



NO
PLACE
LIKE

BY JAY CHESHES

HOME

DISPLACED PERSON

Ai's relocation to Portugal was largely practical, offering affordable land and access to European residency and travel visas. Visiting for the first time, he says, "There was no traffic on the road, a continuous empty landscape, just trees and grass. I thought it would be a nice place to settle."

NOW IN SELF-IMPOSED EXILE IN **PORTUGAL**, ARTIST **AI WEIWEI** IS CONSTRUCTING A MASSIVE EDIFICE THAT CAPTURES HIS **EARLIEST AMBITIONS**—AND HIS LOVE FOR **THE COUNTRY HE CAN'T RETURN TO YET CAN'T SEEM TO FORGET**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JO METSON SCOTT

“HONESTLY, I THINK IT’S A USELESS BUILDING.”

says Ai Weiwei in mid-October, talking outside his new studio, an imposing wood-framed structure nearing completion on a barren stretch of scrubbrush in the Portuguese countryside. The activist-artist has two studios already, in Beijing and Berlin. “I don’t need another studio,” he says. Nonetheless he’s erecting another one above his home here, about an hour southeast of Lisbon in the rural Alentejo region—some 30,000 square feet of open-plan space around a central courtyard.

Beneath a construction crane, 100 solid wood pillars rise to meet a complex lattice of wood beams overhead, each piece notched into place without nails or adhesives, following the ancient rules of traditional Chinese joinery. The building, designed by Ai, isn’t

architecture in the contemporary sense but something more essential. “In China nobody is called an architect; we call it ‘big cabinetry’ or ‘small cabinetry,’” he says. “Big cabinetry, you build houses; small cabinetry, you make furniture—same method. It’s an old type of language . . . it’s puzzled together. For me it’s more like a game.”

Before moving to Portugal three years ago, Ai, 66, China’s most famous dissident artist—now unable to return to his homeland, lest authorities decide to detain him—had been living in Berlin, where he arrived in 2015 after he was released from house arrest in Beijing and the Communist regime returned his confiscated passport. Now he’s traded the hustle of the big city for the idyllic



TROUBLE MAKER

Among the artist’s most controversial works are those that alter or even destroy revered cultural artifacts. The triptych *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* shows the artist smashing a 2,000-year-old sacred relic. To make *Colored Vases*, Ai dipped Neolithic jars in commercial paints.



MEMORY KEEPER

Ai’s new 30,000-square-foot studio, on a perch close to his home, is a near copy of his studio in Shanghai, which Chinese authorities demolished upon its completion. Based on traditional Chinese architecture, the frame is made from timber, the roof from clay tiles, and the floor from stone.

COMFORT SEEKER

The courtyard of Ai's house, which had been the vacation home of a wealthy Portuguese lawyer and his family. Ai bought the home with the furniture still inside. "Its comfortable," he says. "The architecture is 20 years old, maybe 23 years old. It looks classic but it's not. It's well built."



RESTLESS SOUL

Among the few changes Ai made to the home were installing a table, chairs and potted plants in the courtyard. He still sleeps beneath artworks the lawyer hung above the bed. "I never met him—very strange," Ai says. "If I travel and go to a lot of hotels, it's just like that."

calm of this sparsely populated corner of Portugal. "I used to enjoy the fast. Now I enjoy the slowness," he says of the change in scenery and lifestyle.

Even in isolation, though, as an icon of free speech and an outspoken presence on social media whose pronouncements sometimes rankle more than Chinese authorities, Ai's life still moves at a ferocious pace. Last fall, as war consumed Israel and the Gaza Strip, Ai weighed in on the conflict on X (formerly Twitter), calling out what he saw as the influence of American Jews on U.S. support

for Israel, and igniting a controversy that quickly rippled around the world. "Financially, culturally, and in terms of media influence, the Jewish community has had a significant presence in the United States," Ai wrote, in part, in a post he later deleted. "The annual \$3bn aid package to Israel has, for decades, been touted as one of the most valuable investments the United States has ever made. This partnership is often described as one of shared destiny." In response, Ai's London gallery, Lisson, indefinitely postponed a new exhibition of his work that had been set to open in November.

