

Art, Repression and Dissent in China: Ai Weiwei and his Contemporaries

Background notes

Barry Venning — 08 September 2021



Harcourt Romanticist: *Our Vantage* (after Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*). 2019. Digital image. Dimensions and locations variable.

For the two decades that followed the Cultural Revolution, contemporary Chinese artists were marginalized and oppressed in their own country because their ideas conflicted with the mainstream political ideology. Contemporary art is generally based upon ideas of creative freedom and individual expression, whereas the authorities insisted upon communal endeavour and rigid adherence to the principles of socialist realism that were taught in all Chinese art schools. In spite of this, Chinese modern art burgeoned in the 1980s alongside China's economic reform, the pluralization of Chinese society and the inroads of globalization. From time to time, there were notable public displays of avant-garde Chinese art, the most notorious of which was the China/Avant-garde exhibition of February 1989, held at the National Art Museum, Beijing, and curated by the now distinguished critic and scholar, Gao Minglu. The exhibition closed almost as soon as it opened, after the artist Xiao Lu fired a handgun at her own installation, called *Dialogue* (Plate 1)



Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 1989. Performance/installation at the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition, National Art Museum, Beijing.

Gao Minglu's exhibition opened four months before the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, an event which became a byword for Chinese state repression and which featured time and again in the iconography of radical Chinese art. After Tiananmen Square, the state imposed strict controls on 'anti-social' forms of art.

The artists themselves often continued to live on the fringes of society in "artists' villages", where they constantly faced the threat of being displaced owing to political decisions or urban renewal. The most famous and the most important of

these communities was the group that formed Beijing East Village, located in an area mainly inhabited by the most lowly paid workers on the outskirts of the city. Some of the artists associated with the Beijing East Village community would go on to become internationally famous: they included Ai Weiwei, Cang Xin and Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and RongRong, whose images provide a vivid record of his colleagues' lives and work. The contribution of photographers such as RongRong and Xin Danwen to the history of Beijing East Village was indispensable because so much of the work produced there was performance based and, without their photographs, no visual record of now famous performances, such as Zhang Huan's *12 Square Metres* (Plate 2) would have survived. In order to evade the scrutiny of the authorities, the East Village artists, like so many Chinese avant-gardists post Tiananmen Square, either produced art for display only in their own homes or studios, or they pursued provocative, performance-based practices, which were temporary, publicized through word of mouth and thus, for the most part, beyond official control. It was, however, one such performance in 1994, by Ma Liuming, that contributed to the dissolution of the East Village collective.



RongRong (photographer) Zhang Huan (performer): 1994 No. 20
(Zhang Huan, "12 Square Meters"), 1994. Dedicated to Ai Weiwei.
(Plate 2)

Since the early 1990s, Ma Liuming's performances were marked by his exploration of gender fluidity and constant interrogation of the strict binary of male/female that was imposed by Chinese law and society. He often performed as his invented persona "Fen-Ma," an androgynous figure who juxtaposes feminine features with

his masculine anatomy. For much of the performance, Fen–Ma Liuming’s *Lunch*, the artist stood naked, long-haired and made-up in his courtyard while boiling fish to serve to his audience, so that the audience’s consumption of the food took on erotic overtones. Ma Liuming was arrested and held for a period of two months because of this and similar works, and many of the artists of the Beijing East Village fled in response to his arrest.

The Beijing East Village art community was closed down by the police in 1995 and the remaining artists dispersed. Somewhat surprisingly, in the years that followed, the Chinese government sought to enhance its cultural prestige by fostering the growth of contemporary Chinese arts and to this end they designated other underground artist villages as official “art districts” under state supervision. One unforeseen consequence of the state’s attempt to capitalise on the work of its living artists is that those whom it had obstructed and harassed, like the displaced East Village artists, Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan, found themselves the objects of national and even international attention. From 1996 onwards, their work was shown in London, Paris, Berlin and New York. Furthermore, like many of their peers, they benefited from the flourishing market in global contemporary art: the photographs of their performances were reprinted signed and marketed to museums and collectors in expensive limited editions. The staggering prices paid internationally for Chinese contemporary art was one of the most startling aspects of the post-millennial art market.

