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# “Twitter Bodhisattva”: Ai Weiwei’s Media Politics

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**Abstract:** *This article investigates artist and activist Ai Weiwei’s media politics. In 1997 Ai Weiwei imagined a modernist movement that would practise a “non-compromising vigilance on society and power” and since 2005 he has embraced blogging and micro-blogging to enact such intent. We argue that his “communication activism” is part of a broader artistic and political program that long pre-dates his online presence. The study examines how the artist has experimented with blogging and micro-blogging to spread his message of “awakening” in defiance of censorship and surveillance. It shows how Ai Weiwei’s communication strategy combines an international celebrity status, criticism, irony and a round-the-clock interaction with his netizen audience and the media. It also critiques the effectiveness and coherence of this mode of activism from two perspectives – namely, Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of “private telematics” and Jodi Dean’s “blog theory” – and finally assesses its impact. The study aims to enhance our understanding of the web-based communication strategies of Chinese activists, shedding light on cultural production and consumption in Chinese cyberspace as a socio-political barometer.*

**Keywords:** *China, Ai Weiwei, activism, art, blogging, communication, intellectuals, social media, surveillance, Twitter*

## Introduction

This article investigates the media politics of Ai Weiwei to explore how this artist-cum-activist mounts resistance against China’s Party-state authorities via social media.<sup>1</sup> It shows how his use of the media, activism and political stance all derive from an original aesthetic and ethical standpoint centred on the value of clarity. To explore this link, we analyse his blogging and micro-blogging practice from three viewpoints – i.e. artistic program, socio-political activism and celebrity status. Inspired by a tweet from

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one of Ai Weiwei’s Twitter followers in which he addresses the artist as “bodhisattva Ai”, the article employs this Buddhist concept as a metaphor to suggest the convergence of his artistic and political yearnings around the ideals of *juewu* (awakening) and compassion, while discussing the limitations of applying these categories to Ai Weiwei’s activities.

Art and political struggle constitute two intertwined *files rouges* in Ai Weiwei’s biography. He was born in 1957, the son of Ai Qing (born Jiang Zhenghan, 1910–96), an illustrious poet who was imprisoned for “subversion” by the Nationalist Party in the 1930s (Lary, 2012, pp. 142–43), and Gao Ying (b. 1933), a former ballerina and writer who enjoys the esteem of the upper echelons of China’s intelligentsia (Gao, 2007). Ai Qing’s prominence and longstanding support for the CCP did not spare him from being labelled a “rightist” in the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–59. For nineteen years he and his family were exiled from Beijing to Northern China and then Xinjiang, where they were “re-educated through labour” and persecuted (Gao, 2007, pp. 74–75; Klayman, 2012). Ai Weiwei grew up skimming through books of Western art that his father had brought from France in the early 1930s – volumes the family destroyed at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in an attempt to avoid further persecution (Fu, 2008, p. 9).

In the late 1970s he participated in the activities of the *Xinxin huahui* (Stars Group), one of the earliest avant-garde art collectives to be formed after the death of Mao. When authorities in Beijing banned the group’s open-air exhibition, the artists and several intellectuals responded by staging a demonstration on 1 October 1979, blending art, poetry and peaceful resistance (Berghuis, 2004, pp. 40–45). In 1981 Ai Weiwei moved to the United States. He lived in New York’s East Village where he became friends with poet-cum-activist Allen Ginsberg, documented clashes between anti-gentrification protesters and the police, and even staged a hunger strike at the UN headquarters during the 1989 Tian’anmen demonstrations (see Ai et al., 2011; Allen, 2012).<sup>2</sup> New York exposed him to underground culture, avant-garde art and radical activism while he spent time with Chinese émigré artists, authors and musicians.

After returning to Beijing in 1993 Ai Weiwei established himself as a prominent and polarising figure in China’s avant-garde, not only as an artist, designer, architect, photographer and filmmaker, but also as a publisher, curator and art critic. He liaised with artists such as Yang Zhichao (b. 1963) and He Yunchang (b. 1967) (Berghuis, 2004, p. 193; He, 2009), and co-curated the exhibition *A non-compromising method/Fuck off* (2000) with Feng Boyi (b. 1960). Art critics have praised his production for its unconventional character and associated it with iconoclasm (Gamboni, 2010), irony and defiance (Tinari, 2007; 2010), irreverence and opposition to the institutionalisation of art (Merewether, 2007). In 2011 and 2012 *Art Review* ranked him as the most influential artist in the world.<sup>3</sup> Philip Tinari has described him as “the only Chinese artist to have transcended the role of ‘Chinese artist’ in an international context” (2007, p. 455).

