

China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei

Author(s): Christian Sorace

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Winter 2014), pp. 396-419

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674120>

Accessed: 28-08-2018 20:53 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Critical Inquiry*

China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei

Christian Sorace

Duchamp had the bicycle wheel, Warhol had the image of Mao. I have a totalitarian regime. It is my readymade.¹

Ai Weiwei's artistic material is the flesh of politics: the decrees of China's Communist Party; shoddily constructed schools that collapsed in earthquakes; midnight raids on dissidents; tea-drinking detentions carried out by the Public Security Bureau; and ideological pedagogies that are inscribed in the practices, habits, and fantasies of ordinary life. His defining artistic practice is to metabolize social contradictions and harsh realities. "Taking contradictions and making them public is my best weapon."² Despite the fanfare and celebrity bestowed on Ai by his reception in Western art circles and human rights communities, little is understood about the political conditions surrounding him, which are the material of his art.

Ai's celebrity status as a human rights activist and subversive, then, misses how his art and political thinking are only possible as a legacy of Chinese Communism. Ai's compelling power as an artist does not stem from his identity as a political gadfly alone but from his aesthetic improvisation, which transforms his life into an open-ended experimental performance piece. One might say that the Chinese state is the genuine artist and Ai only the curator.³ His apparent self-obsession is not a private lan-

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. Quoted in Victor Maldonado, "Harming the Art: Ai Weiwei's Wicked Sense of Humor," www.ultrapdx.com/zero/2010/08/30/review-harming-the-art-ai-weiweis-wicked-sense-of-humor/

2. Aiweiweidocumentary, "艾未未工作室：老妈蹄花 (Ai Weiwei : Lao Ma Ti Hua)," youtube.com/watch?v=TUizD8WDDFI&feature=plcp

3.

"Tell me, Picasso, is that story true which is making the rounds all over the world? One day a Gestapo officer brandishing a reproduction of your Guernica asked you: You did that, didn't you?' And you are supposed to have answered: 'No, you did.'"

guage of desire but an exploration of the state's biopolitical governance and the ways in which it tries to manage its own forms of incoherence. "If I need to choose an epitaph to be engraved on my tombstone it would say: a classical schizophrenic, I represent the defects of my age."⁴ With characteristic sardonic humor, Ai admits that his artistic metabolization of Chinese politics "gives him indigestion."⁵

For Hong Kong's 2012 art fair,⁶ Ai framed 123 opaquely worded letters from governmental bureaus responding to his inquiries into the deaths of schoolchildren during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (according to official statistics, a total of 5,335 school children died;⁷ the real number is assumed to be much higher because local governments refuse to release a list of the names and circumstances surrounding the students' deaths). Each evasive letter and Kafkaesque message—revealing, in their instructions to him, the unaccountability and impenetrability of the Chinese Communist Party—Ai added to a work of art.

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that without the Chinese state there would be no Ai Weiwei: *ArtWorld's* most influential artist of 2011, winner of the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent, and media darling of the West. Ai's art, however, is much more than the predictable and highly commodified form of political satire and cynical pastiche that is popular in the international market for Chinese art. Rather, China's most famous

"Yes," Picasso laughs, "that's true, that's more or less true. Sometimes the Boches [Germans] would come to visit me, pretending to admire my paintings. I gave them postcards of my Guernica picture, saying: 'Take them along, souvenirs! Souvenirs!'"

(Simone Téry, "Painting Is Not Done to Decorate Apartments," *Picasso's Guernica*, ed. Ellen C. Oppler [New York, 1988], p. 152.)

4. Quoted in biography of Ai Weiwei, *Art Link*, www.artlinkart.com/cn/artist/overview/196bzu

5. Ai Weiwei, 此时此地 (Time and Place) (Guangxi, 2010), p. 99; hereafter abbreviated *TP*.

6. See "Final HK Art Show Launches in Hong Kong, Featuring Warhol, Picasso, and Ai Weiwei," *International Business Times TV*, 16 May 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E6EouSf9o

7. "China: 5,335 Students Killed or Missing after 2008 Quake," CNN, 10 May 2009, edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/05/07/china.quake.deaths/index.html

CHRISTIAN SORACE is a PhD candidate in the University of Texas Department of Government. His research focuses on social transformations and political economic development in rural China, China's urbanization process, political aesthetics, and post-Marxist political theory. He is currently writing his dissertation titled "Beyond Repair: State-Society Relations in the Aftermath of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake." He can be reached at christiansorace@gmail.com

dissident draws significantly from China's communist heritage to inform his own egalitarian political desires and conceptualizations of individuality as socially mediated; even his critical rhetorical style often sounds as if it had been lifted directly from Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*.⁸

Simplifying Ai's project as an echo of Western multiparty democracy and liberal ideals not only arrogantly ignores how Ai's work is only possible as a product of the same political system it denounces but also reveals a catastrophic failure of political imagination, blind to what a potential combination of Marxist and liberal values might look like in a tentative, experimental, aesthetic form.

Ai's branding as an icon of liberalism and multiparty democracy reveals more about the fantasies the West harbors toward China than it does about Ai's own political-aesthetic interventions. Ai's own writings, videos, and installations suggest a set of political ideals and contradictions firmly rooted in the tradition of Chinese Marxism and a critical perspective shaped by his experience growing up during the Cultural Revolution.

1

They are afraid of the masses, afraid of the masses talking about them, afraid of the masses criticizing them. . . . The more frightened they are, the more haunted they become. I think one should not be afraid. What is there to be afraid of?

—Chairman Mao⁹

Who Is Afraid of Ai Weiwei?

—Graffiti, Hong Kong, May 2011¹⁰

From its inception, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been aware, theoretically at least, of the state's intrinsic tendency toward anti-democratic institutional calcification. Contemporary Chinese history can be read as a series of failed experiments to prevent Weberian bureaucrati-

8. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of the first draft of this manuscript for *Critical Inquiry* in pointing out the similarity between Ai's epic sayings (always being retweeted) and Mao's own widely studied and repeated recorded utterances. Recently, Ai published a collection of quotes called *Weiwei-isms*, blatantly riffing on Mao's famous *Little Red Book*; see Ai, *Weiwei-isms*, ed. Larry Warsh (Princeton, N.J., 2012).

9. Mao Tse-Tung, "Talk at an Enlarged Working Conference Convened by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," trans. pub., www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_62.htm

10. During the time of Ai's detention in 2011, graffiti stencils and other fliers circulated in Hong Kong with the provocation: "谁害怕艾未未" (Who Is Afraid of Ai Weiwei?), posted underneath a silhouette of the artist's face; see Louisa Lim, "Hong Kong Graffiti Challenges Chinese Artist's Arrest," National Public Radio, 4 May 2011, www.npr.org/2011/05/04/135985475/hong-kong-graffiti-challenges-chinese-artists-arrest

zation.¹¹ This section provides an introduction to this often-neglected history in order to more fully show how Ai is perhaps (contentiously and uneasily) one of this failed experiment's best results.