Over the years Ai has been a critic of Israeli government policy toward Palestinians, of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, of the U.K.'s Brexit vote, of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. His criticism of German society after he left Berlin—describing a pervasive "authoritarian mindset" and a distaste for foreigners, and going so far as to tell the *Guardian* "Nazism perfectly exists in German life today"—led to a fierce backlash in the German press. "When I start to criticize German society, they have a sense of loss or betrayal, 'We saved this guy's life, there's no gratitude,'" says Ai, of his comments about a country that gave him asylum. Still, he insists, he has "no regrets."

Portugal has offered something of a sanctuary from the spotlight, even as he continues to share his unrestrained thoughts in interviews and posts on Instagram and X. He put an offer on his 40-acre property there, a lawyer's former vacation home, after seeing it once, on his first trip to the country in

2019. "It was very random, nothing planned," he says. "I didn't even study the map to see where it was."

He was drawn to Portugal by the plentiful sunshine, good real estate values and a "golden visa" program offering expats willing to invest in the country easy access to European Union residency. He took over the low-slung house with the furniture in it. The last owners, a couple with four kids, even left him their big white Alentejo mastiff, a local breed. "That dog was so sad," he says.

Ai, who shares the property with three assistants, spent periods of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic here, living among the artifacts of someone else's life. "It was really interesting to see that he appropriated the circumstances of the house," says Philippe Vergne, director of the Serralves Museum in Porto, Portugal, who visited Ai shortly after he moved in. "I see a parallel with the way he approaches art, by occupying circumstances, moving in, like the hermit crabs who occupy these empty shells."

There's a tennis court Ai never uses and a pool he never swims in—though he enjoys watching the sunlight reflecting off its surface. "You need some water for good feng shui," he says. He brought one cat from Berlin and adopted another, added potted plants and a decorative tub filled with koi fish to the courtyard and a big birdcage with a pair of turacos (exotic birds from Africa) to the veranda out back. "We needed some life here," he says.

With almost no art at all in the house, there's not much to indicate one of the world's highest-profile artists lives here. A single recognizable Ai creation hangs in a hallway, a rendition in Lego—a favored medium these days—of an iconic early work, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. The original, a triptych of photographs capturing Ai smashing a 2,000-year-old Chinese relic, referenced the destruction of Chinese heritage during Mao's Cultural Revolution. (Some observers pointed out that in creating the work Ai himself was destroying—some said desecrating—that same cultural heritage.) He hung the Lego version, he told me, so TV crews who come to visit him in Portugal will have something to shoot. "I don't like to look at my artwork."

AI BEGAN MAPPING OUT plans for his Portugal studio a few months after he arrived, with no clear idea of how he might use the space. Eventually, he says, he might shift some of the fabrication that now happens in Berlin and Beijing to Portugal. But the new building is also an end unto itself. "I said, 'Maybe I should do something here to make me feel some sense of belonging.'"

Ai is a polymath and an autodidact, a conceptual artist, documentary filmmaker and architect—he

helped design the Bird's Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics despite having no formal design training. "My work you cannot really define as architecture, sculpture or design," he says. "I work in between, in everything." He creates beautiful things that double as big activist statements, often overcoming huge logistical hurdles along the way.

"He's a tireless figure, has got extraordinary energy, extraordinary ability to work on many different levels," says Greg Hilty, partner and curatorial director at Lisson. "I think he can do that because he approaches everything in a rational, intuitive way."