In the context of China’s non-official culture Ai Weiwei is not only an influential artist, but also a prominent intellectual figure. The leading Chinese magazine *Nanfeng chuang* has declared he sets “a new standard for China’s intellectuals” by combining artistic influence and civil rights activism (Ning, 2009). Barmé (2011) maintains he belongs to “a long line of modern Chinese thinkers and cultural figures”, including Lu Xun (1881–1936) and Deng Tuo (1912–66), whose moral outrage against tyranny took the form of lambaste and satire. Moreover, his activism contrasts with a contemporary

trend towards “specialisation” and disengagement among Chinese intellectuals (Xu, 2003). Finally, he stands out in China’s intellectual sphere also because of his political stance and communication style. Timothy Cheek has observed that “fierce patriotism” generally characterises Chinese intellectuals’ attitude towards the state, “their behaviour with superiors, peers, and subordinates reflects an acceptance of patronage”, while their self-expressions reflect “elitism” and “paternalism” (1994, p. 187). This article will show how Ai Weiwei subverts all these patterns.

Even more than his art, it is Ai Weiwei’s clashes with Chinese authorities that have earned him the attention of international news outlets such as *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera* and *The New York Times*. Relations between the artist and the Party-state worsened in 2009 when his blog launched a “citizens’ investigation” into the death of schoolchildren in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (Ai, 2009). His incarceration in 2011 enhanced his presence in the media, turning him into an icon of anti-government resistance (e.g. Reuters, 2011a). In the meantime, his forays into Web 2.0<sup>4</sup> also attracted the interest of scholars and journalists (e.g. Zhai, 2009; Ai and Ambrozy, 2011; Stahel and Janser, 2011; Warsh, 2013).

As well as being an artist, an intellectual and a blogger/micro-blogger, Ai Weiwei is a celebrity. The coverage that even his most trivial “performances” receive (e.g. Campbell, 2013) attests to his celebrity status. Hancox argues that he performs “a simultaneous Chinese and global identity [...] that is self-consciously narrated and performed through global communication media” (2011, p. 280). This coverage and prominence in a celebrity-centred mediasphere appear as co-essential to his activism. As observed by Phelim Kine of Human Rights Watch, he is among China’s new “human rights defenders” who, by being tech- and media savvy, are “increasingly efficient at getting their message across” (in Trouillaud, 2012). Kine believes he has been among the first to explore how activists can challenge censorship through an effective use of mass and social media (Trouillaud, 2012). Although Ai Weiwei’s politics cannot be disentangled from how international media cover him, this article will not analyse such coverage, but focus on how and why he employs Web 2.0 – blogging and micro-blogging in particular – for his activism.

Ai Weiwei’s activism is worth examining because of its intellectual complexity and peculiar relationship with his artistic endeavour. Even though his criticism of the Chinese Party-state as reported in Western media may appear simplistic, his blogs on art display a sophisticated outlook on cultural history and modern society that anchors such criticism to a wider ethical-aesthetic standpoint.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, his concern for the victims of the Wenchuan earthquake, for imprisoned activists and even for maltreated animals (e.g. Ai, 2007a; *San hua*, Ai, 2010b) projects him as a figure of compassion as well as of creation and engagement.

Employing his blogs and micro-blogs from 2005 to 2013 as source materials, this article investigates how the artist-cum-activist shapes his composite media persona as an ironic and metaphorical “Twitter bodhisattva”. It examines how his philosophy extols “clarity” and “awakening” within the context of “consultative Leninism”, the current shape of the Chinese Party-state. As defined by Tsang (2009, p. 866), consultative Leninism is characterised by the CCP’s obsession with maintaining stability and political supremacy; a focus on governance reform to pre-empt demands for democratisation; a commitment to enhance the Party’s capacity to elicit and direct public opinion; efforts to sustain rapid economic growth; and the promotion of a brand of nationalism

that integrates national pride in a tightly guided narrative of China’s history. Our discussion of Ai Weiwei’s media activism is grounded in a discourse-centred analysis of his writings on art and politics and his blogging and micro-blogging. It investigates how his linguistic and media choices reflect a commitment to candidness and an uncompromising stance coherent with a radical artistic-intellectual program. The study also discusses the potential and limitations of his activism of communication.

