

# “We’re sitting at the same table”

Llucà Homs in an interview with Ai Weiwei

Our conversation takes place in Ai Weiwei’s studio, located on the outskirts of Beijing, at the end of a hot September, just weeks before the inauguration of the exhibition at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge in Barcelona. My first impression when the taxi driver drops me off at the familiar 258 FAKE, in the neighbourhood of Caochangdi, which he built for himself, is that of having been here many times before. In fact, it’s only my second time there but I’ve seen the brick wall and the blue door so many times in the pictures that he puts on social media, as well as the documentaries that have left a detailed record of everything that goes on along this street, that I have a certain feeling of *déjà vu*. At 10 a.m. I get out of the car and note straight away the surveillance cameras that monitor his every move are still positioned under the red lantern that he hung up some time ago. It is a very clear demonstration of how well the government and the dissident know each other, as well as how certain “rules” of the game are played.



And, the bicycle with its bouquet of flowers is still there, solitary, aloof, as though aware that it’s accomplishing its mission. That day the bouquet was spectacular, the orange lilies and roses and some lilac coloured flowers I didn’t recognize accentuated against their green background. What a lovely method of making a stand against the authorities. What a poetic way of stating, day after day, his objection to a regime that does not allow him to leave his country, China. Activism in its purest form on the social media, *#flowersforfreedom*, has led him to receive thousands of pictures of flowers from all over the world, joining his cause.



As I cross the threshold I am met with another powerful image: the famous *F.U.C.K.* in large neon letters that occupies the whole wall inside the courtyard. It is a clear statement of his dissatisfaction with the system, and a protest against misused power wherever and by whom it happens to be. There is an aura of peace and calm that pervades the inner courtyard. A small bamboo forest, on the ground some large Chinese vases and several strange sphinxes with goats' heads remind me that I'm in Asia. I can also see rusted fragments of *Cao*, a forceful work in iron, which he did for the exhibition in Barcelona in a white marble version.



Two assistants are working at a computer in an adjoining room. On the enormous wall is the work of the 5,196 children that died in the earthquakes of Sichuan, and which Weiwei documented in meticulous detail. At the back of the room is the long kitchen table where he, Rosa Pera, some of the team and I shared some delicious noodles on our last trip. Darryl Leung, the pleasant, well-mannered artist assistant accompanies me to the door of the studio. His many cats are beginning to gain confidence and approach us cautiously. They rule the roost here and they know it. Weiwei gives them the run of the house and they fit in perfectly with the dynamic of the studio.

Weiwei welcomes me warmly. He knows I have come a long way to see him. He's frank and says what he thinks. He's relaxed, with both hands in his pockets and doesn't seem exceedingly reserved when he speaks. He's dressed casually in cotton, with a blue shirt out over his greenish yellow trousers. We're in the same room where we met on my last trip. The impressive Chinese table with its ten chairs that Weiwei has used for working and receiving everyone who visits his studio these past fifteen years isn't there anymore. It's surprising how all visits are so well documented – around two thousand. They are one of the pieces shown at the exhibition in La Virreina. I settle myself at the new table, which



is much smaller and plainer. Instead of chairs there are some stools, which remind me of the 886 that he used in *Bang*, his extraordinary installation that I saw at the last Biennale in Venice. He invites me to take a seat. While I prepare my notes and set up the recorder, I am served the customary glass of tea. Weiwei goes in and out of the room a couple of times. He takes a long shot photo of me sitting at the table, which I will see a few hours later on his Instagram page. Ai Weiwei sits down slowly and we start talking. We talk in English, which he learned during the twelve years he lived in New York.

Llucà Homs (LH): Many artists are daunted by the idea of talking about your work, so I'm very grateful to you for letting me have this conversation with you. As you know, the La Virreina Centre de la Imatge is a center devoted to the image and one of its main

objectives is to be at the center of social debate. That aspect is very important to us. Your work is perfectly suited to that objective, as it deals with issues like identity, freedom, activism, dissidence, individual resistance, the role played by the image in building reality, tension between tradition and modernity, as well as many others. You are able to work both inside and outside the mainstream field of art. And you can create several artistic languages at once, you're a man with many talents: you're an artist, a poet, an architect, a designer, a commissioner, a collector, a planner, or an urban blogger. The dimension of your work is highly complex and that's what makes you so unique and difficult to understand at first glance or after just one conversation.

