



Preface by Wang Keping*

Ai Weiwei and I have been friends for several decades: his father and mine were both young artists plunged into the revolution from an early age. They met in the '40s, one a novelist, the other a poet, both becoming cadres in the Culture department of the Communist Party. My father was denounced from 1950, his father in 1957, but Ai Qing underwent greater adversity, with his entire family exiled to a labour camp in Xinjiang, the Far West of China. Ai Weiwei grew up by his father's side, facing scorn and humiliation in these formative years. During the first Beijing Spring in 1979, we participated together in the first exhibition of non-conformist, non-official artists The Stars (Xing Xing) on the railings of the National Fine Arts Museum of Beijing. Following which, he left for New York, soon after I left for Paris. Such we parted ways, but never broke contact.

Who would dare say Ai Weiwei is not a patriot? In 1993, he moved from New York to Beijing, this was a key turnaround moment in his life. Returning from the West back to China, his interest in traditional Chinese art redoubled. The problem was, under the ravages of the Cultural Revolution, traditional Chinese culture and art had been reduced to smithereens. He began trading in antiques, accumulating a vast collection of trinkets, most notably some stunning folkloric pieces. This experience allowed him to deepen his understanding of traditional and popular artistic techniques, later drawing inspiration in these for own artworks. At this period, we could affirm that Ai Weiwei took on the mission of propagating Chinese contemporary art. He founded an art magazine, as well as publishing his three famous Black Cover Book, Grey Cover Book and White Cover Book. It goes without saying that it was underground material, all press and publishing houses being entirely under state regulation.

Ai Weiwei positioned himself as a self-elected leader, taking up arms and stirring up a hornet's nest. He embarked on the project of organising avant-garde exhibitions in a vast village barn on the outskirts of Beijing, having a huge impact on the Beijing cultural scene at that time. Ai Weiwei then announced he was opening an art gallery. Everyone took it as a joke; ever since the Liberation of 1949, the communists had abolished private galleries, allowing only official museums, institutions and art shops for tourists, all State-run.

Ai Weiwei has the habit of finding a sore spot and pressing on it. He marched over to the Cultural department in Beijing to request a permit for his gallery, but was met with the reply: "An art gallery will carry out sales, you need to request permission from the Commerce department." Ai Weiwei then went to the Commerce department, where he was told: "Art is a cultural matter, your permit must be obtained from the Culture department". Sent back and forth between the various offices, he finally obtained the response: "Your exhibitions will

surely attract foreigners coming to buy art. All matters involving foreigners must be approved by the Law enforcement.” Request police approval? Such a thing would be like skipping into the tiger’s den to pluck out his whiskers.

Unperturbed, Ai Weiwei came up with a plan. He and his associates built a huge empty space on the east outskirts of Beijing and hung up a big sign « Beijing Art Storage ». This was China’s very first authentic citizen-opened art gallery since the Communist rise to power in 1949. A building under the guise of « Storage » required no permit; the Culture department, the Commerce department and the Police washed their hands of the matter. From this moment, the Storage space housed exhibitions and sold artworks. One could say, Ai Weiwei had run rings around the State.

As with unruly hair, bootleg trousers, abstract painting, Western music, and rock’n’roll, the Communist party leaders finally had a revelation: these art antics didn’t pose such a terrible threat to their political power, and it maybe wasn’t worth spending such huge efforts on eliminating them. Letting the common citizen enjoy himself wouldn’t bring the world to an end, and might even serve as a distraction from the growing pressures of the daily grind.

Ai Weiwei, not contenting himself with these small victories, then decided to organize a huge avant-garde exhibition in Shanghai, the title of which said everything: “Methods of un-cooperation”. Faced by this pacific form of un-cooperativeness, the government of Shanghai turned a blind-eye. This was the method artists in China were forced to employ: take a shot here, win a point there...

It is above all as an artist that Ai Weiwei is of great relevance. He built his own studio in the village Caochangdi (translated as « grasslands » in Mandarin) along the Beijing airport expressway, and began to create art with great flourish, far ahead of his contemporaries, attracting a vast number of artists to set up camp around him. Currently home to over one hundred artists and several dozen galleries, Ai Weiwei’s Caochangdi is today a renowned arts district.

The emergence of social media on Internet in China was for Ai Weiwei a source of great joy, who one day declared to me, “aha! finally a platform from which to mock the Party !” He started his own blog, attracting a mass of followers responding in constant flow to his publications. He laid out the wrongs of the world, making ironic put-downs and engaging in scorching satire, joyfully bringing forth the contradictions of the current political situation before the eyes of all. Freedom of speech is the sworn enemy of dictatorships. Following an initial period of stunned apprehension, the government ended up prohibiting Ai Weiwei’s blog. Following the 2008 earthquake disaster of Sichuan - precisely at the moment when the entire country was singing the praises of political leaders’ disaster-relief action - Ai Weiwei set about organising the Citizen’s Investigation, in order to record the names of every single child killed. He also got involved in the affair of Yang Jia, an angry young man who assassinated six officers in a Shanghai police station, or Tan Zuoren, arrested and sentenced for proving that the Sichuan buildings had been so poorly constructed that they were an accident waiting to happen.

Ai Weiwei pitches himself at every opportunity against the authorities, fighting to reveal to the public uncomfortable truths concealed by the state. His actions invoke the rage of the Police, who in Chengdu inflicted a potentially mortal blow to his skull. Fortunately, Ai Weiwei has a solid skull or they could have put him into a coma. Following the surgery carried out in Germany, Ai Weiwei called me to say that he was even smarter than before....

Amidst such perils, Ai Weiwei’s artistic career was going from strength to strength. In the space of a few years, he leapt to fame, receiving the acclaim of the international arts scene,

topping power lists of most important figures in art. It was the first time in history that a contemporary artist had such a huge impact on society. Ai Weiwei continued his breathtaking rise, turning out episode after episode of this on-going public performance.

As if bowing to modern ways, the Party was obliged to put a stop to the Police's gangster-style methods... by ordering the arrest of Ai Weiwei, supposedly for his own protection. Under 24-hour close surveillance, eye-to-eye with his guards, and over a period of 81 days. Under this ordeal, Ai Weiwei didn't go insane; he's a hard nut to crack.

In these past years, many an idealist has pitched themselves against the Party, doomed battalions falling one after the other before them – with the one exception of Ai Weiwei. When a boulder was sent to crush him, Ai Weiwei flipped it around to use as a stepping-stone towards success and fame. In the current day, when the authorities are using scorched-earth methods to leave a desert of singed tree trunks, Ai Weiwei springs up like a tall oak. From now on his adversaries, armed with hammer and sickle, will have a job to fell Ai Weiwei.

Wang Keping, January 2016, Paris

*Wang Keping is a sculptor born in Beijing in 1949, the same year of the rise to power of the Communist party. In 1979, Wang Keping was one of the founding members of the first non-conformist artist group in China, "The Stars" (Xing Xing). At the outset of the 80s, he left China for Paris, where he is currently an important figure in the contemporary art scene.

Translated into English by Claire Myhill