

Marble Arm, 2006
Courtesy of Ai Weiwei



TRUTH TO POWER

Ai Weiwei, star of the avant-garde, tells Simon Kirby
about challenging the status quo

The interview takes place under the thin, bright Beijing sunlight in the courtyard of Ai Weiwei's 'Fake' studio in Caochangdi — a dusty, semi-industrial zone between a railway embankment and the new Capital Airport Highway on Beijing's east side. The studio buildings are made of grey local brick and polished concrete with triple-height doors and windows piercing the walls. A group of seven or eight quiet and very focused young studio assistants finish their morning meeting and disappear to the day's tasks. There is a pet dog, some long-haired cats and, ranged along one wall, a marble Ming dynasty sarcophagus and a series of old, stone pillar bases decorated with cloud motifs. I comment that when I first visited the studio in 2001, this was the only building of its kind among the non-descript factories and residential lanes: now there are a number of smart international art galleries behind discreet walls that have all imitated his style. 'That's because I designed them all,' he replies.

As we talk, he takes a series of photographs of me using a small digital camera. Striking, but softly spoken, he explains: 'I want to post some pictures online. I have four million blog visitors and it's good for people in remote areas to see what this guy is doing over here. And when I meet all these people — what could I possibly talk about?'

Simon Kirby: In 2003, you worked with the architectural practice Herzog & de Meuron to provide the winning concept for the iconic Beijing Olympic stadium. You subsequently withdrew your support for the Olympic project and have been critical of the way the Games are being used for political purposes in China. In what ways are the Games being misused?

Ai Weiwei: Yes I did the design. It is a bold and unique structure and has been very well received. I am very happy about that, there is no question.

*The stadium was intended as a facility that is made for the Games but primarily, for me, it was intended as an urban facility — a place for the people to use. Now the controversy concerning my attitude towards the Olympic Games arose from an interview I gave to the *Guardian* that was picked up by Reuters. It was one year before the opening of the Games and I was asked if I would be participating in the celebrations. At that time, we were already witnessing the triumphant public mood and the nationalistic public message that was being sent out by the government. It was just prior to the opening of the 17th Party Congress and I had the very strong impression*

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that politically absolutely nothing has changed in this country. I have lived as an individual and an artist through the past 30 years of Reform and Opening Up in China [Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms] and so this realisation was a huge disappointment to me.

China is facing tremendous problems which are part of opening this new path; in fact it is not only China that is facing these new kinds of difficulties – the whole world is faced with them. But the difference here is that the old political structure remains fully intact. I believe that the primary concern and main struggle within that structure is to stay in control: and everything done within that structure is related to this mission. This is absolutely ridiculous to me. Even in a democratic structure it is very difficult to maintain power – and the pursuit of maintaining control generates more problems than can be solved.

Of course all this relates to democracy, to freedom of speech, to individual responsibility and to censorship. The fundamental problem is not that there are limits on voicing different opinions here. The problem is that the whole society is dying through lack of responsibility or involvement. The government should be leading in generating this sense of active responsibility. It should be elected by the people and act according to the will of the people. But this is impossible because the government has not been selected by the people.

This is the main problem facing China today in politics. And this problem affects every field of national life. I think that even the government understands this, but the difficulty is that this system has now been so firmly established for so long.

We have a nation of 1.3 billion people who seemingly are all looking forward to this Olympic big event and then you have one stupid artist, who happens to be part of the design team. But for these reasons I don't give a damn about these celebrations – because they have no meaning. I do not believe that it is an event that represents the national will. It is an event manipulated into misleading people into believing that we have entered a new, successful and harmonious period in our history. This is not true. There are still too many fundamental questions to be answered. I find that kind of celebration meaningless, shameless and disgusting.

Simon Kirby: Your criticisms of the Olympic Games are not reported in the official media, but your blog remains online. What is the purpose of your blog?

Ai Weiwei: I do my blog because this is the only possible channel through which a person can express a personal opinion in China. No newspaper, magazine or television channel would ever present your argument or ideas. I am the most interviewed person in China, even domestically, and yet even if I say something it cannot be published here: so I am talking to myself – it is ridiculous. So I felt that a blog might be a good way to create one forum in which to open one's mind. Yet every time I sit to write I still hesitate: should I do it? What will the consequences be?

