

ARTIST AS DISSIDENT

THE POLITICAL ART OF CHINA'S AI WEIWEI

Ai Weiwei is a world-renowned, avant-garde artist who has been contesting China's police state for many years. He collaborated on the famous Bird's Nest stadium for the Beijing Olympics, but his earlier work speaks of dissent, such as the iconic photos of him giving the finger to the Chinese government. Ai Weiwei was released from a secret prison after eight weeks in detention without legal representation (2011). He was sworn to secrecy as a condition of his release. Previously, his home was under constant camera surveillance. (Look up on the Internet, *Surveillance Camera*, a marble sculpture that Ai Weiwei created and that is displayed at the Lisson Gallery in London, England.)

Later in 2011, the police demolished Weiwei's house. Weiwei jokingly claimed that his demolished house was his "largest art installation to date."

What is it about Weiwei's work that provokes the Chinese government to take these actions against him? Research additional works of art created by Ai Weiwei, such as *Remembering* (2009), an installation on the outside wall of Munich's House of Art.

JACQUES RANCIÈRE'S POLITICS OF AESTHETICS

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, French philosopher Jacques Rancière (drawing on Foucault) argues that politics only occurs through the moment of *dissensus*. Dissensus is when a retort or challenge is offered to the conventional mode of policing subjects (in other words, a challenge to authority). Art has this potential for political dissent, challenging at the same time the *distribution of the sensible* upon which we judge art to be beautiful, valuable, or worthy of display.

Questions:

1. How would artists and art be governed in Plato's ideal society? What comparisons, if any, can you make between Plato's ideas and Ai Weiwei's experiences? (See pages 419-420, 497-498, and 520 of your textbook for ideas relating to Plato's *The Republic*.)
2. Can the politics of art, either in the form of censorship or artistic dissidence, add to or change your definition of the role of art? Explain your ideas.
3. Drawing upon, and possibly researching Rancière's position further, what can you say about the power of political art such as Ai Weiwei's? Is his art both promising and dangerous at the same time?
4. Create your own example of political art. Or, see the feature on Han Han in China, on page 308 of your textbook, and in writing or speech, connect this to the role of "truth-saying" in Foucault's philosophy, or to the role of art as a force behind social change.