During the Yan'an period of the CCP's anti-Japanese campaign and civil war (1936–1948), the party developed a “democratic work style” (民主作风) of equality between cadres and common people, emphasizing the need for open critical debate. Upon hearing glowing accounts from reporters who visited the Communist base in Yan'an and praised the democratic work ethos of the Chinese Communist Party, Chiang Kai-shek's wife Song Mei-lin allegedly quipped that their democratic successes rest on the fact that “they have not yet tasted the deliciousness of power.”¹² Her prophecy that the democratic ethos of the Communists would be lost in the transition from their role as revolutionary guerillas to state leaders was largely vindicated, not, however, for lack of awareness or effort on the part of the Communists to overcome the intractable paradox that power destroys democracy.

The governance techniques that the Communist Party deployed to combat bureaucratism, rectify elitist attitudes and power bases forming within the party, and democratically “listen to the masses” often perniciously produced unintended effects. For example, the practice of “criticism and self-criticism” (批评, 自我批评) was developed during the revolutionary Yan'an period in order to encourage the open airing of different opinions among party members. After a decision was reached, those in the minority were obligated to follow majority rule but had the right to maintain their opinion, in case it was later vindicated by changing conditions and new information. To this day, the Chinese Communist Party still understands itself as an evolving organism whose “governance techniques are marked by a signature Maoist stamp that conceives of policy making as a process of ceaseless change, tension management, continual experimentation, and ad hoc adjustment.”¹³

After the party obtained control over the state apparatus and monopoly on legitimate violence, however, criticism and self-criticism sessions (d)evolved into tools for disciplining and isolating “heretics” who had run afoul of the current political winds, producing tableaux vivants of self-

11. For a discussion of this topic, see Christian Sorace, “Saint Mao,” *Telos* 151 (Summer 2010): 173–91.

12. This quote was pointed out to me in a private conversation with a professor in Sichuan, China.

13. Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, “Embracing Uncertainty: Guerilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China,” in *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, ed. Heilmann and Perry (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), p. 3.

abnegation, guilt, and contrition. According to Lowell Dittmer, this structural shift “eliminated the possibility of any but manipulated struggle . . . making it necessary for cadres to exempt their superiors or colleagues from avoidable criticism.”¹⁴ The original promise of criticism and self-criticism suffusing the party with democratic debate was abandoned, as it became a process through which Mao and other leading cadres insulated themselves from criticism and purged (perceived) political enemies.

One of the most vivid examples of the palpable gap between the ideal and the practice of criticism and self-criticism occurred during the Lushan Plenum in 1959, when Peng Dehuai (who only participated at Mao’s invitation) criticized the Great Leap Forward Campaign (1958–1962) for triggering a calamitous famine in the countryside.¹⁵ Although Peng’s argument initially generated sympathy from other members in the Politburo, Mao interpreted it as a personal attack. He forced Peng Dehuai to perform a “self-criticism” renouncing his previous criticisms as errors of rightist deviation and demoted him from power, thereby intensifying the Great Leap Forward Campaign as well as, knowingly or not, the famine it caused. According to Yang Jisheng, “the CCP system not only lacked a mechanism to rectify the errors of its top leader, but also pushed its leader toward even greater error.”¹⁶

In a speech given on 30 January 1962 addressing the massive communication failure during the Great Leap Forward, Mao censured cadres for their inability to listen to criticism and understand the reality of local conditions, while conveniently exempting himself from any responsibility:

They are afraid of the masses, afraid of the masses talking about them, afraid of the masses criticizing them. . . . The more frightened they are, the more haunted they become. I think one should not be afraid. What is there to be afraid of? Our attitude is to hold fast to the truth and be ready at any time to correct our mistakes. The question of right or wrong, correct or incorrect in our work has to do with the contradictions among the people. To resolve contradictions among the people we can’t use curses or fists, still less guns or knives. We can only use the method of discussion, reasoning, criticism and self-criticism.

14. Lowell Dittmer, “The Structural Evolution of ‘Criticism and Self-Criticism,’” *China Quarterly*, no. 56 (Oct.–Dec. 1973): 716.

15. See Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*, trans. Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (New York, 2012); Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York, 2010); and Ralph A. Thaxton, Jr., *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao’s Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (New York, 2008).

16. Yang, *Tombstone*, p. 110.

In short, we can only use democratic methods, the method of letting the masses speak out.¹⁷

In present day China, as the Communist Party attempts to reign in rampant corruption and repair the breakdown of trust between the party-state and society, it continues to emphasize the practices of criticism and self-criticism as fundamental to the party spirit (党性) and cadre training (干部培训). According to a June 2010 article on how to train future cadres, the principal of the Shandong LiYi Prefecture Party School urged cadres not to be “afraid of exposing and never conceal the truth of our own shortcomings and mistakes.”¹⁸ The problem is, however, that if cadres were to take such principles seriously, it would jeopardize their political careers. Therefore they are treated as mere formalities (形式主义) that are no longer taken seriously as a substantive form of politics.

The article argues, however, that Ai, a serious practitioner of criticism and self-criticism, activates their historically latent potential against the party itself. The gap between the Communist Party’s rhetoric (praising criticism and self-criticism) and practice (maintaining the appearance of unity and stability at all costs) forms a kind of acoustic chamber in which Ai’s political-aesthetic interventions reverberate. This goes beyond merely mocking the gap and treating it ironically, which is a gesture common to many contemporary Chinese artists fluent in satirizing the symbols of state power (especially Mao’s image).¹⁹ Instead, Ai continues state discourse in a subversively orthodox manner by enacting its own failed promises as the material for his own discursive struggle. Ai’s statement—“if a society is unwilling to admit its own defects, it is perhaps a society unwilling to progress”—refracts back to the party the core of its own ideals and the paucity of its ability to inhabit them.²⁰

Ai’s art is not so much a confrontation with the Chinese state from a position external to it as it is a confrontation of the Chinese state with its own (virtual) historical legacy. Ai’s political interventions are a specific interpretation of a Maoist training in public criticism and a commitment to egalitarianism in opposition to hierarchal authority. When an inter-

17. Mao, “Talk at an Enlarged Working Conference Convened by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.”

18. “批评与自我批评呈现庸俗化” (The Apparent Vulgarization of Criticism and Self-Criticism), *Beijing Daily*, 7 June 2010, www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2010/06-07/2327280.shtml

19. To name only a few of the Chinese artists who have used Mao’s image as material for artistic satire, see the work of Zhang Hongtu and the Gao brothers, and it could also be argued that Yue Minjun’s repetitive self-portraits are formal riffs on the ubiquity of Mao’s image.

20. Ai, “没有用的钱是没有价值的” (Money That Cannot Be Used Has No Value), interview, *商界时尚* (*Bizmode*), finance.sina.com.cn/20100113/18057238858.shtml; hereafter abbreviated “M.”

viewer accused Ai of adopting an “irreverent” attitude to his motherland, Ai responded by linking his attitude to his experience growing up during the Cultural Revolution.