I retain a simple premise in mind: my blog is an extension of my thinking – why should I deform my thinking simply because I live under a government that espouses an ideology which I believe to be totally against humanity? And this so-called communist ideology is totally against humanity. Many generations of people over decades in this nation have been hurt by this: many are dead, many have disappeared and many have been damaged, whether conscious of this reality or not. So my position is not just one person's strange idea – these are our lives and we live in this part of the world. People in London are not going to take a position – they have other concerns. So for me this is not a 'responsibility': it is part of life. If you live in self-punishment or self-imposed ignorance or lack of self-awareness it genuinely diminishes your existence. Self-censorship is insulting to the self. Timidity is a hopeless way forward.

Simon Kirby: On a recent visit to Seoul I heard from a number of people working in cultural life in South Korea that the Olympic Games there had a positive effect in opening up political life and liberalising the social environment. Can this happen in China too?

Ai Weiwei: We all understand this logic. I think the Olympic Games has forced the Chinese government to use its power and muscle more consciously than before: to let go. But change is also brought about by the effort that I make. We could say that things are more open now – after all my blog is still online. But if people take material from my blog they find their own blogs closed down. Openness does have genuine meaning in real life.

Why does the Chinese government want to stage the Olympics? It is to be accepted by the international community. The Chinese only superficially speak the language of the international community. If in reality you want to become less ruthless you have to transform all the patterns in your life, you have to listen to things you are not willing to listen to, and you have to admit



Ai Weiwei and Simon Kirby, March 2008
Credit: Katie Hill

to mistakes. If your power is for the people then what have you got to be afraid of? That's the bottom line. What are you afraid of?

Simon Kirby: The Chinese media is unanimously in favour of hosting the Olympic Games and indeed the Chinese people one meets also tend to be enthusiastic. Do any Chinese people agree with your view?

Ai Weiwei: I think if people have a sense of history they will agree with me. I believe many, many people do agree with me and if one is politically conscious one would agree. I believe even a farmer in the countryside will be aware of the conditions in which he lives and will ask questions about them. It is 30 years since the beginning of the Reform and Opening up process in China and for me this provokes certain simple questions: who has profited and who has suffered? How have the

rich made their money? How has public property been transferred into private hands to create this version of state capitalism? And how do they use their money?

These are questions that any citizen should ask unless totally unconscious. If one does not ask such questions one is not responsible. I have to say, I am fundamentally not a very responsible person, but I am still compelled to ask such questions.

As for state-sponsored artists who are involved in the celebrations surrounding the Olympics, I feel that regardless of artistic or aesthetic merit or public recognition and awards, they still lack in basic moral judgment, in a sense of right and wrong or the consciousness of being an individual. Their only perspective is to associate with a larger power and to become part of that power base. So there is nothing more to say about that kind of artist. They take the lowest position a human can take.

