

Love The Future Free Ai Weiwei

Sean Martindale



Exhibition Text
by

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It seems almost too prescient that a detained artist's name would be a homophone to a phrase that, translated to English, means "Love the future." It's especially apropos of an artist so in love with Modernism as is Ai Weiwei, that a deep belief in progress and reason, those stalwarts of Western, Romantic tradition, would undergird his work, and give it the political edge for which he is renown.

During the course of this exhibition, Ai Weiwei will enter a fourth month of detention if he is not released. The artist was disappeared from Beijing's international airport April 3, 2011. A frenzy of speculation ensued and coupled with global media attention during the weeks that followed.

Almost immediately, pleas for his release were made by the artist's family, and allegations were made that he was being tortured by Chinese police for his supposed connection to the uprisings of the Arab Spring. China's concern that pro-democracy protests would inspire action at home seems to have inspired moves by authorities in various and contradictory directions. A statue of Confucius appeared in Tiananmen Square in January, cater-corner from the portrait of Mao Zedong, seemingly as a concession to the popularity of the 2,500-year old philosopher's teachings on ethics and harmony amidst such rapid national changes. Meanwhile, dozens of intellectuals were arrested for being on the wrong side of the ideological line; activists, lawyers, bloggers, artists, and more went missing, the result of a roundup that many say is the most severe since the reaction to the 1989 student demonstrations. In the weeks before Ai's detention, the artist kept a running tally of the more prominent arrests on his Twitter feed.

Like Ai, Confucius suddenly and inexplicably disappeared one day in April, and in both instances, accusations of censorship circulated. Rumor had it that the statue of Confucius had simply been moved inside the National Museum, in front of which he once stood, but those familiar with Ai's work and his antagonistic relationship to China's government were inclined to think that his arrest was China's way of silencing a longtime critic.

In the days that followed his disappearance, the inconsistency of China's official line added to fears that Ai was being targeted for his politics. Xinhua, the government-run news agency, first broke the story that the artist was in custody. The brief mentioned the grounds for arrest – vaguely described as economic crimes – and cited unidentified police investigators. Within minutes, the story had been taken down without explanation. This announcement came and went without word of when he would be charged, let alone released.

It was five weeks before Ai's wife, Lu Qing, was permitted a short visit. Under intense supervision, she gleaned from their conversation that Ai was being held under residential surveillance somewhere outside Beijing, and reported this to the media.

Perhaps due to international attention to the case, charges were finally announced by Chinese officials two weeks later. The official line is that Ai Weiwei is being held under suspicion of economic crimes related to his company, Beijing Fake Cultural Development Ltd. (FAKE), specifically avoiding payment of what is described as a "huge amount" of taxes. FAKE is also accused of intentionally destroying accounting records, and other criminal acts.

Without formal charges or any other legal recourse, Ai's wife has been the only person to have addressed her husband's tax evasion charges directly:

He's not the company's legally-designated representative, nor is he the chief executive. So even if the company is accused of these crimes, Ai Weiwei should not be detained.

Elsewhere, cultural institutions and workers have offered as equally mixed a response – some avoid any show support for the imprisoned artist, and others offer public statements that call for his release. Petitions have made the rounds, some gathering hundreds of thousands of signatories. A boycott of Chinese cultural production has been called as well. Institutions with ongoing or upcoming Chinese shows have fumbled for a suitable explanation for not joining the boycott, or at least using their position to highlight Ai's situation. The most popular and unfortunate of these have come from the Milwaukee Art Museum and Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, whose heads both issued statements saying with the utmost sobriety, “we don't do politics.”

This is unsurprising, perhaps, for an art world so familiar with radical posturing and yet quick to purge or marginalize its more political elements. These efforts have made no attempt to reconcile the sameness of their strategy with the ineffectiveness of past attempts, or with the realities of their own contexts. Okwui Enwezor, the Director of Haus Der Kunst in Munich, writes in *Artforum* (appropriately enough) that

these petitions shared the easy illusion of the universal ideal of freedom of expression— willfully ignoring the fact that censorship is an occupational hazard that all dissenting and radical forms of art must face, whether under liberal or illiberal political systems. . . Is there no other type of pressure that could be brought to bear . . . than a meek petition or sign?

Enwezor describes an “imaginative deficit” in the dominant art world reaction to Ai's arrest, and it has indeed been lacking in many ways – it's telling that the only official mention of Ai at the recent Venice Biennale was a souvenir offered by one of his European dealers. Those museum heads who aspire to be apolitical would have a much better argument if their refusal was at all concerned with the lack of creative response. Protesting the shoddiness of the protest, in other words, would be far more constructive than their nihilistic, business-as-usual approach.

