

## Ai Weiwei and the History for Dissident Political Art in China

On May 15 2013 Professor Ming Tiampo, Associate Professor of Art History at Carleton University spoke to a standing-room audience on Ai Weiwei and the history of dissident political art in China. One inspiration for the presentation is the upcoming exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (August 17 to October 27) of *"Ai Weiwei: According to What?"*, the first North American retrospective of the internationally renowned Chinese artist's work. Ai Weiwei has emerged as a prominent critic of the Chinese government, bringing together art and politics in provocative and often poetic ways.

Professor Tiampo's presentation provided a preview of Ai Weiwei's exhibition, surveyed Ai Weiwei's career and situated it in a snapshot history of the relationship between art and politics in China from the Yuan dynasty to the present.

Professor Tiampo argued that Ai Weiwei is part of a long tradition of dissident Chinese artists that extends back at least to the 1100s in the Song Dynasty, through the 1200s and the Mongol dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty on 1912 and the present day. The Chinese literati, (also known as Chinese scholars, scholar-gentry, scholar-officials) were mostly well-educated men who had earned academic degrees by passing the rigorous imperial examinations. The scholar-officials were schooled in calligraphy and Confucian texts. They dominated the politics of China until 1911.

Central to tenant of the literati was that free expression was the highest form of artistic expression, and that in a cultivated person their inherent goodness would natural flow out of them through their brush and onto the page in the form of calligraphy, painting or poetry. The literati believed that they had the right and the obligation to critique government. Using slides of historic images of paintings from identical time periods Professor Tiampo compared the style and content of a court insider with essentially similar subject matter from a political dissident. The contrast clearly indicated strong critics for the government of the day. This tradition included painting, calligraphy and poetry and was largely tolerated until 1951.

The People's Republic of China was established on October 1, 1949. In 1951 Mao Zedong issued a declaration that set about creating a new art for the new nation. Socialist Realism Art was the only art that would be tolerated. Under this declaration art could only to exist in service to nation building. Subject matter was strictly controlled and a realistic style was mandatory in all painting.

Professor Tiampo provided an outline of Ai Weiwei's life. Ai Weiwei's father was Chinese poet Ai Qing, who was denounced during the Anti-Rightist Movement and in 1958 sent to a labour camp in Xinjiang province with his wife, Gao Ying. Ai Weiwei was one year old at the time and lived in nearby Shihezi for 16 years. In 1975 the family returned to Beijing.

In 1978 Ai Weiwei enrolled in the Beijing Film Institute, and became part of a group of young artists. In 1979 Ai Weiwei and his colleagues were not allowed to show their work in an exhibit at the China Art Gallery. In protest The First Stars, as they called themselves, staged an out-door exhibit beside the Gallery. The style of their work was modern exploring themes such as cubism and drew on the belief of individual artistic freedom of expression. The police were called in to break-up the exhibit. This lead to protests centred on individual freedom of expression, which tied them directly to the literati tradition of

free expression being the highest form of artistic expression. Under pressure from the Chinese Government The First Stars disbanded on 1983, and Ai Weiwei moved to New York.

For the next 12 years Ai Weiwei lived in the artistic community of New York. It was an era of social movement in New York and the political and the political engagement of the artistic community was high. When Ai Weiwei returned to China in 1995 he had much keener sense of how to reach out to the public and how to make strong and effective social and political statements, often using photography.

Professor Tiampo presented a series of images that covered the evolution of Ai Weiwei's work. The themes of his work might be thought of as falling under two broad categories: the unnecessary and mindless destruction of China's heritage which was in part a result of government policy; and government graft and corruption that is damaging to the people of China. The former theme included the series of photographs in the Perspective Series which featured Ai Weiwei "giving the finger" to an array of iconic western and Chinese architectural structures, 1995 photos of Ai Weiwei dropping and breaking a Ming Dynasty vase, installations of Neolithic vases that had been covered in layers of bright paint, 2007 a Neolithic vase painted with the Coca-Cola emblem, 2008 Table with Two Legs on the Wall, 2008 a rose wood map of China that was six feet thick, 2011 Grapes (composed of Qing Dynasty stools).

2008 was a critical in Ai relationship with the Government of China. Ai was the artistic collaborator in the construction of the Bird's Nest Stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. However he withdrew from the Olympic Opening Ceremony saying that the ceremony was a "fake smile" only to glorify the Communists Party's nationalism; and to protest against an autocratic Chinese government that restricts individual's freedom of choice. Following his declaration the Government listed him as a dissident.

In 2008 an earthquake in Sichuan province caused extensive damage, including the collapse of school buildings. The Chinese government refused to accept any responsibility for what appeared to be unnecessary and extensive damage to public buildings, or for provide a list of those who had died as a result of the earthquake. Ai undertook a photographic project of the extensive damage and supported a "Citizen's Investigation" into the number of people who had died. A year later Ai published a list of 5,385 names of school children who had died in the earthquake. Ai published numerous articles exposing the shoddy construction of the collapsed schools, and arranged for each of the dead children's names to be read aloud in an memorial installation. He also created several visual installations commemorating the disaster including the Snake Ceiling constructed from kid's backpacks.

In 2010 Ai underwent emergence brain surgery in Germany to address injuries he had sustained while under arrest for protesting. He turned this event into performance art and the images were sent around the world. Also in 2010 the Chinese government ordered him to dismantle a huge new studio that he had built for himself. In protest immediately before the dismantling started he created an instant River Crab Feast attended by hundreds of supporters and sent the images around the world.

In April of 2011 Ai disappeared for several months. When he reappeared he uncharacteristically declined to speak to the media and he stopped his prolific blogging. This self-imposed silence continued for over a year, before he began to be more public.

The lecture ended with a 4 minute video clip of Ai Weiwei and his friends performing a dance parody in Gangnam Style, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n281GWft1E8>