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AI WEIWEI
ARTIST ACTIVIST
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01



CULTURE SPY

AI WEIWEI

WORDS DANIEL SCHEFFLER

If the French conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp has the urinal and the pop artist Andy Warhol has the Campbell Soup can, then artist Ai Weiwei has the bicycle. The Chinese artist, known for his work on the "Bird's Nest" Beijing National Stadium used for the 2008 Summer Olympics, Ai Weiwei has created an overwhelming pile of bicycles. In fact, 1,500 of them for his art shows around the globe.

These bicycles have been traveling since 2003 and have been featured at Melbourne's National Gallery, outside the "Gherkin" building in London and, of course, near the Venice Biennale. Entitled "Forever Bicycles" this is one of Weiwei's large scale (30 feet, in fact) immersive installations — and is a perfect indication of how Weiwei's creative mind operates.

The title of the work refers to a brand of bicycles, "Forever," that has been mass manufactured in Shanghai, China, since 1940; they are, however, becoming rare on the streets of the city. Similar to Warhol, who used the Campbell Soup cans, Weiwei toys with the idea of a "found object" turned into something else. "Growing up in China, the bicycle was a major vehicle for people and a status symbol — even though it wasn't as glamorous as owning a BMW," said Weiwei. But this simple collocation of BMW and bicycle sounds just like the pop king Andy Warhol.