As it stands, however, both the abstainers and the critics like Enwezor willingly occlude the more creative efforts to show solidarity. Artist/activists have mobilized worldwide, across scales that range from the intimate to the global, and have assembled forms of protest that emphasize its aesthetic value.

Protests on Ai's behalf follow a decade or older trend of artists restaging everything from second wave feminist movement protests to the film *Dog Day Afternoon*, and, understandably, have taken the form of his likeness, or have been a reenactment of his work. Some such reenactments have originated within the art world, artist/activists joined with curator Steven Holmes, Creative Time and others to create a distributed performance of Ai's *Fairytales: 1001 Qing Dynasty Wooden Chairs* to mark the second week of his imprisonment.

Even more work has been done outside of institutions altogether. F.A.T. (Free Art Technology) has made use of Ai's *Studies of Perspective* series with a web browser extension that permits users to superimpose the artist's now-infamous middle finger over any website of their choosing. The group has also made 3D-style glasses that bring the same effect into nondigital spaces. Stencil artists in Hong Kong have tested the waters by painting images of Ai's face on sidewalks and buildings, and some have faced legal consequences for their work. Projection artists have made his face visible in public spaces. Geandy Pavo's *Nemesis-Ai Weiwei: The Elusiveness of Being*, for example, was staged in New York City, and Cpak Ming, who projected an image asking “Who's afraid of Ai Weiwei?” onto the People's Liberation Army barracks in Hong Kong.

By using his likeness, these protests build on the work the artist has done to make his name and image

synonymous with Chinese dissent, and when these actions replicate Ai or his work in other contexts, their participants and creators don't only inquire *where* is Ai Weiwei, but also ask *when* is his plight relevant. Asking about his whereabouts may be an indirect way of demanding his release – the question tells that the asker knows vaguely his location and disposition, and is more a point of highlighting his absence – but reenactments of his work propose that Ai is more than the person in jail, and that China is dealing with a distributed opponent. These broader dimensions of protest necessarily involve many players, and the cross-pollination that occurs while bringing Ai across spatial and temporal registers permits us to consider more efficacious deployments of political power *because* of (rather than in spite of) the seeming anachronism; it's a strategic reification that engenders subversion.

It's here where the power of Martindale's work lies. *Love the Future Free Ai Weiwei* is an unapologetic call for the artist's release. The work, a sculpture of Ai made of found cardboard, transposes the artist, dislocating him physically and chronologically. The installation places a figure of Ai within a North American community that has direct ties to China, and which has used its own dislocation to call for an end to Communist rule. While others may inquire where the artist is, here we can find him in unexpected surroundings – not memorialized, but, in a nod to those pro-democracy activists who consider Ai to be an actual god, trans-substantiated into cardboard, and posed, Christ-like, in the gallery window. Sunflower seeds, which have become an icon of Ai's work since he installed 100 million hand-painted porcelain replicas on the floor of London's Tate Modern, appear at his feet.

The choice of a common, even democratic medium like cardboard, alludes to Ai's omnipresence and the strength of solidarity networks that seek the Chinese art star's release. The cardboard was sourced from nearby streets, following Martindale's commitment to using local and reclaimed materials, and given this, it might be possible to find Made in China labels on parts of the sculpture.

At this intimate level, what are likely the biggest questions that Martindale wants to pose are brought to the fore. Located at the edge of Toronto's central Chinatown, a neighbourhood housing the largest Chinese diaspora in North America, the work inhabits a space on the border with both Alexandra Park, one of the city's oldest housing projects, and the eclectic Kensington Market. What translation occurs on this border? This text and others are offered in both Chinese and English, but *Love the Future Free Ai Weiwei* proposes that it isn't a linguistic concern alone. Most things and ideas that cross the boundaries between socially demarcated spaces take on new meaning and, in turn, shape the environment into which they enter. This kind of translation is like that of speech and text insofar as it requires the listener to think abstractly about the experience that is being communicated. Translating Ai Weiwei's plight might add a layer of abstraction, as all translations betray their original context to some degree as they aspire to enter another, but this work requires that abstraction of anyone attempting to read it. Equal access abstraction – such is the nature of translating on a border.

These communicative shifts are a part of Martindale's wider practice. Questions about how and when we protest, as well as proposals for constituting better ways of being together in the world are the threads that Martindale weaves. With *Love the Future Free Ai Weiwei*, he does so in order to push those in art who would do politics without considering its trappings, permit ways of thinking about those trappings, and broaden the spectrum of possibilities for pressing for Ai's release.

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