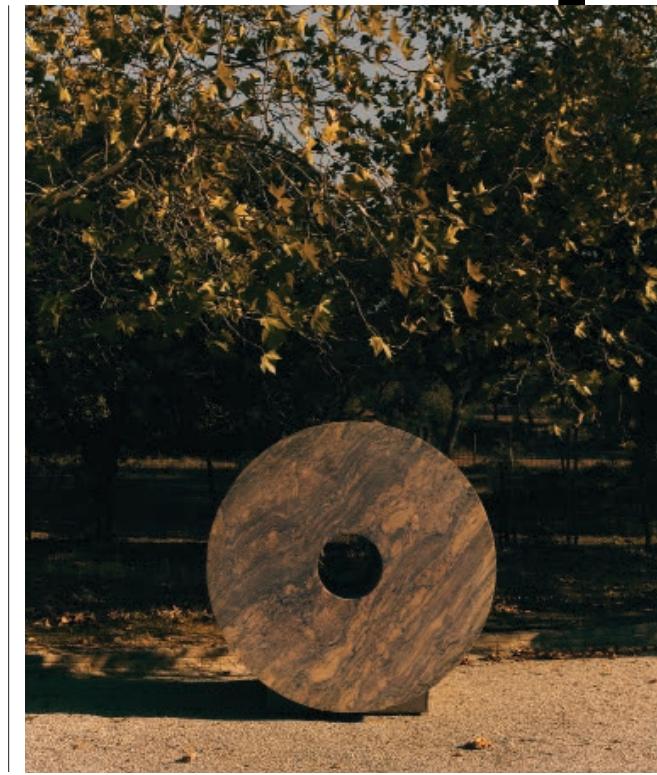
In 2010, Ai filled the Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern museum with 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds, hand-crafted by 1,600 Chinese artisans—a commentary on global trade and the ubiquity of "made in China" exports. He tackled the global refugee crisis with his 2019 piece *Life Vest Snake*, weaving an enormous serpent from life vests recovered from the Greek isle of Lesbos.

In 2021, he presented an outdoor sculpture, cast in iron from a mold made from a 100-foot-tall tree in the Brazilian rainforest, as part of an exhibition focused on deforestation shown at the Serralves museum. Its

"I CANNOT JUST CASUALLY MAKE SOMETHING. IT HAS TO STAY WITH ME. SOMETIMES FOR YEARS I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO."

CONCEPTUAL ARTIST

A sculpture called *Marble Toilet Paper* near the entrance to Ai's property. The artist designed the work during the Coronavirus pandemic, a commentary on the way ordinary objects can transform into precious items during a crisis. Another such work was *Marble Takeout Box*.



AMATEUR ARCHITECT

The new studio differs from its Shanghai forebear in one respect—Ai altered the axis of the gable roof, creating substantial building challenges and, for Ai, exemplifying a “subversive” aesthetic quality he seems to relish. “It’s not supposed to work that way,” he says.



director, Vergne, had originally approached Ai about organizing a show on his architectural work. “I liked the way he turned my question around,” says Vergne. “When I said, ‘I want to do something about your architecture.’ He sent me a picture of this tree and he told me, ‘This is architecture, this is a temple.’”