### A Philosophy of Awakening and Clarity

In 1995 Ai Weiwei declared that his artistic work was aimed at expanding the definition of art, which to him implied defying established power relations to become a “virus” of change (Ai and Zhuang, 1995, p. 11). Fifteen years later Eric Shiner observed that he had “made a career of pushing buttons and opening minds”, as his art “forces the viewer to challenge his or her own assumptions and viewpoints” (in Cardo, 2011). This section argues that he has extended such goals into activism.

When Ai Weiwei refers to defying established definitions of art, his inspirations include Kosuth’s Conceptual Art, Duchamp’s Dada and Beuys’ Social Sculpture (see Ai and Zhuang, 1995). Combining art with activism is part of this effort. With the *Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* (2009), for instance, he re-defined art while searching for a “direct method to participate in social events” in the style of Joseph Kosuth (see Ai and Zhuang, 1995, p. 19). In 2011 he also declared that the tax evasion charges against him were part of a “social performance” (Wong, 2011). The *Names Project* and to some extent *Fairytale* (2007, at *documenta 12*) also bear resemblance to Beuys’ *7000 Oaks* (1982, at *documenta 7*), in particular for their participatory and democratic character and for their focus on the individual contribution to social change.

An essay penned by Ai Weiwei in 1997 highlights the connection between his art and activism, expounding the relation he establishes between “modernist art” and the existential condition. The text first appeared in *Zhongguo Beijing 1997* (also known as ‘The Grey Book’) under the title *Zuochu xuanze* (‘Making Choices’). With some changes and under a new title – *Zhe manchang de lu* (‘This Long Road’) – it appeared among his first blog posts (23 February 2006).<sup>6</sup> The essay contains a call for a Chinese modernist movement grounded in the “liberation of humanity” and the “spirit of humanitarianism” (*rendaozhuyi*). The latter term refers to human dignity and compassion, but also evokes the “debate on humanitarianism” of the 1980s (e.g. Kelly, 1985). Ai (1997, p. 9) defines “Modernism” as “the critique of the traditional ideas on literature and art and the critical reflection on one’s existential condition” and identifies its growing soil in “democratic politics, material wealth and the education of the entire population”.

In Ai (1997) the artist connects Modernism to “awakening”. He asserts that Modernism represents “the primitive creative activity of an awakened artist” and “the paramount concern with existential meaning and the actual existential condition”. “It is” – he continues – “a non-compromising and non-cooperative vigilance on society and on the crisis of humanity”. He adds that “awakening comes from the process of self-understanding”, a process characterised by “perpetual doubt and perplexity” (Ai, 1997, p. 9). This passage links modernist art with a critical attitude towards life and society, an attitude the artist associates with being “awakened”.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1997 version of this passage the field of action is art. In the 2006 blog version of the same passage, however, “awakened ones” has replaced “awakened artist” while

“vigilance on society and the crisis of humanity” has become “vigilance on society and power”. In other words, the 2006 version assigns to the “awakened ones” who concern themselves with the meaning of existence the mission of being vigilant about social issues and the actions of the powers that be – which itself constitutes a form of activism. With a few changes the artistic manifesto has thus become one of activism.<sup>8</sup>

In this passage Ai Weiwei argues that critical vigilance over power and a humanist concern with the predicament of humankind derive from “awakening”. His recent statements on communication hark back to this link between awareness and activism. In 2013 he wrote that his human rights advocacy is “preparing a budding civil society to imagine change. First, you need people to recognise they need change. Then you need them to recognise how to make change. Finally, change will come” (Ai, 2013). To him, the intellectual acts of imagining change and realising the need for it will usher in actual change. From this perspective his use of social media is meant to facilitate “awakening” and therefore socio-political change.