I was born in a society that emphasized critique, bestowing on self-criticism the highest value. Chairman Mao instructed us to carry out criticism and self-criticism, so we always looked at our surroundings and objects with a critical world-view. It could target any cultural organization, government, and also any person or system of power.
[TP, p. 124]

In fact, many of Ai's own artistic performances have more in common with the struggles of the Cultural Revolution than they do with liberal commitments to private pursuits of happiness and the preservation of cultural heritage and antiquities. In 1995 Ai photographed a performance of himself dropping an ancient, irreplaceable Han Dynasty urn (circa 206BC–202AD), smashing it on a tile floor to bits and shards. Similarly, in a 2006 exhibition called “Color Vases,” he covered fifty Neolithic vases (circa 3000–5000BC) with bright monochromatic industrial paint; elsewhere, he ground rare porcelain into powder. These performances replicate the Cultural Revolution practices of destroying traditional religious and cultural objects in order to “shatter superstition” (破除迷信).²¹ One commentator has gone so far as to state that “Ai Weiwei may be a worthier continuer of this tradition than the Red Guards.”²² What, one might ask, is this tradition, and why would it be worthy of being continued?

A recent *Guardian* op-ed written by Ai suggests an answer: “I don't watch TV. I did not watch the Olympics last time; I am not very interested in watching it this time, either. *I have no interest in activities that are dissociated from the emotions and struggles of everyday people.*”²³ This is not Ai's attempt to blithely gloss over the wanton violence that occurred during the Cultural Revolution (including the violence that Ai's family personally

21. Although the rhetorical trope of “shattering superstition” was most popular during the Cultural Revolution when Mao encouraged young Red Guards to smash the old culture, he also employed the term in various political contexts; see Mao, “对帝国主义的‘文明’要破除迷信” (The Need to Shatter the Superstition of Imperial Civilization), www.mzdsx.net/Article/Print.asp?ArticleID=3382 and “关于中华人民共和国宪法草案” (On the Draft of the Constitution of the PRC), trans. pub., www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-19540614.htm

22. Dario Gamboni, “Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast,” in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn, Ceramic Works 5000 BCE–2010 CE* (Glenside, Pa., 2010), p. 95.

23. Ai, “China Excluded Its People from the Olympics. London Is Different,” *The Guardian*, 25 July 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2012/jul/25/china-olympics-london-ai-weiwei; emphasis added.

suffered)²⁴ or the fact that the vases Ai smashed are gone forever. What it does indicate, however, is an unconditional affirmation that the only thing that matters is, in Ai's own words, "the power of the people's livelihood."²⁵ Ai's unsentimental gaze into the emptiness of the culture industry could be categorized as that of a Red Guard who has transcended the need to belong to the Communist Party.

It is precisely this heritage, however, that the Chinese government wants to disown and forget. Beginning in the reform and opening period, Mao's ideological legacy was quietly and quickly shelved by a party committed to creating economic prosperity and maintaining political stability (维稳). The guiding ideological principle of *class struggle* was replaced by *economic development*; even the term *economic class* was replaced by the more benign appellation *stratum*.²⁶ As recently as the Bo Xilai scandal, Premier Wen Jiabao warned that China risks another "historical tragedy" like the Cultural Revolution if it does not "reform."²⁷ The fact that reform is underspecified allows it to function as a cover for preserving "stability" and "social harmony." I suggest the reason that the party has singled out Ai as the object of surveillance and detention is that his demeanor is too unapologetically Maoist and not because he advocates political reforms, which ironically is a position associated with Premier Wen.

Ai's politics are part of the legacy of Maoism precisely because they actualize the latent potential of Maoist doctrine in a way that Mao himself miserably failed at doing.²⁸ Whereas Mao fell victim to the gap he himself identified and described in the following terms, "for many people it is one thing to accept this law and quite another to apply it in examining and dealing with problems,"²⁹ Ai avoids Mao's failure by closing the gap

24. Ai's activism is often traced to vivid childhood memories of helping his father, the famous poet Ai Qing, burn their family library, afraid they would be caught with "counter-revolutionary" materials such as beautiful museum catalogues; see Hari Kunzru, "Ai Weiwei: The Dissident Artist," *The Guardian*, 27 May 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/may/28/ai-weiwei-artist-hari-kunzru

25. Ai, *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006–2009*, trans. and ed. Lee Ambrozy (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), p. 178; hereafter abbreviated *AWB*.

26. See Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2010), and William Hurst and Sorace, "Recession and the Politics of Class and Production in China," *New Political Science* 33 (Dec. 2011): 509–24.

27. Tania Branigan, "China Needs Political Reform to Avert 'Historical Tragedy,' Says Wen Jiabao," *The Guardian*, 14 Mar. 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/14/china-political-reform-wen-jiabao

28. I think this is fundamentally what Slavoj Žižek means when he argues that Mao was not radical enough; see Slavoj Žižek, "Three Notes on China: Past and Present," *Positions* 19 [Winter 2011]: 707–21.

29. Mao, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People," trans. pub., www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm

through an aesthetics of radical transparency and a political ethics of unrelenting criticism.

In fact, the targets of Ai's polemics are almost entirely the failures of the political system to live up to its own ideals. Even Ai's personal investigation to collect and publish the names of the schoolchildren who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake was only a response to the government's failure to fulfill its own promise to do so.³⁰ In this regard, the image of Ai's activism has more in common with Peng Dehuai's confrontation with Mao during the Leshan Plenum than it does with the stereotypical image of a dissident. This image, however, is unpalatable to both the Communist Party that wants to maintain tight control over information flows and to Ai's Western supporters who categorically reject the Chinese one-party political system. Neither side is willing to entertain the possibility of what Chinese Socialism could become if it genuinely followed a version of Mao's initial vision for a New Democracy (eschewing both Stalinism and the European-American capital-parliamentary system).³¹ What I am calling Ai's Maoism is not a naïve and politically misguided nostalgia for the Mao years but the reclamation of political potential buried within them.

It should not come as a surprise, then, why the claim that Ai is a defender of Western-style liberal rights and democracy is one that is invested in and manipulated by both his Western advocates and the Chinese government. The reduction of Ai's politics to this familiar position allows both sides to mutually sustain the fantasy that there are only two options on the table.