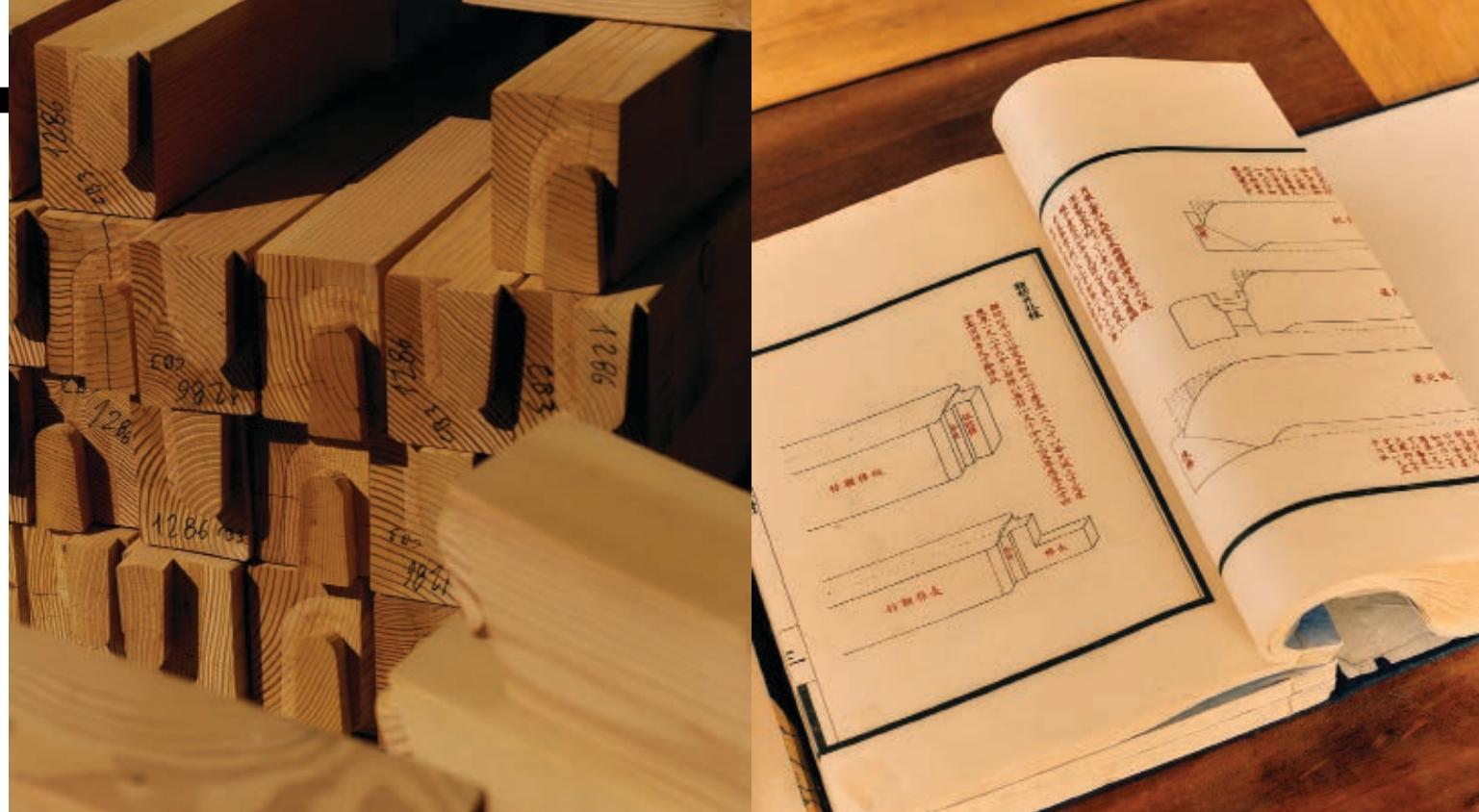
Ai transforms ready-made objects from the ancient and modern worlds into complex works of art, carpeting museum floors with thousands of Stone Age tools or porcelain teapot spouts, and welding together bicycle frames to create towering sculptures. A few years ago, he acquired a huge trove of buttons destined for a landfill from a defunct British factory—“30 tons of buttons,” he says, “covering the whole history of buttons.” For the longest time he had no idea how he’d use them. Now he’s considering a new body of work, focused on the Industrial Revolution. “I cannot just casually make something,” he says. “It has to stay with me. Sometimes for years I don’t know what to do.”

In 2014, he unveiled some of his first Lego works, portraits of 176 prisoners of conscience and human-rights advocates from around the world, among them heroic figures like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr. and more controversial ones such as Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. The portraits, based on blown-up photographs, matched each pixel to a color in the regular Lego spectrum. “It’s only 40 colors,” Ai says. “Can you believe it makes a very sophisticated image?”

First shown on Alcatraz, the former prison in San Francisco Bay, the works are now in the permanent collection of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. “When you see the works, the portraits, they appear to be pixelated, so it is referring, I think, to this moment we live in, where everything is rendered through this digital format,” says Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu.