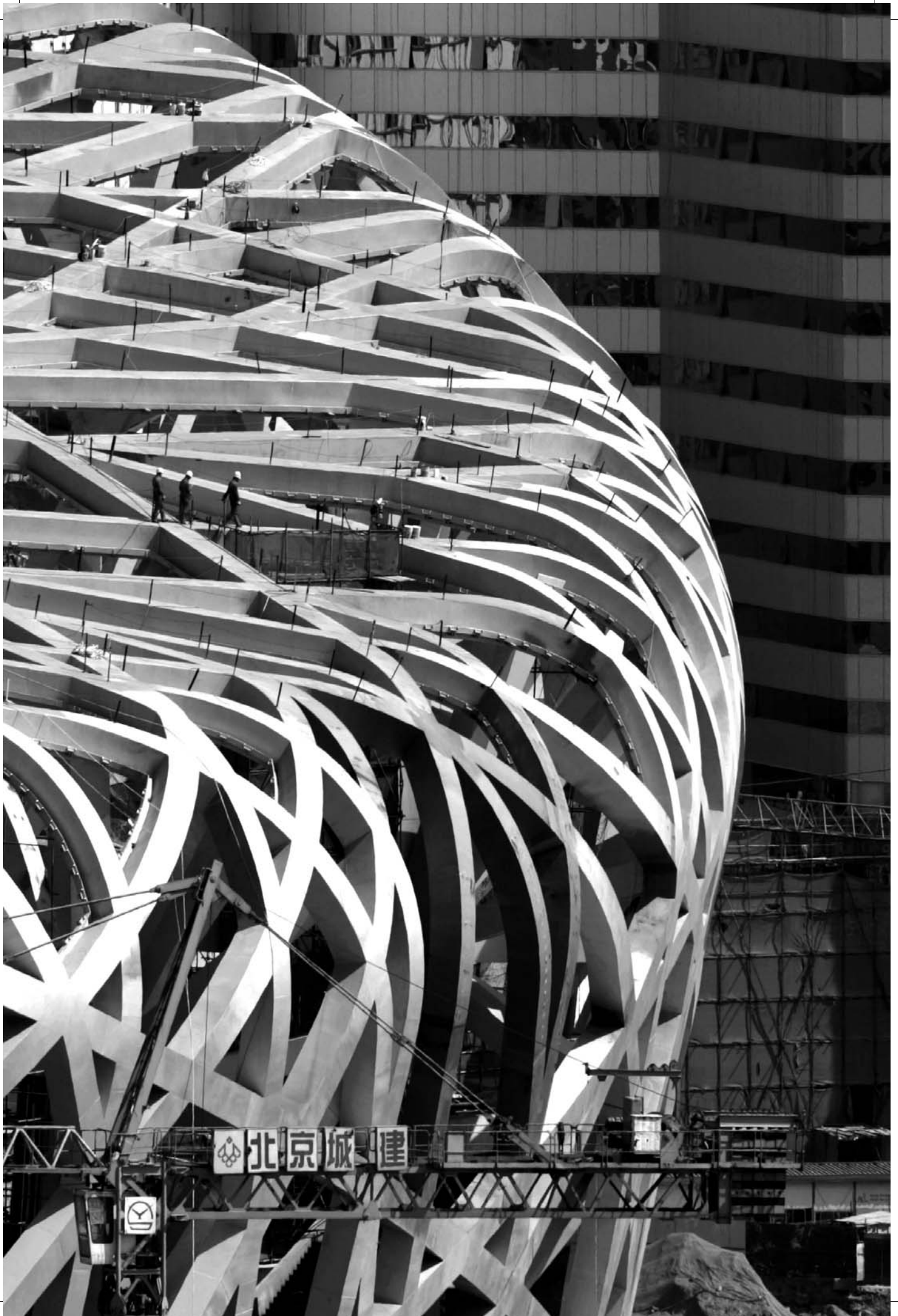
Simon Kirby: What kinds of political reform do you think China needs?

Ai Weiwei: We need a very simple solution. Everything is so complicated and tangled together, so entrenched in history, so deep, heavy and difficult to understand; we need just to cut through the Gordian knot. We live in modern times and we possess possibilities that were unavailable to others before. We no longer have the same West-East, communist-capitalist conflicts – these foundations are no longer in place.

I think that the basic value of contemporary thought has to be established in China. We need to create a sense of right and wrong; to learn to face ourselves and our history; to discuss what kind of nation and what kind of government we should create. These are essential questions and they need to be addressed. Without this, no solution can ever really reach the real root problem.

Totalitarian society creates a huge space that, as we know, is a wasteland. The great success of this system is that it makes the general public afraid of taking responsibility; afraid of taking a position or giving a definite answer; or even of making mistakes. There is no revolution like the communist revolution. You simply burn all the books, kill all of the thinking people and use the poor proletariat to create a very simple benchmark to gauge social change. This has continued for generations – after just two or three generations deprived of continuity in education we inevitably become completely cut off from our own past.