The Chinese government has with some success domestically portrayed Ai as a "running dog" of Western interests, obsessed only with international fame and money; his arrest on charges of tax evasion symbolically associates him with the corruptive influences of the West, and an editorial published by an official government website starkly tethers Ai's fate to imagined Western schemes to destabilize the regime. The editorial accuses the West of being ignorant of the concrete details of the legal case, intentionally meddling in China's sovereign affairs, disturbing Chinese society, and attempting to transform the value system of China's public.³² As a

30. See Katherine Grube, "Ai Weiwei Challenges China's Government over Earthquake," *ArtAsiaPacific*, July/Aug. 2009, artasiapacific.com/Magazine/64/AiWeiweiChallengesChinasGovernmentOverEarthquake

31. See Mao, "On New Democracy," trans. pub., www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm

32. [Opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-04/1609672.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-04/1609672.html). The link to the original *Global Times* editorial is now dead, possibly as a result of the controversy triggered by the vitriolic tone of the article; see Andy Yee, "China: Reactions to Global Times' Lashing out at Ai Weiwei," *Global Voices Online*, globalvoicesonline.org/2011/04/06/china-reactions-to-global-times%E2%80%99

result, Ai's three-month detention and subsequent house arrest are not merely examples of the government's recent clampdown on dissent as it is presented in Western media coverage but must be understood, in an even broader context, as part of the Communist Party's economic neoliberalization, depoliticization of society, and the erasure of its Maoist past.³³

On the other hand, Ai is an easy target for this kind of propaganda campaign as he both exploits and disdains the gaze of Western audiences, a perfect example being the "Weiwei Cam." In April 2012, Ai installed four surveillance cameras that streamed live video feeds of him at home, offering viewers a chance to "be just like the Chinese government" and monitor his intimate life.³⁴ Forced to shut down the live stream, Ai sarcastically bid "byebye to all the voyeurs,"³⁵ positioning his Western audience as both privileged and powerless, demanding his freedom but also secretly enjoying the show. Ai's contradictory position of relying on an international audience for the exhibition of his art (his art has never been exhibited in China) and his criticism of China's domestic politics opens him to the facile accusation of having "ulterior motives" and "pandering to the outside."³⁶ The fact that these "motives" are not specified does not matter; what is significant is that Ai's branding as a pawn of Western governments is intended to block him from potential domestic audiences who might identify with a Maoist-sounding condemnation of contemporary social ills.

The third contributing factor to Ai's discursive exile is that Western "voyeurs," who project their own political fantasies and desires onto Ai, enclose him within a cold war narrative framework. In the twenty-first-century digitized version of this dichotomy, the lone dissident artist equipped with a mouse and a modem challenges the repressive Leninist dinosaur. This mainstream narrative unwittingly overlaps with and rein-

-lashing-out-at-ai-weiwei/, and James Fallows, "The Chinese Crackdown: Arrogance? Or Insecurity?" *Atlantic Monthly*, theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/04/the-chinese-crackdown-arrogance-or-insecurity/237234/

33. For insightful discussions into China's neoliberalism, see Wang Hui, "The Rumour Machine: On the Dismissal of Bo Xilai," *London Review of Books*, 10 May 2012, www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n09/-wanghui/the-rumour-machine, and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York, 2007), pp. 120–52.

34. Kyle Chayka, "Now You Can Be Just Like the Chinese Government! Ai Weiwei Launches a Studio Webcam," *ArtInfo*, blogs.artinfo.com/artintheair/2012/04/02/now-you-can-be-just-like-the-chinese-government-ai-weiwei-launches-a-studio-webcam/

35. Ai, tweet, 4 Apr. 2012. And see Samuel Wade, "Ai's Weiweicam Forced Offline after 46 Hours," *China Digital Times*, chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/04/ais-weiweicam-forced-offline-after-46-hours/

36. Opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-04/1609672.html; see footnote 32.

forces the Chinese government's claim that Ai's loyalties are "foreign," attempting to undermine his political rootedness in China, a conclusion that Ai vocally opposes. Despite his passionate reception by the Western art world, Ai refuses exile in the United States on the grounds that it would make his discourse meaningless in China: "I don't need people saying, American nationality gives you a basis for speaking. See? I am not an American citizen, and I can say these things, you and I run the same risks. Right? So what else do you have to say?" ("M").

I submit that Ai is inventing political-aesthetic practice that neither the neo-liberal Chinese Communist Party nor its Western critics are willing to acknowledge: a Maoist work-style in which everyone is equal and a merciless criticism that is always done in public. In a distinctively Maoist lexicon and militaristic tone, Ai affirms his critical stance toward the government:³⁷

After careful deliberation and long premeditation, I am intentionally performing "reactionary" acts. Honestly speaking, those children who drank the poisoned melamine and died before they could understand this world, they had no chance to say what needed to be said. Analogous things happen all the time. It is necessary for someone to speak out, is it not? Compared to ordinary people, I have an advantage, capability, and aesthetic ability to make my voice heard. Why shouldn't I speak? If I did not do this, I would insult myself.³⁸

In a China in which the GDP and its stability are the cornerstones of political success, the model communist dialectically becomes the reactionary and is thrown in jail. "I think that our age, the age of big politics is vanishing, and that the micro-politics of countless individuals will begin to emerge. I am doing my political part. As Chairman Mao said: politics is the soul. I am now dealing with the soul."³⁹ Ai is not a liberal activist, as he is viewed in the West, but rather a prosthetic medial subject—a subject

37. According to Geremie Barmé, this Maoist-militaristic tone is quite pervasive amongst regime dissidents, even the student leaders of the Tiananmen Democracy Movement. "Modes of criticism in Mainland Chinese culture still readily fall back on the habits of mind and language inculcated by decades of party rule. Even in an environment of free speech and media openness the rhetorical style of totalitarianism . . . maintains its appeal" (Geremie R. Barmé, "1989, 1999, 2009: Totalitarian Nostalgia," *China Heritage Quarterly* 18 [June 2009], www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=018_1989nostalgia.inc&issue=018).

38. Ai, "一个经典人格分裂的人 艾未未的艺术人生" (A Classical Schizophrenic: Ai Weiwei's Life of Art), interview with Yi Ming, *PC House*, sheji.pchouse.com.cn/dasheji/1011/43552_4.html

39. Ai, "只有—种情况我会中止调查" (There Is Only One Kind of Situation under Which I Will Cease My Investigation), 4 May 2009, www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/news/info3/20090504/1715051.html

whose own life is radically open and exposed to the world. His camera, video recorder, computer, and modem are the prostheses through which his existence became a relay (between 2006–2009, Ai wrote over twenty-seven hundred blog posts and uploaded thousands of photographs). For Ai, technology is not an artificial mediation between human beings but rather the connective tissue that places the outside world within our innermost subjectivity and vice versa: “Today, the government is a part of us, we are also part of the government; society is a part of us, we are a part of society.”⁴⁰ Through the camera lens and modem, Ai’s life is transformed into an experimental laboratory, revealing the strategies and effects of biopolitical state power.

Ai’s claim that he is an “identity without identity” (没有身份的身份)⁴¹ erases—or, rather, suspends as unimportant—the psychological depth of his individuality. Ai’s identity without identity is a refusal of the autobiographical and confessional self. On the contrary, Ai’s compulsive recording of the details of his own life forms an archive of the society in which he lives—through which “all the defects of my era are reflected in my person” (AWB, p. 142). In this way, his identity or personal life is radically exteriorized as a commentary on China’s culture, politics, and society.

