Jerome Cohen

Introduction:
A Conversation about Ai Weiwei

One of the questions we aim to address in the remarks that follow is, Where does China fit in to a discussion of “the fear of art” and how representative is Ai Weiwei of artists in China? Our issue, of course, is, to what extent have Chinese artists been subject to fear, and in what periods? The papers in this issue make reference to several unhappy periods in the Chinese Communist Party’s political history, so we have to take account of different times and different places but also different artists. As Weiwei makes clear in his conversation with Ethan Cohen, many artists just have to play the game.

There is a tension between on the one hand talking about this fascinating, important worldwide figure and on the other hand talking about many other Chinese artists. To some extent, Weiwei’s position now, through an uneasy compromise, is stabilized, whereas that of many other artists is not. It’s not that Weiwei is fearless; he certainly is. But more than that, he’s pugnacious. I’ve seen the videos of him literally invading the Chengdu Police Station that had harassed him, and I felt sorry for the police because he really went out of his way to be tough. About a year and a half ago we had dinner in Beijing, and the secret police fellow who tails him was at a nearby table. Weiwei and his lawyer, Pu Zhiqiang, who is now in jail for a long time, not only identified the fellow, Weiwei went over and photographed the secret police fellow while he was trying to slurp his soup.
Weiwei is an unusual character. He was able to get away with it, certainly until 2011, because people thought he was well connected given his father’s career and Communist Party prestige. I asked Weiwei at lunch, I believe in 2010, “Who’s up there protecting you?” And he said, “Nobody, but party officials are afraid to find out.” Finally, however, he was so provocative that the leadership went after him. But then he demonstrated that he has not only internal connections but external connections too, because a huge number of foreigners protested his confinement in China—I think well over a thousand people in the art world, mainly people who until then had largely good will toward China. And, after he was detained by the police, he eventually demonstrated the kind of power that has subsequently offered him protection.

One additional point: Weiwei’s case, when he was confined in 2011, made legal history. His confinement was without any legal justification. As a result, when the party revised the criminal procedure law the following year, in 2012, they had to deal with the problem of locking somebody up for as long as six months with no real basis other than a policeman’s decision to investigate somebody.

So Weiwei has had a great deal of impact, but we should also, of course, keep in mind changes in policy since Xi Jinping has become the new leader. The political space has become tighter, and it is harder on artists as well as a lot of other people. In his comments, Ethan mentioned an artist who last summer was treated to fifteen days in very harsh police confinement because, prior to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the June 4, 1989, massacre, he had a performance art show in his apartment. Not in the street. Not in a gallery. Yet the police came in and broke it up, and locked him up. Again no court intervened. No lawyer was allowed to protect him.

The biggest problem in China now is lawlessness, low-visibility harassment, trying to break people’s will without incurring the bad publicity of formally imposing criminal or other sanctions on them. There is a lot of attempting to immobilize people through fear and harassment that never reaches the level of public visibility.
Artists may not be the most abused people in China. I think the Falun Gong is probably the most abused group. But artists suffer, and much depends on their individual behavior. Weiwei has been blatantly provocative to the Communist Party in public, giving them the finger. I don’t know anybody else who has done that. I don’t know any criminal suspect, anybody investigated by the police, who has been so openly defiant. We have to take this into account because Weiwei is not just your average good artist.
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