Ai has since gone on to produce large Lego versions of many masterworks of Western art. His take on Monet’s *Water Lilies*, shown at the Design Museum in London last spring, is constructed from 650,000 Lego bricks. In other new pieces, he’s been adding his own mischievous touch to iconic works. He inserted the Bird’s Nest stadium into a new Lego version of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and popped his new studio in Portugal into a Lego rendition of *Christina’s World* by Andrew Wyeth. “For me it’s the best media to have my funny attitude toward art,” he says of his Lego fixation.

Ai has always been meticulous about documenting on film and video both his works in progress and the world around him. That led, eventually, to a thriving sideline making documentaries. *Human Flow*, a 2017 feature on the global refugee crisis, took a year to shoot in 23 countries. During the pandemic, he oversaw three more searing documentaries,



RULE BREAKER

The building’s frame will be made entirely from timber according to ancient joinery techniques that eschew nails, glue or other hardware. But because the roof is joggled off its axis, Ai says, the building’s unique form “has never been seen in Chinese architectural tradition.”

dispatching crews to cover the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China; the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong; and the plight of Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar for Bangladesh. He’s in post-production, now, on a new globe-spanning film, *Animality*, produced in collaboration with an animal-welfare nonprofit called Four Paws International, which features footage of animal abuse. “Not a pleasant film to watch,” he says. “But I think necessary.”

AI’S INTEREST IN architecture began with a childhood fascination with the materials and logic of the built world surrounding him. He learned to make bricks when he was just 10 years old, enlisted in a communal work detail in his small village. In the hardship he found a sense of accomplishment. “I did all kinds of hard labor when I was small,” he says. “I enjoyed all of it because it was a challenge. You cannot handle it, you cannot manage it, but once you manage it it’s such a joy.”

It was a punishing upbringing, as Ai recounts in his memoir, *1,000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, published in 2021. He will release another memoir, *Zodiac*, in graphic novel form, this January, with illustrations by the Italian political cartoonist Gianluca Costantini. The book weaves the artist’s personal story with that of his father, Ai Qing, one of China’s most famous poets.

Ai Qing became a literary hero during the Communist revolution following World War II, embraced by Mao Zedong and his followers as they fought to take

over the country. His fortunes changed dramatically during the Cultural Revolution, the great purge of intellectuals in the 1960s that began a few years after Ai Weiwei’s birth. Denounced as a rightist, the poet was exiled with his family—Ai Weiwei is one of four siblings—to a remote corner of China on the edge of the Gobi Desert, where they lived as social pariahs. For many years their home was a literal hole in the ground. “I was growing up in silence—we didn’t even have birds where we were,” says Ai Weiwei. “Music? We didn’t even have electricity. We didn’t even have water . . . I can’t even imagine how we survived.”

Ai Qing’s public rehabilitation followed Mao’s death in 1976. Today he is considered a literary giant, a sort of Chinese Walt Whitman, required reading in public school curriculums. Nobody talks about the long period when his family’s life was a living hell. “They just skip that 20 years like it didn’t happen.”

Though his father, who died in 1996, had been an accomplished painter as well as a poet, Ai says he never once considered the possibility of an art career as a child. “When we grew up, we called artists ‘art workers,’ purely belonging to the propaganda department. There were no independent artists, nothing independent,” he says. “There is no individual.”

When Ai finished high school, the academics and intellectuals who had been considered enemies of the state were beginning to get their lives back. The country’s universities, which had been shuttered for years, were starting to reopen. Ai was offered a coveted spot at the Beijing Film Academy, alongside other children of leading cultural figures. He didn’t stick around long, dropping out after two years.

RULE FOLLOWER

An antique copy of a manual known as *The Way to Build*, originally composed more than 1,000 years ago. The book lays out in detail how to construct a building such as Ai’s studio. “It’s like an encyclopedia,” Ai says. “China’s culture used to be so complete and so developed.”

“I felt like I didn’t fit in. They were a little privileged,” Ai says of his classmates, many of whom went on to become celebrated filmmakers. “I didn’t feel that way.”