This refusal of interiority ingenuously combines a Maoist political ethos (discussed in the previous section) with a Warholian aesthetics. In fact, Ai exerts considerable effort discussing and translating Andy Warhol into Chinese in order to describe his own approach of blending art and life. Ai explains his own identification in the following passage:

[Warhol] practiced the passions, desires, wild ambitions and fantasies of his era; he created an extensive perceptual world, an experimental world, a popularized world, a world opposed to traditional experience, an anti-elitist, anti-aristocratic world. This is his genuine value, and is, after all, also the reason why he has never been genuinely recognized. [TP, p. 298]

Ai’s discussion of how Warhol’s popularity did not result in a genuine recognition of his art’s significance hints at Ai’s frustration with his own attempt to create a new perceptual and experimentally political world in China.⁴²

40. Ai, “艾未未的伍壹貳” (Ai Weiwei’s ‘5.12’), blog post, 26 Apr. 2009, networkedblogs.com/zwTDT

41. See Ai, “Identity without Identity—An Interview with Ai Weiwei,” interview with Chen Shuyu, *New Architecture*, no. 2 (2006): 12–15.

42. Interestingly enough, perhaps, the Communist Party does recognize the subversive potential of Warhol’s work, as the ministry of culture recently refused to allow Warhol’s Mao

Warhol and Ai share hyperpublic personas that are fundamentally impersonal. The following quote from Warhol can equally be applied to Ai: "If you want to know all about Andy [Warhol], just look at the surface of my painting and films and me, there's nothing behind" (*TP*, p. 298). Ai's compulsive video and electronic documentation of his own life is, in the tradition of Warhol, a radical departure from the medium of biography; it is an exposure of how the self is constructed at the intersection of political and social forces.

While many have accused Ai of being an egomaniac, using his stature as a political dissident to sell his personality, I want to suggest that Ai's intensive focus on his own life produces the exact opposite effect. Ai is not selling his personality so much as he is exposing it to the expectation of violence. By compulsively archiving the minute details of his life as sites of political contestation, he is effectively relinquishing the protection of his selfhood afforded by the state—provoking the state to react, choreographing its repression as part of his art.⁴³ It almost seems as if Ai desires arrest, confrontation, even death as providing the denouement of his performance. "Reject cynicism, reject cooperation, reject fear, and reject tea drinking, there is nothing to discuss. It's the same old saying: don't come looking for me again. I won't cooperate. If you must come, bring your instruments of torture with you" (*AWB*, p. 230).⁴⁴ The previous passage should not be mistaken for empty provocation or blustering; the state's "instruments of torture" are the tools with which Ai makes his art. To phrase it somewhat harshly, if the Chinese state left him alone, Ai might have legal freedom of expression without anything to express.

series to be displayed when the traveling Warhol retrospective stopped in Beijing during Spring 2013; see Joshua Keating, "Warhol's Mao Won't Be Headed to China," *Foreign Policy* blog, 17 Dec. 2012, blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/12/17/warhols_mao_wont_be_headed_to_china

43. Ai refers to his recent arrest over tax evasion in the same terms. "This has become a *social performance* and there are so many people involved. Even the *Global Times*. They are also playing a role in this," Ai said. "This has generated such energy which has never happened in the history of China. If they want to crush somebody, then normally, for that person, what's left there is just silence" (Gillian Wong, "Ai Weiwei Makes Tax Battle a 'Social Performance,'" *Huffington Post*, 17 Nov. 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/17/ai-weiwei-makes-tax-battl_o_n_1099864.html).

44. Many of his provocations share a similar tone of antagonizing the security forces to arrest him:

I told them not to forget to bring handcuffs next time they come looking for me, or at least someone capable of speaking in complete sentences. I'm not kidding, this is a different era, and domestic security officers are just like electric rice cookers, they too need to be updated for the times. Who are you trying to scare, all in a day's work? [*AWB*, p. 228]

In this way, Ai self-consciously and deliberately risks his personal freedom by staging his life as a political-aesthetic project. In doing so, Ai reverses one of the ostensible gains of China's recent turn toward neoliberalism. While Chinese citizens are mostly relieved from the burden of constant mobilization for mass campaigns and allowed to lead private lives, they are also expected to keep quiet. Ai chooses to forego the privilege of a private life.⁴⁵ Ai refuses the position of privacy attacked in Mao's manifesto against liberalism: "To let things drift if they do not affect one personally; to say as little as possible while knowing perfectly well what is wrong, to be worldly wise and play safe and seek only to avoid blame."⁴⁶ If one did not know beforehand that the following two quotations are from Ai's blog, one would not be wrong to assume they are a continuation of Mao's critique: "There is no greater disgrace than being too weak to make such a sacrifice, or living simply for the sake of being alive" (*AWB*, p. 93); "when a people reject truth, they have already chosen death" (*AWB*, p. 218). It is not only that their rhetorical styles are similar, but, rather, for both Ai and Mao what matters is not life in general or bios but the very kind of life one leads and is able to lead only through political struggle conducted in public, loudly and aggressively. Mao's rejection of private political opinion as a pernicious oxymoron—where one is afraid to speak "to people to their faces but to gossip behind their backs"⁴⁷—is deftly shifted by Ai to also target governmental secrecy: "There is nothing that cannot be made public, anything that cannot be made public is filthy."⁴⁸ From Mao to Ai, we can trace the contours of a very different conception of political community based on radical exteriority, exposure to criticism, and overcoming of petty narcissism.

2

During Ai Qing's (Ai Weiwei's father) era, Chinese people would be moved by verses such as: "why do my eyes contain tears? Because I love this land so deeply!" Today, however, people prefer to hear Ai Weiwei indignantly say: "Why do my eyes contain tears? Because filth got in them!" ["M"]

45. I would like to thank Haun Saussy for helping me refine the idea of how Ai rejects the contemporary neoliberal social pact that maintains CCP legitimacy.

46. Mao, "Combat Liberalism," trans. pub., www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_03.htm

47. *Ibid.*

48. Aiweiweidocumentary, "艾未未工作室：老妈蹄花 (Ai Weiwei : Lao Ma Ti Hua)." Keep in mind that Western liberal democracies, like the US, would probably fail Ai's transparency test. See the recent Wikileaks controversy.

To be able to imagine an alternative political and social world requires learning how to see this world differently (removing the “filth”). While it might sound like a platitude, this point deserves our attention because few have grasped the magnitude of the proposition that sight is more than a sense organ; it is also a political organ.⁴⁹ The process of seeing only begins with the retinal image. According to Ai, “Seeing is never purely a matter of the eye, nor is reading. It includes both structure and subjective intention, what you are looking at as well as how you are looking” (*ATP*, p. 104). In Ai’s formulation, two factors disrupt the seeming purity of vision: how sight is structured by the world in which the eye is embedded and how it is influenced by the desire of the seer. While humans living in the twenty-first century would immediately identify an airplane flying overhead, a sixteenth-century observer would register some inchoate sensory impression. The eye and mind would lack the conceptual framework and knowledge through which an airplane could be seen as it is. This example may be less absurd when it is applied to the world of political possibility, in which the ability to see alternative political forms is vitiated by the inertness of the present. All of the examples of Ai’s art discussed thus far can be summarized as interventions in the optical-political nexus. Ai’s compulsive photographing of his daily life forces us to see individuality as enmeshed in techniques of state power rather than existing outside of politics.