The 1997 text also stresses that the awakening elicited by modernist art is necessary to provide China with new spiritual values. Art expresses awakening and so helps achieve such values when displaying “an unpolished and unvarnished reality, terror, emptiness and boredom” (Ai, 1997, p. 9) rather than being “decoration” (see also CNN, 2011). Such art makes the audience realise “the solemnity and absurdity of the existence of life” (Ai, 1997, p. 10).<sup>9</sup> Hence “awakening” arises from the realisation of the absurdity and horror that permeates our existential condition, and modernist art embodies such “truth”.

In turn, such realisation cannot occur without confronting reality and asking clear questions about our condition. In 2006 Ai blogged: “Why are you here, how are your surroundings, what happened before and how will the future be? If these questions are not clearly spoken, judgment is not clear (*qingxi*)” (Ai, 2006d). In 2009 he further emphasised the importance of clarity in language by referring to Wittgenstein, whose “efforts in language and clarity and the almost impossible approach to structuring your thoughts, and how to express them in the most precise and clearest way” he deems “essential for any practice, in art or architecture” (Ai and Wellner, 2009, p. 40). On Wittgenstein he also declared: “What I like is the clarity. To give definition to what needs talking about, the message has to be absolutely clear” (ART iT, 2009; see also Ai, 2006a). These statements suggest that the artist is not concerned with beauty for its sake, nor with the sublime, or “cultural characteristics” (e.g. Ai, 2006e), but rather with clarity.

The installation *Remembering* (2009) constitutes an example of how his art embodies this principle. The work covered the 160 metre-long façade of Munich’s Haus der Kunst and was composed of 9,000 school backpacks forming the sentence: “She lived happily in this world for seven years”. According to Ai Weiwei, these words were pronounced by the mother of a student who died in the Wenchuan earthquake.<sup>10</sup> *Remembering* tells this story with rhetorical effectiveness by means of an apparently simple language. The backpacks recall the dead schoolchildren while the size of the work evokes the extent of the tragedy. The monochromatic elements combine visual clarity with the refusal to make the work eye-pleasing. Fifteen characters spell out a simple sentence. It states a fact, but awareness of its context – a mother remembering the death of her daughter, the collapse of sub-par school buildings – makes it moving and political. The dimension and collocation of the work maximise visibility and

impact. In sum, behind apparent simplicity, the work relies on linguistic clarity to tell an emotional story with political overtones.<sup>11</sup>

Ai Weiwei's search for clarity is closely linked with his political stance. Commenting on the relation between freedom of information and democracy,<sup>12</sup> he defines "acknowledging the truth" as inseparable from and even more important than a democratic political system (Elegant and Ai, 2009). His advocacy for rule of law and civil rights derives from a demand for transparency and accountability. He believes that China's tragedies – corruption, economic crimes, environmental degradation – continue because the system lacks transparency, news media fail to investigate and therefore people do not open their eyes to reality (Ai, 2006c). He regards the control of ideas and information as a key task of the regime, and transparency as the only way to limit its power (Ai, 2012a).

A commitment to clarity when addressing life and society assumes a political meaning in the context of China's "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon, 2011), where state censorship and directives, editorial supervision, surveillance software and other methods combine to filter and manipulate public knowledge on current and past events.<sup>13</sup> Within this context, advocating clarity and practising outspoken communication via social media themselves constitute political statements and strategies of engagement. In this sense Ai Weiwei's use of Web 2.0 constitutes "communication activism".<sup>14</sup>

Ai Weiwei's statements on clarity shed light on his choices in regard to language and communication. In his blogging and micro-blogging the artist has been conspicuously averse to self-censoring and self-bowdlerising, common practices among Chinese intellectuals and netizens.<sup>15</sup> Novelist Yu Hua (b. 1960) calls them "the spirit of May 35<sup>th</sup>", an ironic reference to how Chinese netizens discuss the events of 4 June 1989 without explicitly mentioning the date (Yu, 2011). Other prominent bloggers who have lobbied for freedom of expression via social media such as Han Han (b. 1982) and Wang Xiaofeng (b. 1967) have used these strategies extensively (see, for example, Berg, 2011, pp. 150–51). The metaphor of "May 35<sup>th</sup>" epitomises the absurdity of public discourse under censorship, while affording a glimpse of hope for communication and collective memory.

