

## Ai Weiwei and the battle of Culture vs Repression

Artist Ai Weiwei has been recognised for his vocal criticism of the Chinese government, with an award from Amnesty International. Joan Baez also received the International Ambassador of Conscience Award, for her lifelong commitment to human rights causes and non-violent direct action.

Of course, Ai Weiwei was unable to collect his award in person, at the ceremony in Berlin, because his passport has been revoked by the Chinese authorities. This has not stopped him from creating art for exhibition all over the world. Notably, he installed his work in the former Alcatraz prison in San Francisco bay, which was available to view up until the end of April. It is hard to think of a more suitable venue for the artist's work, than the austere, infamous and long-abandoned cell blocks, which for those weeks and months were home to colourful Chinese kites, and the portraits of political prisoners, rendered in Lego. The aching melancholy of the bare walls is a salutary reminder of the power of the state, and the pitiable weakness of the individual, who is so easily silenced, and forgotten.

Not so Ai Weiwei. Those soaring sculptures of dragons and birds are analogous to the optimism of the human spirit, and a powerful commentary on the finitude of monolithic and oppressive institutions. The stone and reinforced concrete from which the organs of state control are often fashioned, gives a very good impression of permanence. In fact, the governing ideology is destined for obsolescence, thanks, in part, to the unfailing criticism of political dissidents like Ai Weiwei.

For his exhibitions in the Lisson gallery in London, he has used marble to startling effect - taking advantage of its immense versatility to thoroughly subvert existing ideas of what a marble sculpture "should" be. 2010's *Surveillance Camera*, for example, is a slippery, cold rendering of that modern icon of state control, which sits perched atop a plinth, just like any classical bust from antiquity. *Lantern*, from 2014, is a traditional Chinese lantern carved from the same medium. Instead of being light enough to float, it lies on the floor of the gallery, like a sunken artifact from a shipwreck. *Mask*, from 2013, is a gas mask which peers sightlessly out of a polished marble slab. And - perhaps most disconcerting of all - a couple of stained-looking white leather armchairs, which are in fact blocks of marble. The "stains" are the naturally occurring patterns within the rock.

What these - and other - sculptures by Ai Weiwei succeed in doing, is offering the gallery visitor a glimpse into a world that has gone wrong. The armchairs in particular have a subversiveness about them that is not immediately explicable. It has a lot to do with the level of detail, and the way in which the surface of the stone naturally mimics the appearance of leather. And the way those chemical impurities - seared into the rock under millions of years of pressure - which would add so much

character to a set of Doric columns, look, in this context, like blooms of mould - if you happen to be short-sighted, and see it from a distance.

It is not surprising the Chinese government hates it, all of it, and wants to bury it from view. This is art that makes you think. As the party apparatchiks are all too well aware, thinking has a nasty habit of forming ideas, and questions, and even translating into action. In a country of nearly one point four billion people, that could be dangerous.

Like all leaders of authoritarian regimes, the Chinese high command have a preference for representational art. In the 1990s this gave rise to the brilliantly-named Cynical Realism, which was an art movement that had fun subverting the smiling, bland paintings that were considered acceptable to the state. It is interesting to note that the ruling elite will tolerate cultural diversity up to a point. This is without doubt based upon the calculation that it would not only be impossible to rigidly control such a vast population, but that it would be undesirable, as such inflexibility would risk a dangerous head of steam forming, which might one day blow the edifice apart. So, there is an undercurrent of subversiveness that pervades contemporary Chinese art, but it is for the most part quite tame, and rooted in the past. For example, Mao does seem to be fair game these days - as evidenced by the work of Huang Yan, Wang Guangyi and others. Fifty years on, perhaps it's now possible to lightly take the piss out of the Cultural Revolution, without fear of imprisonment.

It is commentary based on the present that is dangerous. Following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Ai Weiwei has been forthright in his criticism of the government for its lamentable failure to enforce building regulations in the earthquake zone, and its subsequent efforts to cover up the full scale of the disaster. He has created numerous installations that powerfully evoke what happened, and encapsulate the sense of loss experienced by whole communities. In 2009 he arranged nine thousand school bags on the facade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, to represent every child that died when the schools collapsed. Five years on from the disaster, in 2013, he used 150 tonnes of rebar that he had extracted from the ruins of the schools, to create an undulating expanse of rusted metal at the Venice Biennale. It is another example of the artist using a single material to powerful effect, evoking through his placement of the steel rods the appearance of a fractured landscape, and the terrible human cost incurred.

Because of the Chinese authority's refusal to disclose how many students perished during the earthquake, when the school buildings collapsed, Ai Weiwei launched a "Citizens' Investigation", eventually compiling a list of 5,385 names. He also visited the shattered remains of the schools, and invited structural engineers to inspect the wreckage, in an effort to determine why the buildings collapsed so quickly, and completely. In his quest for the truth, Ai Weiwei has been beaten, placed under house

arrest, jailed, and prevented from leaving the country. Outside his home in Beijing are a small forest of surveillance cameras.

His defiance in the face of ruthless authoritarianism has echoes of other artists' rebellions throughout history - notably that of Kazimir Malevich, whose austere abstract style was not liked at all by Stalin. His Suprematist arrangements of flat blocks of colour represented a conceptual leap from cubism, and a major development in the history of painting. While this revolution on canvas was a natural accompaniment to the political revolution of 1917, it fell out of favour with the tyrannical and paranoid dictator who replaced Lenin in 1922, and Malevich was banned from making any more of it. Thankfully, he had made a lot of it already up till that point, and his paintings are now the most collectable of any Russian artist.

Even after Malevich was banned from creating abstract works, he would sign his less contentious figurative paintings with a little black square - evoking his seminal exercise in minimalism, painted in 1915. This unobtrusive, continued act of defiance can be considered symbolically important, because it kept his idea alive, through the dark tunnel of those times. The baton of intellectual artistic inquiry was passed along to subsequent generations, so they could make further innovations, and enlarge the existence of free thinkers. Ai Weiwei is working in the same tradition. Long after the bureaucratic megalith of state power has been consigned to the lost and unloved past, those ideas will still be alive in the heads of people compelled to action, shaping the cultural landscape for generations yet to come.

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