Based on this understanding, I suggest that Ai’s sunflower seed installation in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall is an attempt to retrain the eye to see differently the relationship between the individual and the commons. Eschewing the unpalatable options of depoliticization (seeing the individual apart from his or her shared existence with others) and totalitarianism (seeing the individual dissolve into the social whole), Ai creates an installation in which singularity and communal being can be seen simultaneously.

For this exhibition, Ai hired sixteen hundred Chinese artisans from the town of Jingdezhen to handcraft and individually paint over one hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds.⁵⁰ In this way, the viewer of the exhibition is confronted simultaneously with the sublime power of the mass and the unique singularity of each individual seed. The precarious dialectic between the individual and the communal is staged rather than overcome

49. For an excellent discussion on political and philosophical critiques of privileging the eye and visual metaphors in politics, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993).

50. Initially Ai conceived of the project interactively; visitors to the Tate would have been able to stroll through the hall filled with sunflower seeds—walk on them, handle them, and establish their own relation to them. The Tate eventually, however, prohibited people from walking on the seeds because of concerns from the health liability created from the porcelain dust. The exhibit also had a computer for visitors to record personal messages for Ai.

in favor of either. According to Ai: “Without individual voices or the free exchange of information, neither the people nor the proletariat can exist, and there can be no common interests for humanity; you cannot exist” (AWB, p. 226). If one does not exist, neither does the other. If the individual is not free to express his or her own voice, the people become the Orwellian double of state power; conversely, if the people do not exist, the individual’s voice amounts to nothing.

The contradictions in Ai’s political thought regarding the boundary between the protection of individual personhood and the desire for communal being are remediated at the level of representation. What the Tate sunflower seed installation allows us to see is precisely the mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and the people. It is not necessary for Ai to provide any political blueprint or manifesto for how to combine singularity and communalization in practice because his purpose, as an artist, is to make their possibility become visible.

Commentators have interpreted Ai’s sunflower seeds as a pessimistic indictment of mass behavior and conformity in China on the grounds that, at a moment in the recent past, Chinese people were represented as sunflowers following Mao’s radiant face.⁵¹ Ai, however, did not manufacture sunflowers; he made the seeds. As seeds, they represent the pure potentiality of what the people might become when it is imagined as a collective of individuals and what individuals might become when they are collectively empowered as the people. The pure “natality”⁵² of the seeds directly opposes the taxidermied body of the people on display in Mao’s mausoleum.

While the sunflower seeds represent the pure natality of what the people might become, Ai documents their spectral double in the names of those who have died under the current political regime. Although Ai has been vocal in broadcasting the state’s violence, tolerance of private industrial violence, and sheer negligence across a spectrum of issues ranging from the tainted milk scandal to capital punishment, the topic I want to focus on here is the Sichuan earthquake. It is widely accepted that Ai became a target of the Chinese government as a direct result of his involvement with the earthquake. Before this, the international cachet he received partnering with the Swiss architecture firm Herzog and De Meuron designing Beijing’s Olympic Bird’s Nest granted

51. See Andrew Graham-Dixon, “Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds, at Tate Modern, Seven Magazine Review,” *The Telegraph*, 15 Oct. 2010, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/8066846/Ai-Weiwei-Sunflower-Seeds-at-Tate-Modern-Seven-magazine-review.html

52. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958; Chicago, 1998), p. 9. My term *pure natality* is borrowed from Hannah Arendt who famously defined *natality* in the following terms: “The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (p. 9).

Ai latitude from the government, which for a surprisingly long time tolerated his criticisms. Ai's involvement in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake, however, destroyed the fragile bubble of toleration, or perhaps indifference, granted to him by the government.

On 12 May 2008, an earthquake registering 8.0 on the Richter scale struck Sichuan province. Although the Chinese government was initially praised for its rapid emergency response and the ways in which it welcomed the media, evidence soon came to light that over seven thousand schoolrooms collapsed due to inadequate construction materials, sarcastically referred to as "tofu dreg schoolhouses" (豆腐渣校舍), resulting in the death of at least five thousand children. Grieving parents began protesting, calling for an official investigation into why the schools collapsed as well as the publication of the names of all of the children who died. Instead, the state offered monetary compensation in exchange for silence. In reality, this was a forced choice, akin to a robber offering the person he or she is holding up at gunpoint, "Your money or your life." In this example often used by Jacques Lacan, the robber always ends up with the money; in the Sichuan example, whether or not they accepted the money, the grieving parents would be silenced. Symbolically on behalf of the parents, Ai refuses the coerced choice:

We reject pardons, the erasure of your memory, cooperation, and compromise, because your troubles have latched onto us. Life is simple; it simply will not tolerate doubt.

What is truth? It is everything about us, and it is everything about them. In the darkness, the fractured truth will ultimately emerge.

[AWB, p. 225]

In this passage, we can see the major themes of Ai's work discussed thus far. To help bring the facts into transparency, Ai conducted a series of interventions that represented the deceased by counting and naming them. In China, he led a citizen investigation (公民调查), collecting the names of deceased schoolchildren (a year after Sichuan's provincial government failed to adequately publish the same list).⁵³ Maintaining his commitment to transparency, Ai turns a possible private grief into a public act of mourning. A local source in the Mianzhu city government (many schools collapsed in the villages surrounding the city) informed me that a week prior to Ai's arrival in Sichuan, the central government circulated a memo sternly warning that he should not be received by

53. Ai, "只有一种情况我会中止调查" (There Is Only One Kind of Situation under Which I Will Cease My Investigation).

any governmental office.⁵⁴ Their fear should not be a surprise—and was not entirely unjustified—as Ai turned the names of the deceased into various artistic memorials: an audio file several hours long of volunteers reading aloud the names of the dead; nine thousand children’s backpacks composing the sentence “she lived happily in this world for seven years” (她在这个世界上开心地生活过七年) uttered by a grieving Sichuan mother projected onto the façade of Munich’s Haus Der Kunst in an installation titled “Remembering”;⁵⁵ and a similar installation in Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum titled “Snake Ceiling” consists of grey and black backpacks shaped into coiled snakes suspended from the ceiling.

