

About the Artist: Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei—artist, architectural designer, curator, and social activist—is perhaps the best-known and most successful contemporary artist in China. Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957 and grew up in exile due to his poet father’s conflict with the government. This early experience laid the groundwork for Ai Weiwei’s future as a social activist and spokesperson for freedom of speech and against injustice.

When living in Beijing in the late 1970s, Ai Weiwei became an early member of one of the first avant-garde art groups in modern China, and later spent a decade in New York where he gained attention for transforming everyday objects into conceptual works. Perhaps China’s most internationally acclaimed artist, Ai Weiwei has exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, and has been involved in highly visible projects such as the 2008 National Olympic Stadium (“the Bird’s Nest”), which he worked on with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. However, he has frequently found himself at odds with the Chinese government in his stance on free speech and human rights.

With his finger on the pulse of modern China and unafraid to spotlight injustices in Chinese society, Ai Weiwei maintains a connection with a devoted Chinese following through his blog and Twitter account. He has risked his life leading a number of high-profile protests to defend his beliefs which have caused him to be repeatedly, and sometimes severely, punished by Chinese authorities. He was secretly detained by Chinese authorities in 2011, and did not regain possession of his passport until 2015. As a result, the artist was unable to be present for events such as *@ Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, a 2014-15 exhibition on San Francisco’s Alcatraz Island that raised questions about freedom of expression and human rights.

