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Art Review

## A Beijing Bohemian in the East Village



Three Shadows Photography Art Centre and Chambers Fine Art

**Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983-1993** Self-portraits from 1987 are part of this exhibition at Asia Society Museum.

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

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The Chinese government did what it set out do with the artist and gadfly Ai Weiwei: silenced him. Or did it? When he was released from detention in June, he was under orders not to discuss the experience, or human rights issues generally, with anyone. Talking about politics nonstop for years via blogs and tweets was what landed him in jail. No one expected to see him back on the Internet anytime soon.

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Ai Weiwei's "Protesters at Tompkins Square Park, Lower East Side, 1989." But there he is, as of this week, with a new Google+ account. It comes with a bare-chested photographic self-portrait, a profile describing him as "a suspected pornography enthusiast and tax evader" (a reference to the charges leveled at him during his detention) and scanned lists of items removed from his home by the police.

Also on the site is a file of 227 black-and-white photographs that Mr. Ai took when he lived in New York City some 25 years ago. If the new Google account can be taken as evidence that he is still active as artist-provocateur, the photographs document how he became one.

Online you can view them one by one. But in an exhibition at Asia Society called "Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983-1993" you see them panoramically: hung salon style, edge to edge, in large-print format, in a wrap-around installation that puts you in the middle of the social and political action.

Politics was part of his life from the start. His father was a renowned poet who ran afoul of the Maoist government. In 1959, two years after Mr. Ai was born, the family left Beijing for the remote countryside, beginning a forced exile that would last until the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the mid-1970s Mr. Ai moved back to the capital with vague ambitions to be painter. There he became involved with some young avant-garde artists known as the Star Group, who painted in Western styles and railed against the Communist Party.

Inevitably, in 1982, the government cracked down. A year later Mr. Ai left for New York, ostensibly to study art but really to figure out who and what he was supposed to be. He did a desultory stint at Parsons and took odd jobs as a baby sitter, a sidewalk sketcher, an extra in the Metropolitan Opera's "Turandot."

Mostly, though, he hung out in the East Village, where his apartment became a crash pad for Chinese friends passing through. The composer Tan Dun stayed there, as did the filmmaker Chen Kaige and the artist Xu Bing (who has an exhibition at the Morgan Library this summer).



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**The composer Tan Dun at his East Third Street apartment in a photograph taken by Mr. Ai in 1986.**

The one thing Mr. Ai did consistently, and daily, was to take photographs wherever he went, the way tourists do, as Andy Warhol and Allen Ginsberg (an East Village neighbor) did too. Mr. Ai's were just candid snapshots of

this and that; nothing special. But he took thousands of them. The 227 examples in the Asia Society show — which originated at Three Shadows Photography Art Center in Beijing — represent a mere fraction of the total.

Still, arranged in chronological sequence, they give a vivid impression of his New York stay. They chart his gradual immersion into the city's life and his awakening to the idea of art as social action.

Among the early pictures are a few sleepy, sullen-looking self-portraits and shots of his bare-bones apartment packed with Chinese friends. We also see him visiting museums. At the Museum of Modern Art he poses with work by two artist-heroes, Warhol and Marcel Duchamp.

And he was making various kinds of art himself: conceptual, ephemeral, trying-out sorts of things. For one piece, photographed in 1983, he bent a metal coat hanger into the shape of Duchamp's profile, laid it down on his apartment floor and filled in its contours with sunflower seeds. In effect, he was creating a sketch, way in advance, for his 2010 Tate Modern installation, which consisted of thousands upon thousands of seeds cast in porcelain.

In the early photographs New York is mostly backdrop to images of young people having fun. But by 1987 the city starts to move into the foreground, with shots of homeless people and abandoned buildings. Mr. Ai had arrived near the peak of the East Village art boom. He stayed on as the economy tanked, and as a poor and working-class neighborhood gentrified. In 1988 warfare broke out.

The main battleground was Tompkins Square Park, where community activists, punk anarchists and the homeless repeatedly clashed with the police over use of the park. When a troop of park employees broke up a squatter encampment one day, the violence intensified. Mr. Ai was there in the middle of it, photographing everything. He sold some of the pictures to newspapers but gave most to the American Civil Liberties Union for use as evidence in their lawsuits against the police.



杜尚像 葵花子 1983 Profile of Duchamp, Sunflower Seeds 1983

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**Ai Weiwei's 1983 photograph of a metal coat hanger he bent into the shape of Duchamp's profile, its contours filled with sunflower seeds.**

Just a few months later the pro-democracy movement in China was crushed. After the Tiananmen massacre Mr. Ai went on an eight-day hunger strike in protest. If his identity as an artist-activist didn't exactly originate at this time — it was already there earlier in China — it certainly crystallized and gained force. He became fully who and what he was supposed to be.

The final pictures in the show are subdued. By the 1990s his friends are no longer the harum-scarum newcomers of 10 years earlier, bopping around town or camped out on floors. Tompkins Square Park has changed. It's cleaned up and filled with elegant young summer picnickers. The show's final shot, from 1993, is of an all-but-empty apartment. Mr. Ai moved back to China that year to be with his ailing father. The New York sojourn was over.

But not forgotten. He took the essence of it with him. Back in China he found himself cast in the role of adviser and exemplar to a group of radically experimental younger artists who lived in a wasteland area of Beijing that they dubbed East Village.

His own field of activities expanded hugely. But whatever work he did as the years went on — as an architect, a magazine publisher, an entrepreneur, an artist, a blogger — was in some way collaborative, interactive, socially directed.

And he never stopped taking photographs. During the past several years he routinely uploaded hundreds a day onto his Web site. Many of the images, like the blog entries and tweets they illustrated, were blatantly, heedlessly critical of China's social realities and of its leaders. Outraged by the political negligence that resulted in the deaths of children in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Mr. Ai photographed shoddily built and flattened school buildings and interviewed distraught parents, posting everything on his Web site, which by then had an international following.

The earthquake was a public relations disaster for the Chinese government, which was doing everything possible to limit coverage in the news media. And here was this artist feeding on-the-ground truths out across the world.

Until that point Mr. Ai had operated within a kind bubble of protection, because of his father's illustrious reputation within China and his own fame as an artist abroad. But with his persistent antigovernment blogging and tweeting, he finally went too far. He was taken into custody in April, held for nearly three months and released only conditionally.

It would not be wrong to call his Internet activity his most important art so far, his magnum opus. And it appears that it will continue in some form, which means that government pressure on him will be unrelenting. So should the vigilance of his supporters. And it is not too much to say — Mr. Ai has more or less said it — that the seeds for an art of social change, if not planted in New York, certainly took roots there. You see those roots growing in these coming-of-age photographs.

*"Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983-1993" runs through Aug. 14 at Asia Society Museum, 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street; (212) 288-6400, [asiasociety.org](http://asiasociety.org).*

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