

THE Nation.

Published on *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com>)

Ai Weiwei and the Art of Protest

Danielle Allen | August 29, 2012

In the Declaration of Independence, the American colonists complained of the impossibility of receiving redress from the English crown, stating that “In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.” That could be the tagline for the new documentary *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, directed by Alison Klayman, except that the famous Chinese artist and dissident’s constant petitioning, closely detailed in the film, was never exactly humble. But then, neither was the colonists’. Like them, Ai Weiwei is courageous, self-confident, blackly ironic.

Between 2008 and 2011, Ai invoked China’s Freedom of Government Information Law to send government agencies more than 150 inquiries about the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, whose official death toll was nearly 70,000. When he received no response, he filed suit against the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

In the course of his work on behalf of such earthquake investigations, Ai suffered a police beating in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. This inspired a separate round of petitions and suits. Eight months after the beating, he returned to Chengdu to file an official complaint and request an investigation. Several months later, having seen no action, he returned again to Chengdu with the strategy of filing requests for a hearing in as many government offices as possible. This series of encounters with government officials—nervous, bored, perfunctory, violent—is one of the film’s most powerful segments, and also one that Ai has broadcast via Twitter.

When one journalist who accompanied him on these visits asked him why he kept at it, he was told by Ai that “you can’t just say that the system is flawed; you have to work through the system and show it in all of its detail; that’s the only way you can ultimately make a critique.”

Will Ai Weiwei’s efforts make any difference? He is an artist whose work of petitioning is straightforwardly political, but whose use of the blogosphere to publicize that petitioning is artistic and political at once. But what exactly is the relation between voice as expression—the artist’s voice—and voice as influence: the citizen’s voice? And do social media change that relationship? These are the questions raised by Ai’s in-your-face petitioning.

Historically, petitioning has been a fundamentally performative act. In ancient Greece, supplicants—those, for instance, who petitioned for asylum—chose dramatic public venues and made a spectacle of themselves: appearing, say, in their underwear or baring their breasts. Crowds gathered around to watch; knowledge of the controversy spread—and with it, questions about the justice, or injustice, of the ruler. By their strenuous moral demands, such acts of supplication jeopardized the political authority of the

petitioned by raising questions about whether that party could effectively maintain moral authority.

Ai Weiwei has always had an eye for the point where art and politics meet in performance. During the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square massacre, Ai was in New York. The son of a famous Communist poet and intellectual, Ai Qing, he had grown up in domestic exile in far western Xinjiang province, to which Mao Zedong had condemned his father. Upon the family's release in 1976, Ai went to Beijing and studied film until, frustrated by the Chinese government's repression of artists and intellectuals, he moved to the United States in 1981. In response to Tiananmen, Ai staged a hunger strike in front of the United Nations, wearing a headband that read "Fuck your mother." That would be a lot like sitting in the ancient agora of Athens in your underwear. It's also a move that Ai has turned into art. Twenty years later, as a Beijing-based artist, he filmed an art project in which a series of eight people—he is the eighth—say, each in his own dialect, "Fuck you, motherland" while standing before a backdrop with the same text in Chinese characters.

To understand Ai's expletive, though, we have to remember that this is the curse of a man who, in the end, decided to go home, both literally—he returned to China in 1993—and figuratively. Long ago, economist Albert Hirschman identified loyalty as the motive force driving the commitment to dissident self-expression. In Hirschman's terms, Ai chose voice over exit. By returning home, he chose the voice of the artist *and* citizen instead of simply the artist. One commentator in the film says, "Among all the Chinese artists I know, he's probably the only one who, deep down, really cares about this country and what happens to it." Yet the import of this choice didn't unfold to its fullest extent until the Sichuan earthquake in 2008.

* * *

If we wish to understand the relationship between the expressive voice of an artist and the influence-seeking voice of a citizen, we would do well to think about the social importance of mourning. What can be more purely expressive than a cry of grief, the effort to commemorate? Yet societies in different times and places have long known that such purely expressive cries are very destabilizing. Grief often leads straight to anger—and anger, commonly, to calls for action.

Think again of the Greeks. Think of Antigone. Ancient Athens put limits on the right of women to mourn in public, and Pericles concludes his funeral oration during the Peloponnesian War by enjoining the women to silence. In May 1999 during the Kosovo war, Serbian wives and mothers took to the streets by the thousands because relatives they had sent to the front fourteen months earlier had not come home from tours of duty that were supposed to last only twelve. Because the unrest threatened to evolve into war resistance, the government dispatched a leading general to the provinces "to defuse the anger of the women."

When on May 12, 2008, a 7.9-magnitude earthquake rocked Sichuan province in western China, roughly 7,000 classrooms collapsed. For seven days after the temblor hit, Ai—who had been blogging daily since 2005 on Sina Weibo—didn't post any entries at all. The scenes of children's backpacks strewn amid the dusty rubble silenced him. When he did start to blog again, his project was mourning.

Ai first visited the devastated region in June 2008 because he wanted to use the names of the dead schoolchildren in an artwork to commemorate the tragedy. He sought information from the Sichuan Post-Quake Reconstruction Office and recorded a cellphone conversation, featured in his 2009 documentary *Hua Lian Ba Er* (Dirty Faces), in which he is told, "The death toll is a secret." Indeed, the government was not forthcoming with statistics about the dead, and because so many schools had collapsed, suspicions of corruption-fueled, shoddy building practices ("tofu construction") began to circulate widely. The official death toll of 68,712 was released in late July, two and a half months after the quake. The

government paid the parents of the dead schoolchildren for their silence.