My aim is to get a vision of your work as a whole, a panoramic view of all the aspects related to the exhibition at La Virreina. I want to put your Barcelona project in context, the pieces you have decided to exhibit and discover the main ideas behind the exhibition. We will go into certain pieces in greater detail, especially the one the exhibition takes its title from, *On the Table. Ai Weiwei*, and we'll also talk about the social and political context in which the pieces were created, your role as an activist and your relationship with other prominent figures of the Chinese dissident movement. It will be interesting to analyze the tools you use to spread your message on the internet and elsewhere and, to end the interview I'd like to talk about what is happening in Barcelona and Catalonia at this moment, and how your work can be reinterpreted in the current climate. And, of course, any other issue you might want to discuss.



The exhibition at La Virreina is a retrospective view of your work. It includes over forty works, among which are some of your most outstanding pieces, as well as some of your older or less known work, and even some pieces that have never been exhibited before. What is the idea behind this exhibition?

Ai Weiwei (AW): In all our projects we think about what makes this exhibition unique and different from the others. We emphasize on the specific circumstance and the relationship with our work and our public. As artists these are our main concerns. I've been working on that since

the beginning, at the end of the seventies, as the representative of the first generation of the contemporary Chinese movement, continuing throughout my time in New York, where I stayed for twelve years before I returned. In the first years I didn't have the chance to devote myself to art full time. It wasn't until 2004 when I did my first exhibition in Switzerland and in 2005 they introduced me to the internet. Since then my work has been involved with many different practices in the field of art. At first I investigated in antiquities, using my knowledge of art history, quality, and methods to study the historic use of stones, bronze, wood, and fabric. With the internet, I begin to focus on multimedia

writing, photography, videos and communication in order to establish my position and my views. On a daily basis, I reflect on what is happening, give direct opinions and participate in debates. The practice made me become socially active and helped me organize movements that act towards my concerns, my situation and what happened to me, all in the context of what happened in China. It caused me a lot of problems: police violence, secret arrest and false accusations. I'm still under surveillance to this day. That is the story of what I've been doing and how I wanted to offer a work to a public that hasn't shared exactly the same baggage or concerns.

LH: To what extent did the building at La Virreina, which is an XVIII palace, affect your choice of works?

AW: La Virreina is an exceptional venue; we made sure that we prepare an exhibition that has beautiful proportions. The rooms are smaller than in other exhibitions that we have worked on, but that translates into a much more pleasant and intimate dimension. We strive for a clear language that the public can understand easily. The exhibition itself is a piece of art and it is a part of the process. It should never be separated from our daily exertions. That's the only way for the exhibition to justify itself and become interesting.

LH: Over the course of your extensive career, from the beginning with *New York Photographs* to your most recent work, *Cao*, how have you evolved as an artist? Has your creative process changed over the years?

AW: I think my true breakthrough came with Marcel Duchamp, when he refers to everything as *readymade*. He even said that an oil painting, like that of Van Gogh or Rembrandt, was also *readymade* because the tubes of paint were pre-made. As a farmer, first you have to cultivate the plants, then later wash them and finally cook them before the vegetables are ready to eat. Now you can also buy them at the supermarket and even cook them at a restaurant. While what's really important is determined by society, the true sense of its construction requires a different knowledge base and form of communication. It requires different kinds of talents.



LH: *Cao* is an impressive installation made with marble, in the form of grass, that you specially created for this exhibition. What does this piece mean?

AW: It's a new piece that we are still creating. What you see exhibited is only a part of this piece, the rest is still in the workshop. It's supposed to be a large field. In Chinese, "cao" means many things: grass, effort, patio, horse... On the internet, people also use the term "cao." And here, where we currently are, this town is called Caochangdi, or "field of grass." It's

a very interesting play on words for us, as we make colossal pieces based on something that normally does not usually grasp people's attention. This piece is difficult to create

due to its particularities: it has to be carved, polished, and sculpted by hand. It is very fragile. We try to have new pieces and unprecedented, fresh, recently-made pieces for every exhibition. It's more interesting this way.