Ai Weiwei's rejection of such strategies has to do with valuing clarity, refusing compromise and advocating freedom of expression, rather than intellectual unsophistication. For instance, when in 2009 Xinlang (Sina) invited the artist to self-censor and avoid trouble, he dismissed their advice and remarked that he valued the freedom to speak his mind above all else (Zhai, 2009, p. 45). As a consequence of refusing to use oblique language and avoid "sensitive" topics, Ai Weiwei is censored in mainland China, but continues to express himself straightforwardly outside the Great Firewall,<sup>16</sup> especially via Twitter. While some may consider this choice as self-defeating, an intellectual's pursuit of clarity can count as a brave political act in China. Writer Murong Xuecun (b. 1974) maintains that bravery for an author "is about calmly speaking the truth when everyone else is silenced, when the truth cannot be expressed" (Murong, 2010). Even though Ai Weiwei is not alone in voicing resistance to the regime, his linguistic and media choices put him at the vanguard of communication activism in the country. The following analysis of his blogging and micro-blogging practice discusses these choices in detail.



### **Blogging and Micro-Blogging across China's Great Firewall**

In June 2014 China boasted 632 million Internet users, 444 million bloggers and 275 million micro-bloggers (CNNIC, 2014). While authorities have banned social media such as Facebook and Twitter, the country has produced indigenous versions such as Renren.com and Sina Weibo. Meanwhile, many mainlanders employ software such as VPNs to circumvent the Great Firewall and access forbidden content. One could view such efforts to overcome censorship as a political act of defiance. From this viewpoint, the mainland-based Twitter population may be more likely than other netizens to share Ai Weiwei's yearning for freedom of expression; one could even argue that he tweets to a self-selected audience.<sup>17</sup>

The power of blogging first appeared in China's national consciousness around 2003, the year when Muzi Mei (b. 1978) published her diary as a blog (Berg, 2010). MacKinnon maintains that despite filtering and censorship, the blogosphere provides mainland netizens with a "growing online space for private civic discourse", possibly contributing to gradual socio-political change (2008, pp. 44–45). Hassid (2012) argues that blogs in China can increase social tensions by spreading news and rumours, but also relieve such tensions by acting as "safety valves" for public anger. On a cultural level, blogs help create what Yang Guobin defines as "a citizens' discourse space", where "people can voice concerns and express their feelings and opinions" while fashioning new languages and identities (2009, p. 217).

In 2005 Ai Weiwei adopted blogging as a way to correspond with China's burgeoning netizenry in the most direct way, transcending the barrier of censorship, the boundaries of personal space, and geographical distance (Ai and Obrist, 2011; Ambrozy, 2011). His first blog entry, dated 19 November 2005, declared: "If to express oneself one needs a reason, let me say that to express oneself is the reason" (cited in Ai and Wellner, 2009, p. 41). The decision to start a blog, however, came after an invitation from Xinlang, a media corporation and partner of the Party-state in Internet censorship.<sup>18</sup> Xinlang encouraged the artist to launch his blog on Sina.com as a marketing move to lure more netizens onto their blog platform (Ai and Obrist, 2011; see also Zhai, 2009). Nevertheless, his blog turned the tables on this brand endorsement strategy, emerging as a space for public expression and social critique.

Since Ai Weiwei started blogging he has often expressed optimism about the possibilities the Internet offers to socio-political change. The next passage from a 2007 blog post credits such technology with facilitating "awakening" and participation:

The Internet is the most fantastic thing created by humankind in the last few thousand years. [...] The ideas of freedom and democracy, the individual awakening and participation, and the practical learning that it brings forward make people independent and freer. It is a veritable revolution that will finally change the setup of this world (Ai, 2007b).

The artist seeks to exploit such potential by interacting with his readers and followers, experimenting with techniques and languages, and integrating different media such as video, photos and audio recordings, thus contributing to the "citizens' discourse space". By disaggregating a narrative into a flow of articles and sound bites, his blogging also

points to a new communicative modality for Chinese intellectuals in an era of “cultural commercialisation” and hyper-connectivity.