Having petitioned the government for information and been denied it, Ai made another “ask.” He put out a call on his blog for volunteers to catalog the names of the dead schoolchildren. One woman who responded says in the film: “One day I saw a [blog] entry he wrote about investigating the student deaths from the May 12th quake. He said he was seeking volunteers to help him do this work.... The volunteers went to every town to ask parents and schools for the names of the dead.” With blog petitions, Ai built a team of fifty researchers to collect the names of deceased students in towns across Sichuan province.

At last, on May 3, 2009, a year after the quake, Ai announced on his blog that his Sichuan Earthquake Names Project had achieved a final tally: 5,212 dead students. In response, on May 5, the government finally released its own tally with a slightly higher number: 5,335. On May 12, the actual anniversary, Ai posted all 5,212 names. On May 29, his personal blog was shut down. On May 31, Ai signed up for a Twitter account. On June 2, China blocked access to Twitter across the mainland in anticipation of the twentieth anniversary of the June 4 Tiananmen Square massacre. Ai then used a Web proxy, VPN or other circumvention tool to leap over China’s Great Firewall and keep on tweeting.

On Twitter, he began a daily posting of the names of the dead children on their birthdays. He used a major September 2009 exhibit to commemorate the students, covering the façade of Munich’s Haus der Kunst with 9,000 backpacks in a piece called *Remembering*. And in 2010, for the second anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake, he decided to post recordings of individual people reading the names of each lost child. Via Twitter, he sent out another call and, in a country where Twitter is illegal, was able to post 4,546 spoken names.

In describing this project, Ai says: “We are always trying to think of a way to get everyone involved. The earthquake anniversary [was] coming up so I think this method is very good. It helps everyone to learn about using resources, making recordings, and sending messages online.... The content [of the project] is respect life and give [people] a way to find a new communication and to reach out.”

In April 2011, the Chinese government detained Ai for eighty-one days and then imposed a major fine on him for tax evasion, as well as restricting his right to travel outside China. In July 2011, when a deadly high-speed rail crash in Wenzhou was first reported on China’s microblogs, the volume of blogosphere commentary was simply too great to censor. For all of censorship’s power, grief for the dead finds out its limits. Ai Weiwei could be detained, but his example could not.

* * *

In December 2009, Ai signed Charter 08, a dissidents’ reform manifesto, which declares:

The political reality, which is plain for anyone to see, is that China has many laws but no rule of law...[and] especially, in recent times, a sharpening animosity between officials and ordinary people.... we see the powerless in our society—the vulnerable groups, the people who have been suppressed and monitored, who have suffered cruelty and even torture, and who have had no adequate avenues for their protests, no courts to hear their pleas—becoming more militant.

One of Ai’s supporters puts the same points in more personal terms: “What we want is normalcy, just a normal society in which we can express sorrow and mourn death, where those who do wrong are punished, and those who do good for society are encouraged, not jailed.”

In China, there is a real problem with avenues of redress. The dismay throughout the country in October 2011 at the hit-and-run death of a toddler grew out of frustration with a legal system that appears not to

weigh gradations in culpability and in which, according to a recent article published by the Association of Corporate Counsel, politics trumps the law. (To practice in China, lawyers have to swear allegiance to the Communist Party.)

One of Ai's visits to court included the following scene, as described by *New Yorker* staff writer Evan Osnos:

There was a line of bank-teller-style windows, and, at the one closest to us, a tiny old woman in a pink padded jacket was bellowing into a rectangular opening in the glass. "How could the other side win without any evidence?" she shouted. "Did they bribe the head of the court?" On the opposite side of the glass, two women in uniform were listening with resigned expressions suggesting that she had been at it for a while.

History suggests that the need for redress, for justice — as distinct from problems of material distribution — often holds the seeds of transformation. Will the petitions of mourners hold such power in this case? This is precisely the question that Ai has raised with his Sichuan Earthquake Names Project, his ceaseless, performative petitioning, and his very public effort to use the Internet to resist the governmental suppression of mourning.

The opponent is formidable. Along with Iran and Vietnam, China is one of the most aggressive Internet censors in the world. At a maximum, 3 percent of China's Internet users are able to get around the country's Great Firewall to use Twitter or other blocked sites.

Yet as many as 450 million people may use China's two main microblogging platforms, and millions have developed a culture of humor, wordplay and speed to get around the censors' tools. These are the practices that made it impossible to censor commentary about the high-speed rail crash, according to Ethan Zuckerman, the director of MIT's Center for Civic Media.

Significantly, the Chinese government has never released an official death toll from the great unmentionable, the Tiananmen Square massacre. According to Reuters, in the months leading up to the twentieth anniversary, calls for a re-evaluation of the 1989 protest movement circulated on the Internet. It was in this context that China shut down Twitter in June 2009.

But ten months later, even with the Twitter freeze ongoing, when Ai Weiwei went back to Chengdu to file his complaint against the police in April 2010, he tweeted all day about his dinner plans, inviting the people of Chengdu to join him. So many showed up that the restaurant had to put tables on the street. One man passed by just to say hello to "Teacher Ai" but chose not to stay. Police arrived to videotape those who did and, eventually, to shut the party down. Even in China, then — a country, one should note, without freedom of association — Twitter is powerful enough to get strangers and police officers to a flash party.

Of course, this was no ordinary occasion. The guests ate pigs' feet together to celebrate one man's relentless petitioning and affirm his steely pursuit of honor for the dead.

Repeated petitioning. Polemical parties. In the American colonies, this was the stuff of revolution. Perhaps, in artful, ironic performances lifted aloft by new media, such seeds are being cast abroad once more?

Source URL: <http://www.thenation.com/article/169636/ai-weiwei-and-art-protest>