LH: The title of the exhibition is *On the Table. Ai Weiwei*. In addition to its figurative meanings, it literally "puts everything on the table," showing your hand of cards: the work table and ten chairs from your studio are part of the exhibition.

AW: It's a kind gesture, to say that "we are all at the same table." This table has been with us for the past 15 years. Everything happens at this table: our discussions, interviews, ideas, meetings, sometimes arguments. Overall, we've enjoyed many great moments. It's a way of inviting the people of Barcelona to be a part of it. We perceive our work as a process, and the making of a piece of art is a process that continues to grow. It's like a plant under the sun of Barcelona, getting stronger with the wind, the air, and the presence of the people who approach it. It is good to have a connection with reality, to travel through someone's inner world. It is a religious experience. All religions seem to have artifacts that usually belong to a temple, or another place, that invoke a sense of awareness. This is another way of saying, also with a sense of humor, that the exhibit is "on the table," implying that we are showing things candidly as they are: the way we designed the exhibition in these rooms, where we build the display cabinets to exhibit our small objects. It's the first time we've done something like this: the object or artifact is in the middle, surrounded by a 2-dimensional image on the wall, relating to that time period. I think it works well with the architecture and conditions of this location.

LH: The transformation of a utilitarian object into a piece of art, a contemporary version of *readymade*, is a very common practice in your work, but it usually involves some sort of transformation of the object. Nevertheless, in *Untitled (Ai Weiwei Studio Table)* and *Untitled (Ai Weiwei Studio Chairs, Qing Dynasty, Qianlong)*, the table and chairs remain in their original states, and the only thing that changes is their location. When does the table become a piece of art, an installation with its own title?

AW: It becomes art when the time and place change and the audience is different. To me, it is important; it says everything.

LH: The idea of the table as a meeting place, for encounters, for the exchange of ideas and conversations brings me to your use of social networks, especially Twitter, as a virtual roundtable. To what degree is it important for your work to have this virtual exchange and dialogue with your followers?

AW: I think a piece of art is always the result of an intellectual debate, but it only works when we initiate this kind of debate or express a mindset through our perception or ideas of reality. It works in both directions.

LH: So, do the conversations with your followers on social networks have an impact on your work? Do you use social networks as a source of inspiration?



AW: Social networks nowadays allow us to be informed and be transparent on many levels. We would never have achieved this without the internet. We are living in a very different era, a very different kind of society, in which these networks continuously influence our lives, and as they influence our lives, they eventually influence our art.

LH: A few years ago, the “Arab Spring” demonstrated the power of Twitter and, in your case, as a political activist, it gives you huge power to share your message. How does this social network further your discourse as an artist?



AW: Without social networks, we might not have had this interview. My situation is an example of what is happening in society. As an artist, I hold many more exhibitions in museums than in galleries. My career in exhibitions coincided with the development

of the internet as a public platform, so I never had to struggle with the determinants of the private market. This clearly shows how my situation has expanded through internet relationships. That doesn't necessarily indicate whether this is good or bad, just that it's the nature of the situation.

LH: Have you ever immediately deleted any of your tweets, or, like the title of the documentary: *Never Sorry*, are you never sorry?

AW: I can say I never am. I have posted hundreds of thousands of tweets, but I have never deleted any because I think that even a mistake should be recorded, it's not the end of the world. When people really get to know you, they can make their own judgments. Sometimes you post something, or you re-tweet an image, and only later you realize that the origin of the image presents an objective problem. You always have to be aware that you may lead people to misunderstandings.

LH: Moving away from the virtual and getting back to the physical, some of your installations are extremely elaborate. They are characterized by extreme skill and the unconventional use of traditional materials. To what degree is the formal execution of these pieces important to you?

AW: Precision is important when it comes to the execution of a concept, because the concept can be shared. An artisan's precision and performance provides us a greater understanding on different levels and transforms the piece into a work of art.

LH: Within the context in which these pieces were originally produced, in your country, China, considering the current difficult political and social conditions, can you identify any key moments when the government began to perceive you as a so-called “dissident?”