01
Ai Weiwei's
Forever Bicycles 2015

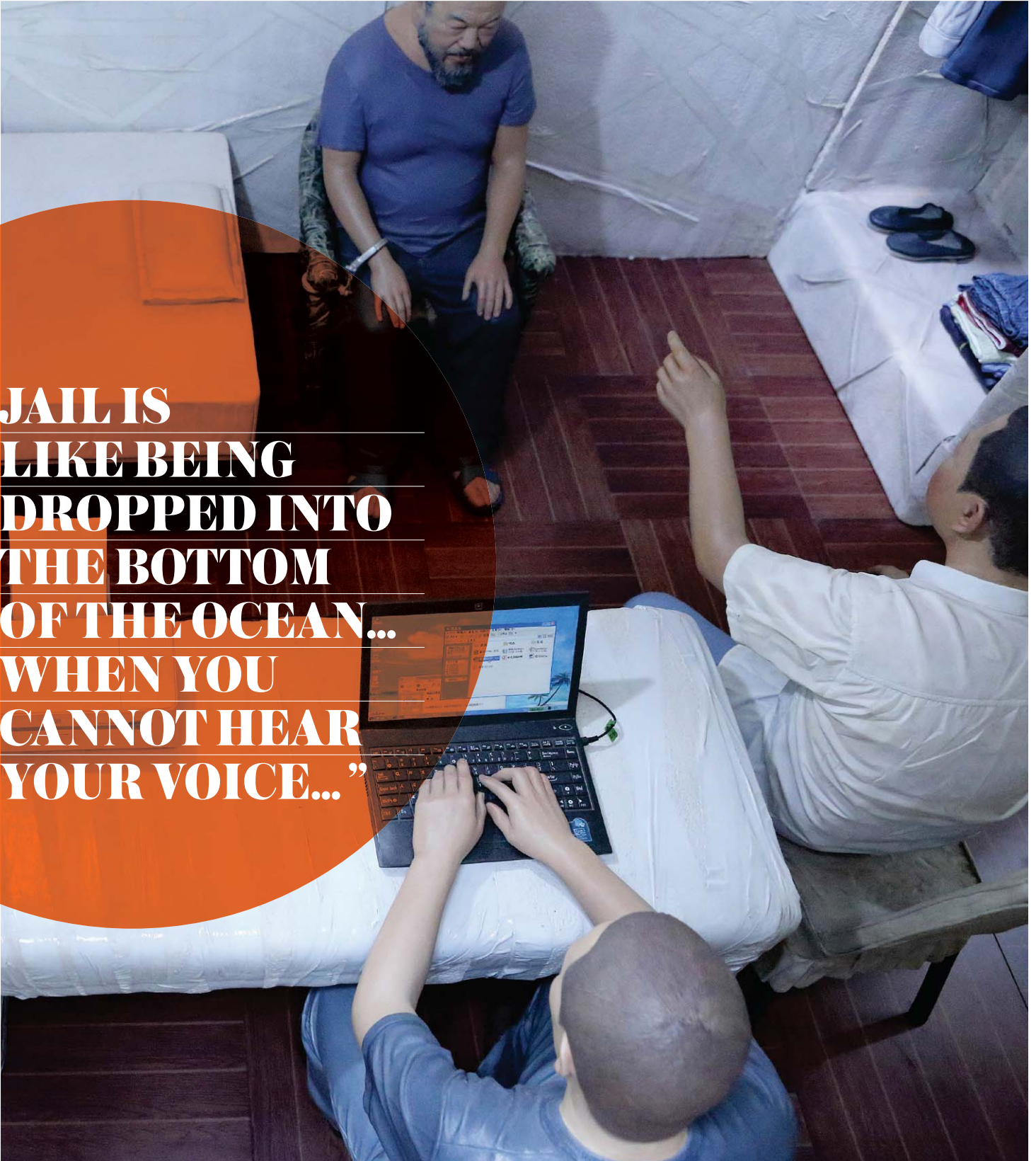
02
Ai Weiwei



**“I THINK
MY STANCE,
MY WAY
OF LIFE,
IS MY MOST
IMPORTANT
ART”**

03

**“JAIL IS
LIKE BEING
DROPPED INTO
THE BOTTOM
OF THE OCEAN...
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YOUR VOICE...”**



And this is why one of the most recent Weiwei shows pairs the artist with Warhol — showcasing the artists' similarities, one voice for the 20th Century and one for today. "Through different formal means, yet utilizing similar strategies, Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei have quite literally defined the aesthetics of their respective times and places, while challenging the sensibilities and mores of all of us," said Eric Shiner, Director at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, and co-curator on this latest Warhol-Weiwei exhibition.

But for all the parallels there also are the juxtapositions. "Warhol is the first artist I felt that I could completely understand. I come from the northwest China, near the Russian border; he comes from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but he is a person with a gesture and language that I completely understand," said Weiwei. For him, the artist Warhol was possibly 50 years ahead of his time and Weiwei describes him to be "extremely sincere and, at the same time, never sincere, like a person that virtually exists." Both artists are known for "escaping into their work" and Weiwei thinks that Warhol would have, as he does now, embraced social media in that way.

"We both love our time," said Weiwei, who in 1981 moved to New York and stayed for 10 years. "Of course I went to New York as it was the most hated by communists and it was the farthest place I could go," added Weiwei.

But Weiwei's world, right now, is dedicated to his online activism. Twitter, Instagram, viral videos, satirical memes and Weibo (the biggest social network in China), all top the list of his weapons of choice. His activism includes his demand for justice when junky schools collapsed in a Sichuan earthquake killing thousands of children, his critique of the Beijing Olympics, which he dubbed "propaganda," his comment on "Internet freedom" and the numerous photos of his middle finger directed at the Chinese government.

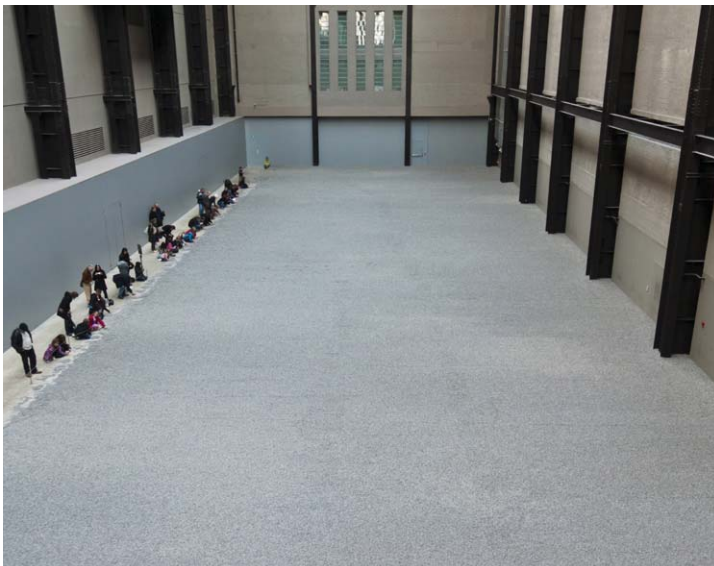
The revolution, according to Weiwei, can be lit any moment when you touch the keyboard. And this is exactly where he finds the source of his power. For him, the very idea that a nation would shut down an Internet site because he was having too much fun is powerful; this ultimately led to his arrest in 2011. "Jail didn't change me in principle, but changed the way I behave," says Weiwei. "Jail is like being dropped into the bottom of the ocean. When you cannot hear your voice, there's an illusion that you don't have your voice."

Some may say that the 20th Century was shaped by America, it did after all produce artists like Andy Warhol. But as we venture deeper into the "Chinese Century" it is clear that activism, heavily politically charged, is where the art world will find itself again. "Warhol is probably jealous that he's not here right now," added Weiwei. ●

For more on this amazing artist visit his social media pages:

  @aiww

04



05



03

S.A.C.R.E.D. 2011-2013
Six-part work composed of
Supper, Accusers, Cleansing,
Ritual, Entropy, Doubt

04

Sunflower Seeds –
The Unilever Series,
Tate Modern, London 2010
Eight million porcelain
sunflower seeds covered
the floor of Tate Modern's
Turbine Hall

05

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei
before a discussion in
the Philharmonic, Berlin.
September 2015