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For example, children in this society don't even know their parents. I have had young people tell me that their grandparents have died, and when I ask who their grandparents were and what happened to them they just say, 'Oh I don't really know, my father never said much about it.' And if I say, 'Are you sad?' they simply shrug it off. In a real society, people would say, 'Oh I love my grandfather or grandmother.' These may just be ordinary people, yet ordinary people still transmit the emotion of who they are and where they have come from. A child receives this sense of self through the process of growing up. Personally I don't know any of my grandparents: my family never talked about them because they themselves were in a critical condition. My parents did not talk about what the Party did to them.

There is no continuity of experience through the generations. We talk about 'crimes against humanity': is this not a crime against humanity? It's not necessarily a question of killing people, but of torturing or mutating basic human emotions.

In this process, we dramatically found ourselves with this One Child Policy and as a result no one knows where he or she has come from. And then suddenly we live through this radical, new, urban development: everyone has had to move from their old neighbourhoods and no one knows anyone else in their own apartment buildings. The population is in a constant state of enforced dislocation. And so let us hope that a totally new culture will come out of this.

Simon Kirby: Your father, Ai Qing, is an important poet and no stranger to political repression. He was first imprisoned by the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang in the 1930s. After liberation, he was targeted in the Anti-Rightist campaign of the late 1950s. Later, in the Cultural Revolution, he underwent a severe regime of 're-education through labour' in the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps where you yourself were brought up. In spite of these experiences, you remain a very outspoken critic of the government. What gives you this confidence?

Ai Weiwei: I have taken this position because, I have to say, I am not scared. I have considered what I have to lose. My close friends say, 'Weiwei, you are stupid. Some day they will get you.' But I am not naïve. I grew up in this system and my father was a victim of this system and this history. If we do not access our rights it only makes their power stronger.

Simon Kirby: You are known as an iconoclastic artist – I am thinking for instance of the early works that involved daubing neolithic Chinese pots in gloss paint or indeed smashing those relics as documented performances. In what way is this iconoclasm related to the radical-leftist politics of the Maoist years – a response or a result ? And to what extent does iconoclasm characterise the production of other artists of your generation in the so-called Chinese avant-garde?

Ai Weiwei: I do not really know what the radical left is, but China has been struggling to face its past since long before 1949 [year of the establishment of communist China]. Ever since the May 4th Movement [social and cultural reform movement of 1919] we have been grappling with the question of replacing the old with the new. This dilemma characterised contemporary thought worldwide at that time. And yet the challenge has not yet been fully confronted intellectually. It is just a formalistic act. So for artists, contemporary thought has to be about questioning reality and challenging power. It has always been like that in the past in the West. The role is to challenge power.

Using historical artefacts brings weight to bear and generates greater understanding of who we think we are. And so using historical artefacts can make the point more forcefully and clearly. Because I am Chinese, I speak Chinese, therefore those things mean something to me. But actually the use of historical objects in my work is really a lazy kind of act, you could write many lengthy paragraphs to explain it, but in essence it is a lazy act.

Simon Kirby: China is in a period of unprecedented economic growth and entrepreneurs of all kinds are making great fortunes, including artists. By international standards, the rules of this new capitalism in China are still being created, including in the arts. What do you feel are the chief dilemmas faced by artists in this respect?

Ai Weiwei: I think the most difficult thing is that an artist's work becomes too closely associated just with the great pace of change. Change, in itself, does not have a fundamental philosophical or aesthetic basis attached to it. For instance, the current process of change is based mainly on the very simple idea of 'letting some people get rich first' [attributed to Deng Xiaoping in 1978 on liberalising economic policy]. But who is getting rich? And how are they getting rich? These questions have never been explained.



Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995
Courtesy of Ai Weiwei



Forever Bicycles, 2003
Courtesy of Ai Weiwei

Art and culture here are disassociated with public debate. This applies to the political landscape too. So what do you expect? We see plenty of artistic work that reflects superficial social conditions, but very little work that questions fundamental values.

Simon Kirby: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is in undisputed and full control of the government of China. By nature, the CCP is culturally conservative. Meanwhile, the rise to prominence of China in the international contemporary art world has been unprecedented and has taken place largely outside the control of the government. What is the relationship between the Communist Party and the government on the one hand and the international contemporary art world on the other?