In 1981, when he was 23, Ai followed a girlfriend to Pennsylvania, and then across the country to Berkeley, California, where he spent a year studying English. He arrived in New York in 1983, moving into a tiny apartment in the East Village. He took on odd jobs to survive, working in a framing shop, sketching portraits on the street. And he discovered blackjack, an enduring obsession, making frequent trips to Atlantic City. “Probably until now Atlantic City is the city I visited most in the world,” he says.

He took art classes at Parsons and the Art Students League and was introduced to the work of Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp, two important influences. In the mid-1980s he made his own off-kilter portraits of Mao, among his last canvases before he abandoned painting entirely in favor of conceptual art. He also had an active social life, immersed in the bohemian milieu of the East Village—his circle of friends included the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg—capturing everything with the camera that was often slung around his neck. “I had this idea that my life was almost meaningless at that time, but the photos have some meaning,” he says.

After learning his father was gravely ill, in 1993 Ai returned to China for the first time in more than a decade, moving back in with his parents in Beijing. “I felt strange at home. I became a foreigner again.” He kept himself busy visiting flea markets and antique stores, amassing the beginning of what would eventually grow into a vast collection of dusty relics. “I didn’t know anything about our past, so that was a period of intensive learning about the material life in China—2,000 years ago, 3,000, 5,000 years ago,” he says of his early flea market excursions.

The original photos of Ai dropping a Han dynasty urn were shot on a whim by his younger brother in that period—it was 1995—and not printed until years

“IT ALARMS ME THAT I MAY DISAPPEAR AGAIN AND MAY NEVER HAVE THE CHANCE TO TELL THE STORY TO MY SON.”

later. “Now it’s become some kind of iconic anti-establishment image,” Ai says, “but nothing was planned.”

When his mother lost patience with him hanging around the house, he rented a piece of fallow farmland near the airport, where he began planning his first live-in studio. “She said, ‘You should move out. I’ve had enough of you,’” he says.

The Beijing studio, Ai’s first major building design—modeled partially on a New York loft—was

BY LINES

Jay Cheshes, a regular contributor to the *Wall Street Journal*, last wrote for *Smithsonian* about the artist Anish Kapoor.

Britain-based photographer Jo Metson Scott focuses on portraiture, fashion and documentary projects.

completed in just a few months in 1999. With its clean lines, high ceilings and ample skylights, it became a sensation in the Chinese press. “My building appeared in the most sophisticated architecture magazines,” he says. “They invited me to Japan and Germany as a new star of architecture. Nobody knew I’m an artist.”

The area around his studio came to be known as Beijing East Village, embodying the spirit of the New York neighborhood where Ai had first come into contact with activist artists. “He brought a lot of those ideas back to China for a slightly younger generation of impressionable artists,” says Chiu, of the Hirshhorn, who met Ai when she was a graduate student visiting Beijing in that period.

As a new art scene rose up around him, he launched his own not-for-profit gallery space and, eventually, his own restaurant. “We had to close because so many friends came and, very often, we would not let them pay,” he says.

And he began testing the limits of free speech, publishing some of China’s first underground art publications (the first, a black book with no title, was his veiled response to *Red Flag*, an official Communist party magazine) and organizing some of its

FREE SPEAKER

Ai’s high profile is inextricable from his political advocacy. His detention by Chinese authorities, in 2011, became the basis of a 2013 diorama-based installation, *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, pictured below. That year, pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong carried placards demanding his release.

ly blog. His first post, a single sentence, was published online that November: “To express yourself needs a reason; expressing yourself is the reason.” Sharing his unbridled thoughts, the blog soon attracted millions of readers. For a few years, writing became a compulsion. “I spent 95 percent of my time, energy on the blog, less than 5 percent on art,” Ai says. “I wrote a few million words.”

Though many of his peers in the art scene in Beijing were eventually arrested for producing subversive work, for a while Ai seemed to be untouchable. “I was always laughing about it, because I thought it’s very real, super real, and at the same time surreal. You want to test how far you can go.”