In direct contrast to the state propaganda machine’s proud descriptions of the Chinese people’s unity and strength in the rescue and reconstruction effort and its images of Premier Wen’s immediate arrival on the scene of the destruction and his emotional appeals broadcast nationwide to the Chinese people, Ai rejected these attempts to sublimate the disaster, as doubly covering over the bodies of the children already buried in one form of rubble. Refusing the politically orchestrated process of national mourning, Ai demanded to know who the children were? What were their names? How did they die and was it preventable? As argued by Judith Butler, mourning becomes political precisely when it begins to investigate the lives of the dead, when the survivors ask, according to Ai, “Who are they? What pain did they endure while alive, what grief do they provoke, now dead?”⁵⁶

The showdown between Ai and the Chinese state can ultimately be explained as a confrontation between opposing aesthetic practices and their political outcomes. On the one hand, the state constructs itself as a national-aesthetic object by engaging in practices roughly translated into English as “imageism” (形象主义) and what I call elsewhere “face construction” (面子工程).⁵⁷ State power produces and recognizes itself in the construction of visibly impressive exteriors. The post-Sichuan earthquake reconstruction process can be viewed as an aesthetic performance demonstrating state benevolence in ways that fail to address the concrete needs and desires of the disaster victims. In Wenchuan County, new buildings

54. Private conversation with government official, Sichuan Province, Mianzhu municipality, 21 May 2012.

55. Ai, “Remembering,” Haus Der Kunst installation, 12 Oct. 2009–17 Jan. 2010, premierartscene.com/magazine/ai-weiwei-in-munich/

56. Quoted in Gerard Lemos, *The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese People Fear the Future* (New Haven, Conn., 2012), p. 232. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York, 2004), p. 150.

57. See Sorace, “China’s Vision for Developing Sichuan’s Post-Earthquake Countryside: Turning Unruly Peasants into Grateful Urban Citizens,” *China Quarterly* (forthcoming).

are decorated with propaganda slogans such as: “when drinking water, do not forget who dug the well. Our good fortune depends entirely on the Communist Party!” (吃水不忘挖井人, 幸福全靠共产党).⁵⁸ By mobilizing the compassion of Chinese society and demonstrating its own benevolence and ability to “miraculously” accomplish engineering goals in under three years, the party reconstructs its legitimacy on the ruins of the earthquake.

In direct contrast, Ai’s politics of memory eschews compassion in its pursuit of justice. From Ai’s perspective, compassion is ultimately contaminated by the state’s instrumentalization of it. Ai writes: “The masses don’t need pity after injury, they need even more a strong institution of self-protection, they need to know the facts, and they need action, the power to participate and refute” (*AWB*, p. 178). Consequently, Ai’s dedication to finding and recording the names of each student who died in the earthquake is not only a way of honoring the dead but also a way of recomposing the body of the people. It recomposes the body of the people by undermining the “hierarchy of grief”⁵⁹ through which certain bodies are invested with value during life and mourned after death,⁶⁰ while other bodies remain anonymous, abandoned and exposed to suffering, like the bodies of schoolchildren in rural villages of Sichuan. According to Butler:

If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition. Although we might argue that it would be impractical to write obituaries for all those people, or for all people, I think we have to ask, again and again, how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publically distributed.⁶¹

The state’s carefully manicured performance of compassion is a way of making the dead remain dead; in direct contrast, art organized around a politics of memory is concerned with reanimating the dead. Ai is attuned to the sensitive point that state performance is not for individuals but for the collective naming of a group. Contrary to the official record and monuments, responsibility, for Ai, to the deceased is a matter of how many

58. Data from author’s current research project on how state-society relations have changed during the post-2008 Wenchuan earthquake reconstruction work.

59. Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 32.

60. In December 1994 in the prefecture level city of Karamay, Xinjiang Province, a fire broke out in a movie theater, killing 324 people, 288 of whom were children. Popular outrage occurred after it was alleged that a teacher shouted: “Let the cadres go first!”

61. Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 34.

individuals there were and who they were.⁶² As the political heir to Antigone, Ai's endless grief becomes an act of state subversion: "After major historical events and incidents, after their 'proper' presentation to the public and their 'definitive meaning' have been determined, gaps will emerge. After unspeakable new possibilities and methods materialize, cracks and leakage will occur" (AWB, p. 146). Signs of leakage are already occurring. On 1 November 2011, the Chinese government charged Ai fifteen million RMB (\$2.3 million) in back taxes, allotting him fifteen days to pay it. In response, thousands of people began "lending" him money to help him pay the onerous bill and expressing their solidarity (in China it is called lending because a charitable donation would need to be approved through the appropriate bureaucratic channels). As of Wednesday 9 November 2011, Ai received 6,725,139 RMB (one million dollars, approximately) in loans. What is even more striking is that the amounts of some of the funds are not so subtly veiled political critiques. One person donated 512 RMB (\$80) commemorating the date of the Sichuan Earthquake, 12 May 2008; another loan was for 89.64 RMB—suggesting the date of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, 4 June 1989. While thousands of people are only a small fraction of a population of over 1.3 billion, the political ramifications are clear to the Chinese government now challenging the legality of the contributions.⁶³

Although Ai is heavily guarded by police officers surrounding his home in Beijing, his spectral presence is proliferating across the globe. In Bad Ems, Germany, twenty-five-year-old artist He Xiangyu from Liaoning Province placed a sculpture of a corpse resembling Ai face down in a window-front. The life-size sculpture made from plastic and fiberglass with real human hair is named *The Death of Marat*, after the 1793 painting by Jacques-Louis David.⁶⁴

Naming the sculpture after David's painting of French Revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat as he was assassinated in his bathtub is a gesture loaded with significance. According to T. J. Clark, David "saw in the cult of Marat the first forms of a liturgy and ritual in which the truths of the Revolution itself would be made flesh—People, Nation, Virtue, Reason,

62. I would like to again thank Saussy for bringing to my attention this difference between collective and individual mourning.

63. See Jonathan Watts, "Ai Weiwei Vows to Clear Tax Charges Amid Fresh Challenge from Authorities," *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/nov/14/ai-weiwei-chinese-artist-tax. In 2012 Ai lost his appeal.

64. See Jessica Phelan, "'Dead' Ai Weiwei Alarms German Village," *GlobalPost*, Weirid Wide Web blog, 3 Nov. 2011, www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/weirid-wide-web/dead-ai-weiwei-alarms-german-village

Liberty.”⁶⁵ From this perspective, David’s painting is more than a portrait of a political hero; it is an inscription of the truths of the French Revolution upon the flesh of Marat.⁶⁶ In Communist China, representations of heroic figures also function as incarnations of revolutionary principles: “The sublime in an individual figure is ethically inspiring because all the progressive truth and essence of history shine forth through her or him, as through a synecdochal figure.”⁶⁷ Within this logic of revolutionary aesthetics, the nation is made flesh in the heroic body.

What distinguishes He’s *The Death of Marat* is that the new body of the people is no longer tragically sublime but is lying facedown on a hardwood floor. It is a body that is found, stumbled upon, producing in the viewer a sense of anxiety that is quite different from the ethical inspiration and “imagined community”⁶⁸ incarnated in the tragic revolutionary hero. Producing an effect opposite to that of national monuments, this memorial *avant la mort* (Ai Weiwei 1957–?) haunts public space, disorganizing its coherence. He’s sculpture apprehends the passerby with the unexpectedness, contingency, and brutal facticity of its placement. *Why is this dead body here in front of me?* What were the circumstances surrounding his death? Why was his body abandoned in this violent manner?⁶⁹ Finding out that Ai is *not* dead prompts further questions: Who exactly wants this person dead? *What does this (un)dead man want from us?* Are we simply voyeurs anticipating the fate that will inevitably befall him?