Ai Weiwei: I think any power or structure that seeks to maintain full control and is not open in any way to loosening its power eventually makes itself ridiculous. With regard to contemporary art and the Party this creates

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the impossible situation that you describe: it's like oil and water – it can never mix.

The process of building relationships between the two sides has so far not been based for a single second on goodwill, but only on a very practical money-making impulse that stems from the same old system. Building a bridge or road will make a certain amount of profit – workers and technicians are all in place and know how to fulfil their role. But any situation that requires creating a new system is automatically refused. Only when tremendous problems are being faced, such as the arrival of cheaper labour elsewhere, will the authorities say for example, 'Ah, China does not have a creative industry – we must create one!' Then every single city develops a communist policy to develop ways of profiting from the creative industries. A property developer will change his plan to create a 'cultural industry zoo' or 'art district'. It makes profit, clearly.

Slavery or ignorance are both a big part of human history and it's part of our tradition too. The idea of individual consciousness is a very new idea developed over the past 100–150 years. In China, it is still an undeveloped concept. If you look around this city you see that it is being constructed by migrant workers – people who have no name, no power and nowhere to go. Who cares what their family is like and who their children are? This is the reality of the celebration of the global economy – how to use third world labour markets in China, India, Russia and elsewhere to generate new markets for increased consumption.

Simon Kirby: In the face of enormous challenges the Chinese government has proved itself in many areas to be a very able administrator. Could you describe the nature of the informal mechanisms that link the state administration with individual artists or circles of artists – in particular those in the independent sector?

Ai Weiwei: The government may be made up of clever, sensible people. But if they do not believe in basic human values, the more clever or shrewd they are the greater the tragedy they will create. It is better to have a retarded president who respects human values than a clever government without human values.

The system is based on individuals and most Chinese leaders come from technical backgrounds. I don't know how many of them have Renaissance ideals or an understanding of nature or if these things are rooted anywhere in their training. But, in general, China is a nation

that has been deeply practical. Historically, we have a very rich tradition of respecting culture and scholarship but in recent times this respect has been absent. The Chinese authorities think of artists as prostitutes. And in reality it's true: in the communist system artists just represent what the power structure seeks them to represent. It is prostitution.

I do not think they are able to do anything really dramatic. They represent a situation, which is disintegrating into corruption, they are free of loyalty or honesty – yet these values are very important for a nation.

Simon Kirby: What particular considerations does an artist working in China have to take into account when putting a work into the public domain?

Ai Weiwei: There is no public here. You do not expect people to engage in artistic work, nor to have any meaningful discussion about what you do. So to be an artist in this environment is already to disconnect yourself from reality and to be somehow arrogant or disillusioned with reality. The natural audience for contemporary art is in the West, where people cultivate a curiosity about what artists are doing.

Simon Kirby: Do you think that western political commentators and art specialists misinterpret what takes place in the cultural arena in China?

Ai Weiwei: It's hard to say – I don't think there is much mystery about contemporary art in China, even if it can be difficult to explain. When it comes to 'fundamental values', they remain the same, regardless of how people actually interpret them.

Simon Kirby: Chinese artists of talent, even quite young and relatively inexperienced practitioners, are in constant demand for gallery and museum shows, by public and private collections and for residencies and new commissions. What effect does this demand have on the creative work produced?

Ai Weiwei: But in the West you don't have a situation where the ideas and concepts of the entire older generation are dead. Or a situation in which nothing of value is passed onto the young. The young here think that the world starts with themselves. There is no other place on earth

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like this: elsewhere a sense of continuity links people with previous experiences, but in China we have been cut totally from the past for many years. And now in China we have performed that same rupture with the past yet again.

Simon Kirby: You mention the audience for artistic work being in the West. Can Chinese contemporary art impact significantly on Chinese society?

Ai Weiwei: Somehow it still does, willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously. It is so far from the mainstream but it can reach people very slowly: through young people and perhaps through fashion. We must challenge our human intelligence. We have to be positive. □

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Simon Kirby is a curator, commentator and producer in the contemporary visual arts. In 2007, he established SKA Culture, an independent agency based in Shanghai that produces international artists' projects