By 2008 Ai’s relatively privileged position in China as a critical voice with a public platform was looking increasingly tenuous. That spring, as work was nearing completion on the Bird’s Nest, which he designed in collaboration with Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, a devastating 7.9 magnitude earthquake shook Sichuan province in southwestern China. With little information about casualties coming out of the region, Ai set up a “citizen investigation team” online to gather the names of children who had gone missing after their schools collapsed, in the process calling attention to shoddy school construction. Though authorities quickly mobilized to shut him down, he would eventually publish 5,219 names—a small fraction of the more than 80,000 people estimated to have died in the quake.

In the summer of 2009, a few months after the birth of his son, Ai Lao, with filmmaker Wang Fen, Ai’s blog went dark, officially taken offline by Chinese authorities. “For four years I had talked openly about anything on the internet,” he says. “Those four years were the peak of my life, because I had a platform to organize actions online.”

Things got worse that August, when Ai was assaulted by police while visiting Sichuan province, suffering a cerebral hemorrhage after being struck in the head. He was treated for his injuries at a hospital in Germany a few weeks later, while visiting Munich

edgiest art exhibitions. “When I decided to go back to China, I asked myself one question: ‘Am I afraid to be arrested?’ And the answer was no,” he says.

In the fall of 2000 Ai rented a warehouse space in Shanghai for an exhibition showcasing other envelope-pushing Chinese artists, coinciding with the city’s third official art biennial. “They were trying to promote the city, and I had this show,” he says of the local authorities. “They were so mad. The head of the Communist Party held [the catalog] up to the Central Committee: ‘Look at what art has become.’”

Though he had never used a computer before, in 2005, at the invitation of one of China’s biggest internet portals, Ai began publishing his own dai-



LEFT: KIN CHEUNG / AP PHOTO; ALEX B. HUCKLE / GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: MADIS NISSEN / PANOS PICTURES; LENNART PREISS / AP PHOTO; COURTESY OF AI WEIWEI STUDIO

to install a museum show. The crackdowns followed him into 2011. By the start of that year the authorities were tearing down a new studio he’d just finished building in Shanghai. (Another of Ai’s studios, the second of two in Beijing, was also later destroyed.) Then, on April 3, 2011, he was arrested at the airport in Beijing while preparing to board a flight to Hong Kong, and his passport was confiscated.

Ai would spend the next 81 days in a secret detention site, interrogated constantly, watched 24/7—even while he slept. After his release, he described the experience as a “kind of mental torture.” Thinking of his son, he began writing his memoir right after his release. “Because it alarms me that I may

ISSUES MAN

Ai’s work defies easy categorization. Clockwise from top: a model of the Bird’s Nest stadium, which Ai helped design for the 2008 Olympics. *Sunflower Seeds*, an installation composed of 100 million tiny porcelain sculptures. *Pequi Tree*, cast in iron from a mold of a tree in Brazil’s rainforest.

disappear again and may never have the chance to tell the story to my son,” he says. (Lao, who is now 14, lives with his mother in Cambridge, England.)

And he began to make art referencing his months in captivity. He raged against the state in a Chinese-language rock album, *The Divine Comedy*, produced with a musician friend, Zuoxiao Zuzhou. A music video for the lead single, “Dumbass,” showcases the claustrophobic conditions of his incarceration. “People kept asking me, ‘What was it like?’” he says. “I said, I’ll make a video.” He built six hyper-realistic half-scale dioramas of the windowless space he was held in, including replicas of the guards who stood watch while he ate. Together, the life-like



COUNTRY MOUSE

For Ai, accustomed to big city life, rural Portugal has been unusually quiet, so he filled the house with pets. “We needed some life here, so we have cats and birds and fish,” he says. “The birds we bought at a local pet store. We had two, the cats got one. There’s no justice.”

scenes, encased in steel boxes, formed an installation, S.A.C.R.E.D., which debuted in Venice during the 2013 art Biennale. “That’s a point where his lived experience translated quite directly into a moving art project,” says Hilty, his London gallerist, who has worked with Ai since 2010. “It had this almost timeless sense of suffering and existential dread.”