AW: It is very difficult to pinpoint a specific moment because my government will not admit any dissent in society. On one occasion, to answer a reporter’s question about a dissident such as myself, the government spokesperson responded that there are no dissidents in our society, only criminals. This society still believes that there should only be one unique idea. It is intellectually shocking, because a society can only be alive and healthy if there are differences. Without them, it is impossible to make progress or face new challenges.

LH: How do you value your contribution to the fight for freedom of expression and human rights in China?

AW: I think that my efforts are very evident, considering the significant restrictions. They are validated for the difficulties involved. If my efforts weren’t substantial, they wouldn’t have led to the seriousness of my current situation.

LH: How has your activism helped other people in your situation?

AW: What I do only makes sense if young people can see an example of someone who speaks and acts differently. While helping on an individual level, the act is simultaneously implicating a collective support for ideas. When I express an opinion, I am not only sharing my own.

LH: Allow me to ask you a personal question. The poster for the exhibition in Barcelona that can be downloaded directly from your Instagram account has a picture of your son.

AW: Yes, I’m happy they chose that shot; it’s really pretty.

LH: Has fatherhood changed anything about your role as an activist?

AW: Frankly, yes, in two ways. Firstly, as a father, I have become more responsible. I think my actions should liberate us to share our ideas and efforts with future generations and to provide better conditions for all children, not only my own. Secondly: I feel selfish. When I was arrested, I was so worried, thinking, “I’m being too selfish. By trying to explain my thoughts, I’ve put my family at risk.” So I’ve become more careful, without giving up the dissent.



LH: With regard to other forms of activism, to what extent do you believe that art can be a

powerful tool to combat social injustice and censorship?

AW: In terms of human emotions and thinking, I think that art has the highest power. Sometimes it is stronger than rationality because rationality comes from sensibility and emotions. When your job is to examine these aspects, it can be very powerful. It can also change a person, and the more it changes a person the more it can change society.

LH: Talking about different forms of activism, you are surrounded by people who openly and actively struggle for freedom of expression, each using their own tools. I am referring to Hu Jia, Tsering Woeser, Wang Lixiong and Ilham Tohti, who appear in this photograph with you after Woeser received the prize at the United States embassy in China last May.



AW: It is unfortunate that only five or six people appeared in this photo. Five million or five hundred thousand should be in it. The photo represents an idea shared among scholars, writers, poets, activists and artists: to build a stronger society with a more solid intellectual base. None of these people are professional politicians. However, some of them are either under arrest, sentenced to jail, or imprisoned for life. None of them can travel. Therefore, the question is: How can the nation constantly persecute people who are intellectually seeking a better future for the society? They are brave, sincere and honest. How can a nation afford this constant repression?

LH: One of the people missing in this photograph is the Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, who was in prison since 2009. Last year at Montjuïc Castle in Barcelona, we showed 26 photographs by his wife, Liu Xia, in the exhibition entitled *The Silent Force?* What does this title evoke to you?

AW: I personally prefer *resounding force* over *silent force*. We are alive and we have to shout it out. I try to avoid becoming a silent force.

LH: Many of your works are translations of noise, of intensity, created to have an immediate, striking visual impact. Do you think that the message is understood more clearly this way?

AW: I don't think that they are noisy; they could be noisier, you know? I am very restricted in my situation, and if this is noisy, I think that they speak very loudly. The message is not necessarily clearer just because it is louder. But as a contemporary person, the desire to express myself is very strong, as it is with rock 'n' roll, with films, with all sorts of expression. It is both a challenge and a competition to reach out and communicate. My clamor always has a message; it comes from the many silenced people who do not have the chance to express themselves. That's why I say that my noise is not enough. I cannot be at peace if even one voice remains unheard. I'm like a messenger of those voices.





LH: Talking about photography as a medium, you seem to have an almost compulsive way of using photography to document the things happening around you. Sometimes it seems as though you view a photograph as proof, as evidence. I am thinking about photographs like the one in the lift in Chengdu when you were arrested. Do you think that photography is capable of serving as proof?

AW: All photographs are proof in and of themselves since they record a piece of reality. Photography is not reality, but it always suggests a reality. Sometimes it is more, sometimes less, or sometimes it is misinterpreted, but it is never reality. A photograph is only the reality of itself. This is a fascinating philosophical idea: it is like seeing your image in a mirror, capturing the image of a specific moment, cutting a piece out of reality. It is truly meaningful and charming.

