

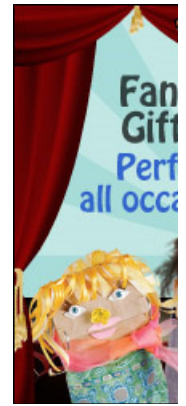


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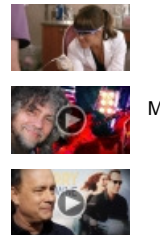


汤普生公园外 1986. Outside Tompkins Square Park, 1986

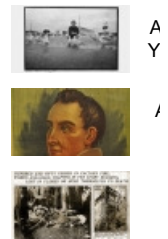
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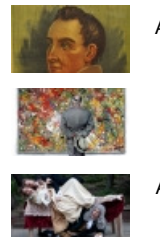
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ARTS REVIEW: 'AI WEIWEI: NEW YORK PHOTOGRAPHS 1983-1993' The Asia Society's Photography Exhibit in New York is Both Personal & Political

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By: [Roslyn Bernstein](#)
July 5, 2011



In June 1990, on the first anniversary of the Tiananmen Square events, four artists came to my hotel room, in Beijing just before midnight, to show me their work. It was a brave act. At the time, they were breaking the law because Chinese citizens were not allowed to visit Westerners in their hotels. Guan Wei, a 33-year-old painter, brought with him "Diary" -- a mixed media work on board. In it, the artist had created a collage of identity papers, some cross-hatched, on a printing plate. The highly political work spoke to issues of censorship and harassment. Within one year, Guan Wei had fled China for Australia.

It is 2011 -- twenty-one years later -- and Chinese artists still suffer under the constraints of the Chinese government. The travails of Ai Weiwei, incarcerated for "economic crimes" for three months and recently released, speak to the government's persecution of critics. A conceptual artist, Ai was well known for his photographic work, as the Asia Society's new exhibit, "[Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983-1993](#)," reveals. He was also known for his project, *Fairytale*; for the 2007 *Documenta 12*, where 1,001 Chinese citizens participated in his work at the exhibition in Kassel, Germany; and for his design work on China's Olympia Stadium in 2008 -- "the bird's nest" -- a project that Ai ultimately criticized. Following the Sichuan earthquake that killed nearly 70,000 and displaced 4.8 million people, Ai Weiwei began to publish victims' names on his blog, moving his activism to [Twitter](#) to get around government censors.



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The son of renowned poet Ai-Qing, Ai Weiwei left China in 1981 at the age of 24, studying first at The University of Pennsylvania and Berkeley before winning a scholarship at the Parsons School of Design in New York, which he then lost because of a failed English-language art history exam.



He began to take pictures just after leaving Parsons in 1983, using the medium not so much as an art form but rather as a scrapbook of his life. "Taking pictures was a habit -- a twitch to stave off boredom," writes Stephanie H. Tung of Ai Wei Wei's photography. In an interview, Ai told Tung that the photos "really reflect my life at that time. [They] are purposeless, with no goal leading to anywhere."

The artist selected 227 images for the New York exhibit, from over 10,000 negatives, and arranged them chronologically, with no photo singled out. All are re-produced as gelatin silver prints, identical in size and uniform in tonality. They trace Ai Weiwei's New York life, from his apartment on Lorimer Avenue in Brooklyn in 1983 to his live/work East Village apartment on East 3rd Street in 1985, which functioned as a sort of hostel for the Chinese art community. Many fellow artists slept on mattresses on the floor, eking out a living as street musicians or pavement artists.

We see them hanging out and socializing, rehearsing before street performances, and touring the city. There are photos of East Village luminary Allen Ginsberg, who lived at 437 East 12 Street near Avenue A and Tompkins Square Park. He was a rebel and an activist who Ai Weiwei greatly admired.

Beginning with the photographs of 1986 and 1987, there is a shift from the personal to the public. This was the direct consequence of major changes in the neighborhood. Known for its drug-infested identity, art galleries and developers moved into the East Village in the late 1980s, gentrifying the area and resulting in protests and conflict, with local residents often clashing with police. Ai Weiwei was there to document the events — two especially strong images from this period: *The Police at Tompkins Square Park* and *A Bleeding Protestor*.

The photographs from 1992 and 1993 shift back to peaceful subjects, as life quieted down in the East Village. We return to friends and fellow artists with the final image in the exhibit: a tranquil photo of an East 7th Street apartment.

For someone who lived through the gentrification of SoHo, I was struck by the intensity of Ai Weiwei's East Village chronology. My sidekick, however, Livia Bernstein -- my seven-year-old granddaughter -- had another vision of the exhibit. She lingered at particular images, commenting on several that appealed to her: # 3, the profile of Duchamp ("Wow, he made it from a bent clothes hangar and filled part of the face with seeds"); # 40 Coney Island ("Everyone knows the Roller Coaster!"); #132 (I visited the USS Intrepid too!); #143 ("The old man probably is homeless. All he has is his teddy bear"); #151 (I can read that sign. It says: No Housing. No Peace."); #164 *Preacher Reading Bible to Man on the Street* ("Do you see that huge snake around the man's neck?"); # 200 ("That man is feeding seagulls in a puddle. It's probably a parking lot in Coney Island."); #218 *Practicing the Violin* ("I love these three pictures. In the first, one we see the bottom half of the woman's body with her arm on the bow of the violin. In the second one, we see her legs. In the third image, we only see her feet.")

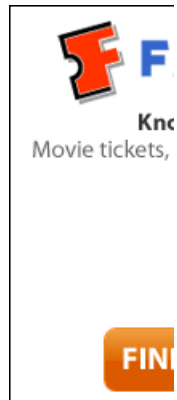
After the exhibit, we walked down to the Pulitzer Fountain outside the Plaza Hotel to see Ai Weiwei's [Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads](#) — twelve heads of the creatures of the Chinese Zodiac. Cast in bronze, the four-foot-high statues include the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and boar. The work is up until July 15th, when it will travel to Los Angeles, Houston, Pittsburgh, and Washington. Livia found the dragon and the tiger to be scary, and was relieved that her sign (she was born in the year of the monkey) was friendly. "Look," she said pointing to the water below the work, "there's even a little fountain below his head."

Apparently Ai Weiwei's work had a profound effect. When we arrived back home in SoHo, Livia asked for markers and cardboard, and surprised me by making her first political poster. She had her concept. Riffing on No Smoking signs, she criticized the Chinese government for claiming that Ai Weiwei owes them nearly \$1 million. In her art, there's *No Money* in a red circle, crossed out with a red X.

'Ai Weiwei: New York Photography 1983-1993' is on view at Asia Society Museum in New York until August 14, 2011.

Top photo: Ai Weiwei in 1986 Outside Tompkins Square Park. Inkjet on Fantac Innova Ultra Smooth Gloss. Printed on 20 x 24-inch paper. Courtesy of Three Shadows Photography Art Centre and Chambers Fine Art.

[\[View the gallery here.\]](#)



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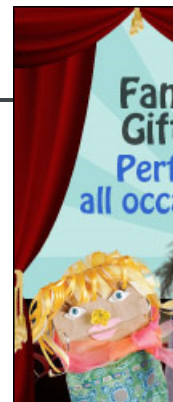
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