Unable to leave China, Ai oversaw the Venice installation remotely. He wouldn’t get his passport back until two years later. When he did, he left—possibly for good.

LAST FALL, in the wake of his London gallery’s postponement of his show, Ai released a broad statement in defense of unpopular speech. “If free expression is limited to the same kind of opinions, it becomes an imprisonment of expression,” the statement read, in part. “Freedom of speech is about different voices, voices different from ours.”

Ai’s new studio in Portugal is an homage of sorts to a less divisive and perhaps more hopeful time in his life. The design mimics his destroyed Shanghai studio—before he fell decisively out of favor with the Chinese authorities, before the head injury, before exile. While the basic form and proportions are identical, he swapped in wood for concrete and made the new building much larger.

The old-fashioned timber construction is a nod to another Ai creation, an installation first shown in Beijing shortly before he left China in 2015. From near his father’s hometown in southern China, he had purchased the ruins of the 400-year-old Wang Family Ancestral Hall, built in the Ming dynasty as a place for ancestor worship. After transporting the wooden structure, piece by piece, to Beijing, he rebuilt it inside two connected art galleries within an industrial space—one, Tang Contemporary Art, Chinese-owned; the other, Galleria Continua, Italian. “They both wanted to give me a show,” says Ai. “I said it would be the best situation to put one work in two galleries.” Showing half of the building in each gallery, he repurposed the historic site into a conceptual work of art, adding his own interventions in and around it.

Ai remained under constant surveillance, right until he finally left China. “The police never left the gallery, but they didn’t close the exhibition, they didn’t censor the exhibition,” says Maurizio Rigillo, a partner in Galleria Continua, which has had a presence in Beijing since 2004, and which will host a solo Ai show at its flagship space in San Gimignano, Italy, this spring.

The dismantled building, which was later shown in Mexico City and Vienna, is now boxed up on Ai’s property in Portugal, each of its 1,500 pieces matched to a numbered drawing like parts in an

Erector Set. “If you don’t make clear drawings, you cannot build it back,” he says.

The traditional building techniques behind the Wang Family Ancestral Hall and Ai’s studio in Portugal are described in excruciating detail in a historic manual, of sorts—the title loosely translates as *The Way to Build*—originally published during the Song dynasty a millennium ago. A hand-printed 1925 edition of the book in Ai’s personal collection features the sorts of visual diagrams that might be included in an Ikea furniture kit. “The interesting thing is everything has a name, every piece defined, what should be, proportionally,” Ai says, leafing through the book. “You can build the perfect house. Of course, my design is much simpler, not so complicated.”

To the studio plans in Portugal, though, he added an extra hurdle to overcome—“I think I have to create problems to enjoy it,” he says—jogging the roof off its usual axis to create new angles, new shadows, new building challenges. “I did just one movement, shifting the roof 32 degrees,” he says. “That made it very subversive. There’s no reason to do that. By doing that it destroys the logic of the interior and the outside . . . and it creates a lot, a lot, a lot of problems.”

With the land zoned for agriculture, the building



CITY SLICKER

Ai in Manhattan’s East Village in 1986. He dropped out of art school after one semester but spent ten formative years in New York. The first book he read in English was a volume on Andy Warhol he found at the Strand Bookstore. “The only places I’d go were bookstores and tool shops.”

permit describes the site as a storage warehouse. “They asked, ‘What are you going to put in there?’ I told them, ‘Sunflower seeds,’” Ai says, with a laugh. With a small team of Portuguese carpenters handling construction, work has moved slowly. Ai’s nearly 700,000 Instagram followers have been able to track the progress online.

Even with the building approaching the finish line—he’s hoping to complete construction this February—the compound still doesn’t quite feel like home. For Ai, who hasn’t been back to China since 2015, life in European exile has been a disconnecting experience, as he’s retreated into an increasingly monastic existence. “I’m either in China or outside China. Berlin, Portugal—it’s the same thing: outside China,” he says. “That’s the Chinese psychology.” ♦