In the case of Ai Weiwei, his prominence in the international art world enabled him to become one of the nation’s most vocal political commentators, and a persistent critic of Chinese authoritarianism. Before he became a mentor to the artists of Beijing East Village, Ai spent a decade (1983-93) living in another East Village – the one in Manhattan – where he worked, occasionally studied, formed friendships with the likes of the beat poet, Allan Ginsburg, and became the lynchpin of the Chinese expatriate artistic community in New York City. When he returned to Beijing in 1993, he took with him a lesson learned from the ‘readymades’ of Marcel Duchamp: that ordinary objects and even actions could become works of art. In works such as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* of 1995, which he described as a ‘cultural readymade’, he dropped a 2,000-year-old ceremonial urn, allowing it to smash to the floor at his feet. Not only did the urn have considerable value, it also had symbolic and cultural worth. By smashing it, Ai questioned how and by whom cultural values were formed; he also raised the issue of China’s relationship with its

past. In addition to his activities as an artist, Ai collaborated with the critic and curator, Feng Boyi, on a series of three books on the work of younger Chinese artists (1994-97). Ai and Feng also co-curated the exhibition provocatively titled “Fuck Off” in Shanghai in 2000, which was notable for the agonisingly painful performances of Ai’s friend, Yang Zhichao, including *Iron*, in which Yang’s shoulder was branded with his own state identification number as a protest against official control and surveillance.

Although Ai’s activities were deliberately and repeatedly provocative, he only began to suffer the full oppressive force of the Chinese authorities after the Sichuan earthquake of May 2008, in which many thousands of school children and students died in the rubble of poorly constructed, so-called “tofu-dregs” schools. Ai helped to organise a citizen’s investigation into the disaster to collect the names of all the children who died. He also created another monument to the dead children at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2010: a colossal art work made from 9000 children’s backpacks that spelt out in Chinese characters the lament of one mother for her lost child: “For seven years she lived happily on this earth” (Plate 3). The response of the regime was brutal: he was beaten by police in 2009, his newly constructed Shanghai studio was demolished in January 2011 and, three months later, he was arrested and charged with ‘economic crimes’. His arrest gave rise to a spate of clandestine protests. Tang Chin, a 22 year old Hong Kong artist who went under the soubriquet ‘Tangerine’, responded to the arrest with a simple graphic, *Who’s Afraid of Ai Weiwei?* (Plate 4). She made the image available online as a stencil that was downloaded, graffitied and projected all over Hong Kong.



Ai Weiwei: *Remembering*, from the exhibition ‘So Sorry’, Haus der Kunst, Munich, January 2010. 9000 children's' backpacks (Plate 3)



Tangerine (Tang Chin), *Who's afraid of Ai Weiwei?* 2011.
Stencilled graffiti. Various locations, Hong Kong (Plate 4)

As Tangerine herself pointed out, “If he can be arrested, then ...being a Hong Kong citizen doesn't help anymore....There's no shield any more against this very naked power that's trying to engulf us.” Her words were prophetic. Proposals by the Chinese authorities in 2014 to limit democracy in Hong Kong by changing the territory's electoral system gave rise to the ‘Umbrella Movement’ and to massive public demonstrations. In 2019, an attempt to facilitate extradition from Hong Kong to Mainland China generated another series of massive demonstrations in which the territory's cartoonists, like Ah-To, or artists, such as Harcourt Romanticist and Three Hands Monkey, took a prominent part, often through social media. The latter two used pseudonyms to remain anonymous and avoid arrest.

But perhaps the most surprising aspect of the 2019-20 demonstrations is that the participants frequently drew on tactics that resembled those of performance and conceptual art. They included impromptu, site-specific sculptures made of spent tear gas shells, a 30 km. long human chain and the series of *Lennon Walls*, made up of countless post-it notes with drawings, slogans and political statements that appeared in locations all over the city, including the example at Fortress Hill (Plate 5), which grew to an enormous size after only two days in July, 2019. They are vulnerable, of course, to removal by the Hong Kong authorities, but similar, albeit smaller, Lennon Walls have been installed in art galleries in Berlin, Paris and New York, well beyond the reach of Chinese officialdom.



Lennon Wall, Fortress Hill, Hong Kong. July 13th, 2019 (Plate 5)

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