LH: Do you view photography as an essential weapon in your struggle for freedom of expression, especially in the context of the social media, or are your photographs more like a complement to your works, a way of attracting attention to their message?

AW: Yes, any piece of photography shows some kind of intention, but a photograph can be more than an intention. Therefore, photography is useful for social change because we can record many images. We forget many historical details, but photography tells us about history and sheds light on some of the details. For this reason, photography can be used as proof of history, and it is important for social change.

LH: Let's talk about the importance of humor in your work. Many of your works make it clear that you have a great sense of humor, and sometimes your attitude shows this. Is it easier to talk about serious issues if you do so with irony?

AW: Humor reaches where we cannot express our ideas directly or frankly. It brings our consciousness to another level so we can deal with the situation. It is a very interesting reaction, and it doesn't always work, but sometimes it's the only way when our strength and capacity for action are limited. However, even with these restrictions, our ingeniousness and will can take us further. When we are overwhelmed by a situation, humor is very necessary.

LH: Allow me to compare East and West. In recent years you have become one of the most influential and visible Chinese artists in the Western world. Your work has had an enormous impact on how the West perceives modern China. How do you feel about this? Do you think that you have a greater responsibility since you are such a famous figure?

AW: The fact that people use me as an element for understanding a very complex society reveals that they are striving for a symbol that can simplify and relate to the society's current conditions. I'm simply expressing my own thoughts, and it's misguided to think

that I reflect China. At the same time, if there is no other voice, then my voice is heard more clearly. This is my way of telling other artists that they should try to find their own voice, their own way and their own style. Afterwards, they might be recognized.

LH: In Europe, part of the population of Scotland and Catalonia is calling for independence through voting. Do you think that in a democracy one can choose one's own future through voting and the law?

AW: For a modern society with contemporary thinking, 'one person, one vote' is the backbone of our society. It can often become problematic, but it is the only way for people to shoulder this responsibility. If a person does not recognize this kind of responsibility, then the society has no legitimacy.

LH: How can people who want independence from the State in which they live interpret this exhibition?

AW: People should interpret my exhibition as seeing a person who is truly trying to attain the identity and dignity of an individual, and with this dignity and identity, to help human society as a whole to become more dignified. Anything that ignores the past is shameful. We have to shed light on political consciousness and make people understand that they have the right to decide their fate.

LH: One of your online projects that has left the greatest impact on me is the one which everyday on Twitter, you post the birthdays of the children who died in the Sichuan earthquake. Likewise, you've been tweeting everyday: "From 30th November 2013, I will place a bouquet of fresh flowers in the basket of a bicycle outside No. 258 Caochangdi studio every morning until I regain the right to travel freely". I understand that the public's participation is crucial, since they send their images of flowers to place symbolically in the basket of the bicycle.



AW: First, it was a form of peaceful resistance for my situation. I think that you can reach the goal of peaceful resistance if you repeat what is on your mind, almost like a Buddhist mantra. It's not only for people to hear you but also to ensure that it is not being forgotten. Doing this continually can become a habit for me and for society, and all of this is possible because I posted it on the Internet. It is a very simple protest, but this action has led to an enormous response from the public. Everyday I see thousands of people from all over the world who have posted flowers. You can check it out in [#flowersforfreedom](#). It is a very gratifying action. I truly feel that if an idea cannot stand up to a challenge, it cannot survive a form, and that message dies. Any real message with real content should have the right to survive.

LH: One last question: I want to ask you about the speculation on your possible move to

Europe, especially to Berlin.

AW: Well, I always make plans, you know, like a studio or something, but I never know when I will be able to travel. It's not something I have the power to decide, you know?

LH: Thank you once again for this conversation.

AW: No, thank you.

The conversation lasted one hour, as I had requested. At some point he became inspired, because he grabbed his iPhone and posted a few images on Instagram. Only when I showed him the picture of the Chinese dissidents at the United States embassy did he appear to become absorbed, as he stared at it for a long time.

We said our goodbyes around lunchtime, and as I left I saw the appointments that awaited him. At that point I became fully aware of what I had already seen in the documentaries or social media. Weiwei cannot leave the country, but "the world" literally parades before him.

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