A much more “weightless” apparition of Ai appears in Cuban artist Geandy Pavon’s *Nemesis: Ai Weiwei, the Elusiveness of Being*. On 20 May 2011, one month and half after Ai was arrested, Payon projected a video of Ai’s face upon the wall of the Chinese consulate in New York.⁷⁰ In Hong Kong, twenty-two-year-old graffiti artist Tang Chin, also known as Tan-

65. T. J. Clark, “Painting in the Year Two,” *Representations*, no. 47 (Summer 1994): 28–29.

66. For a brilliant discussion of how the painting of Marat inaugurates and captures the symbolic agitation and contradictions of modernist painting produced by “the entrance of the People onto the stage of power formerly occupied by the monarch,” see Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago, 2011), pp. 91–91.

67. Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif., 1997), p. 166.

68. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 2006).

69. Numerous local German residents phoned the police to report the “dead body,” in some cases even filing a complaint regarding mistreatment of a corpse; see Erica Ho, “In the Name of Art: Ai Weiwei ‘Corpse’ Statue Alarms German Residents,” *Time*, 3 Nov. 2011, newsfeed.time.com/2011/11/03/in-the-name-of-art-ai-weiwei-corpse-statue-alarms-german-residents/

70. Geandy Pavon, “Nemesis-Ai Weiwei: Guerrilla Projection by Geandy Pavon,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVYvPRM7fQI

gerine, began spray-painting stencils of Ai's image with the captions "Who Is Afraid of Ai Weiwei" and, more sinisterly, "Death Ai Weiwei." Similar to Payon's work, artist Cpak Ming pioneered what he calls "flash graffiti," projecting Ai's image on the Chinese People's Liberation Army barracks in Hong Kong.⁷¹ In Toronto, artist Sean Martindale installed a seven-foot sculpture of Ai made out of corrugated cardboard, entitled "Love the Future/Free Ai Weiwei." The sculpture has become a mobile object, as Martindale moves it to various locations, including the front of Toronto's city hall, the Chinese consulate, and Whippersnapper Gallery, the artist usually accompanying the installation to answer questions.⁷²

Ai's prosthetic existence, He's effigy, Martindale's cardboard giant, and Ming's "flash graffiti" migrate from the protective confines of museum space, in which art is merely cultural production and consumption, uncovering the aesthetic substratum of politics. This substratum occurs because politics is ultimately a form of organizing space, ordering value, and shaping perception,⁷³ a fact that the Chinese Communist Party has been aware of for decades. According to Ban Wang, in China, "politics has been turned into aesthetic experience and on such a massive scale as to become a veritable cultural practice."⁷⁴ An inheritor of this cultural practice, Ai makes visible the defects of his society refracted through his own life in a distinctive adaption of the Maoist practice of criticism and self-criticism. In this sense, the antagonism between Ai and the Chinese Communist Party is an Oedipal rivalry, not simply a dichotomous struggle between good and evil, as it is represented in both Chinese and Western mainstream narratives.

The complicity between the Chinese government's and Western media's portrayal of Ai as purely "oppositional" to the Communist Party forecloses the possibility of finding in Ai's discourse the seeds of what Ai calls a "communalized state of freedom" (*AWB*, p. 242). I suggest that Ai's vision is what remains of communism when its traditional organizational support—the party—turns into its autoimmune enemy. For this reason, Ai's "communalized state of freedom" has more in common with Oscar Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism" than it does with Vladimir Lenin's "What Is to Be Done?"⁷⁵ Wilde's argument that "no Authoritarian

71. Louisa Lim, "Hong Kong Graffiti Challenges Chinese Artist's Arrest," www.npr.org/2011/05/04/135985475/hong-kong-graffiti-challenges-chinese-artists-arrest

72. See Matthew Sherwood, blog, matthewsherwood.blogspot.com/2011/08/ai-weiwei.html; this blog is open to invited readers only.

73. See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (New York, 2009).

74. Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History*, p. 6.

75. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of the first draft of this manuscript for *Critical Inquiry* for referring me to the Oscar Wilde essay.

Socialism will do,” on the grounds that “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to individualism,” opposes genuine individualism to the “egotism of . . . ignorance”⁷⁶ and heralds Ai’s absolutization of the individual through its exteriorization in the community. Their similarity ends there as Wilde relies on a Platonic conception of individuality consisting in intrinsic temperament, whereas Ai’s individual is medial, prosthetic, and fundamentally exposed to the society from which Wilde wanted to escape.

Ai’s transformation of his life into an experimental work of art and political criticism began even before his birth. Staring at his newborn baby, the Chinese Communist Revolution’s beloved poet Ai Qing said to his wife: “This child is our work of art, perhaps our masterpiece.”⁷⁷ According to Ai Qing’s diary, after his son was born, he closed his eyes to think of a name when the character *wei* (威) materialized. In Chinese, *wei* signifies power, might, and prestige, forming compound words such as *quanwei* (权威; “authority”), as well as *weixie* (威胁; “to threaten and menace”). Finding it inappropriate to bestow upon a “powerless intellectual’s son” a name of awe-inspiring political authority, Ai Qing quasi-prophetically announced: “reality is too cruel, we will call him ‘love the future,’”⁷⁸ providing a homonymous logic at the heart of Ai Weiwei’s name (艾未未).

To love the future means to embrace the unknown and attempt to bring into existence that which cannot be imagined in the present. A future that is only an unfolding of the logic of the present or negation of the past loses the vital power of indeterminacy. On these grounds alone, we should hesitate before immediately identifying Ai’s political-aesthetic interventions with familiar routines, formulas, and ideologies.

The purpose of this paper has not been to challenge Ai’s commitment to certain liberal values, per se, but to make the Maoist forms of expression and values that are hidden in plain sight in his artistic productions, gestures, and actions *visible as well*—to allow them to become visible by situating them in the specific conditions from which they arose and developed. Ai’s political explosiveness flows from the fact that he takes the empty gestures of the Communist Party as points of intervention—wresting its moribund discourse away from its contained and managed place in official party ideology and reanimating it with brutal honesty and a caustic sense of humor. His aesthetic activism, though, is more ambitious than merely

76. Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/index.htm

77. Zhang Tie Zhi, *Who Is Afraid of Ai Weiwei?* 谁怕艾未未, ed. Xu Ming Han (Hong Kong, 2011), p. 12.

78. *Ibid.*

poking fun at the gaps in the ideology of a Communist Party that also happens to be the capitalist world's second largest economic power. Ai's practice is a new mode of political being that is neither complacent nor slavish to the demands of Party Central. It is what Maoism might have looked like, if Mao had the courage to keep his word.

The stakes of Ai Weiwei's art are thus born by his name: "love the future." Addressing what the future could become, at least in a provisional artistic formulation, has been the motivation of this essay. We should allow the contradictions of disparate political genealogies in Ai's art to be resonant, discomfoting, generative and let the vases of our ideologies shatter without trying frantically to reassemble the pieces.