense Ai Weiwei's fate truly does concern everyone.

Interventions is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com