Politically speaking, Ai Weiwei’s blogging reflects McLuhan’s intuition that the medium is the message (McLuhan, 2005). The interactive nature of social networks realises his ideals of responsiveness, openness and active coordination among netizens. In other words, blogging and micro-blogging do not merely represent a vehicle of such ideals, but also embodies them. Choosing to interact with netizens by means of this technology entails a rejection of the one-way, teacher-student relationship that used to dominate communication between intellectuals and the masses in China, especially before the advent of the Internet (Cheek, 1994; Hua, 1994). This kind of communication also stands in contrast to the perceived opacity and unresponsiveness of the Party-state towards its citizens, which is one of the principal causes of Ai Weiwei’s discontent (Elegant and Ai, 2009). Finally, the built-in possibility for dialogic communication makes such technologies the natural enemy of the monolithic socio-political narratives that still prevail in official media. From these characteristics stems his confidence in the emancipatory potential of the Internet.

Besides the dimension of activism, however, the constant flow of writing and photos relayed via blog posts and tweets also provides netizens with a real-time peek into a spectacle of Ai Weiwei’s everyday life. While his blog was active he posted on average a hundred photographs per day (Ai, Tong and Chen, 2011, p. 29), amounting to circa 70,000 photos in total (Smith et al., 2010, p. 19). In 2009 the artist declared that he poured 90 per cent of his energy into blogging (Elegant and Ai, 2009), reflecting how this activity almost constituted his everyday life. The one-man reality show of his blogging and micro-blogging echoes the reality craze in Chinese popular culture during the last decade. The allure of these genres in China lies in replacing the old, idealised socialist heroes with spectacles of everyday life, the “authentic” experiences of “real” people (Berg, 2011).

Ai Weiwei estimates that his blogs on Sina.com, Sohu.com and Bullog.cn received 10,000 visits per day by a total of 17 million readers (Birmingham, 2011). When the government shut down his blogs in 2009, he started micro-blogging (*weibo*) on Twitter, Sina Weibo, Zuosa and Fanfou (Goldkorn, 2010). Several of his accounts on the Chinese websites were allegedly closed (Ai and Wellner, 2009, pp. 2–3) and it is unclear whether he is now active on these platforms. A confirmed Twitter account of the artist, aiww, remains active in 2013 and has 224,210 followers and 100,777 tweets.<sup>19</sup> “Aiww” is the subject of the next section.

### **Micro-Blogging as Communication and Activism**

This section examines the function of Ai Weiwei’s micro-blogging activities on Twitter through the lens of Jean Baudrillard’s private telematics and the metaphor of the Twitter bodhisattva. It assesses the impact of “communication activism” as a mode of activism that relies on the power of communication, especially virtual interaction and circulation.

***Twitter as private telematics***

Ai Weiwei considers Twitter as the quintessence of freedom of speech: “What is freedom of speech? Twitter is” (aiww, 21 December 2010). This statement conceals the irony that Twitter is banned in China, and so is freedom of speech. From this perspective Twitter appears as a tool enabling “technological empowerment” (Zheng, 2008), but the artist is aware that social networks can also serve the opposite purpose – i.e. control. When asked why the authorities allowed him to tweet, he replied: “Twitter is the window of surveillance” (9 March 2011). While the speed and ease of information exchange that micro-blogging offers do pose a challenge to the state’s regime of information control, the same technology can also facilitate said control by allowing authorities to identify and circumscribe dissent (Sullivan, 2013).

Ai Weiwei finds in Twitter a space for self-expression and connectivity. He composes tweets almost exclusively in Chinese, targeting a Sinophone audience. The language is usually colloquial and frequently coarse.<sup>20</sup> When considered in the context of China’s literary history, his tweets continue genres from the imperial era such as the aphorism, the anecdotal prose vignette (*xiaopin*) and the short essay. From this literary perspective one may note the proximity between his tweets and the *xiaopin* genre, which articulated “a late-Ming sense of where the personal gives way to the political” (Kafalas, 1998, p. 50; Berg, 2013, p. 190). Similarly, Ai Weiwei’s tweets turn the personal into the political. Compared with traditional genres, however, tweeting enhances interactivity while precluding contemplation, as new tweets submerge older ones.

On Twitter Ai Weiwei fosters an atmosphere of familiarity with his followers, who usually approach him with a mix of reverence and mockery. They address him as Ai Weiwei, *Ai shi* (master Ai), *Ai shen* (god Ai), *ai shen* (god of love), *Ai shen* (auntie Ai) or simply *shen* (aunt). Sometimes the artist also humorously refers to himself as *shen* (god). Many messages addressed to him display the mix of reverence, affection and irony these monikers suggest.

With its activity extending from morning to late night, aiww has become a familiar presence for his Twitter followers:

KAng\_zz: @aiww Morning, God Ai. Basically I can see you Sir everyday at this hour.  
aiww: Good Morning (23 November 2010)

This virtual familiarity relies on a constant feeding and back feeding into the aiww Twitter feed, amounting to dozens of tweets per day. This continuous stream of text snippets resembles what Baudrillard described as “private telematics”:

Each individual sees himself [sic] promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his original universe; that is to say, in the same position as the astronaut in his bubble, existing in a state of weightlessness which compels the individual to remain in perpetual orbit flight and to maintain sufficient speed in zero gravity to avoid crashing into his planet of origin (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 15).

Baudrillard’s description prefigures the micro-blogger, or the social network user in general, as a non-localised avatar isolated from the off-line world and sovereign over

its online existence. Today the speed Baudrillard refers to is the frequency of posts and updates. As Jodi Dean writes apropos of blogs, "the post gets the blog off the ground", "it keeps it going" and "when the posts stop, the blog dies" (2010, p. 47). This is even truer of Twitter, a media characterised by "constant-contact media addiction" and "bird-like attention-span compression" (Zaitchick, 2009). As a result, "the short glimpses into someone's life as it is being lived" – fragments of history and discourse – "seem real" exactly because they are but glimpses and fragments, rather than fully formed reflections (Dean, 2010, p. 36).

These fragments exist in a time frame that is neither linear nor circular, but "composed of Nows".<sup>21</sup> "What are you doing now?" Twitter used to ask the user, above the text entry box. Such a time frame, as Baudrillard and Dean suggest, requires a sustained communicative feed of fragments and glimpses to re-affirm its existence, or it risks dissolution and the users' plunging back into off-line reality. The speed and continuity of tweets combined with the delocalised quality of the Web keeps the users "in orbit", conserving them within this virtual dimension. In addition, thanks to the possibility of receiving and sending tweets from mobile devices, the user no longer needs to leave the "hypothetical machine" to wander in off-line realities. Micro-blog users thus come to "exist as terminals of multiple networks", to use Baudrillard's words (1988, p. 16).

When applying this critique to Ai Weiwei's tweets, two qualifications are in order. Firstly, 140 Chinese characters offer a significantly broader space for expression than 140 letters, thus allowing for more than abbreviated fragments. The artist believes such space is sufficient "to seduce a girl or write a constitution" (in Pillig, 2010), although most of his tweets are shorter than 140 characters. Secondly, his tweets reveal a tension between the isolated ubiquity of the astronaut-netizen and the relative situatedness of his political discourse. The artist's reflections on power and life may have global relevance, but his concern with China's predicament gives a situated character to his blogging and micro-blogging. Even though he opposes patriotism as a value and declares himself "anti-China",<sup>22</sup> his blogs and tweets betray an underlying preoccupation with the country's condition that constitutes a common feature of Chinese intellectual discourse (Davies, 2007). Nevertheless, as highlighted above, his higher aspirations – and the main goal of his media politics – are the awareness and freedom of the individual, rather than national glory. In conclusion, aiww combines the characteristics of Baudrillard's private telematics and the universalism of human rights discourse with a focus on current events in China.

### ***Twitter Bodhisattva***

In the tweet translated below, a follower of aiww introduces their baby daughter to the artist:

- iunwater: Come, my good girl, meet Ai Bodhisattva of Great Mercy and Compassion @aiww  
[includes a link to the photo of a baby]
- aiww: Bodhisattva is amazed, she's got my nose. Blessings (28 July 2010)

User iunwater addresses Ai Weiwei with a title commonly reserved for bodhisattva Guanyin. This tweet exemplifies the half-serious, half-ironic veneration the artist enjoys among his followers, who often seek from him insight and compassion. The topics of these conversations range from personal issues to philosophical questions, as if his “wisdom” transcended the realms of art and politics. One could argue that they acknowledge his role as an intellectual whose public voice reaches beyond the confines of his field of expertise, while fashioning him as a spiritual guide. Nonetheless, these interactions never lack a hint of irony and jest.<sup>23</sup>

In the course of entering Chinese tradition in imperial times, the Indian bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara changed gender, turning into the feminine goddess Guanyin (“the one who perceives the voices of the world”). Blending the roles of agony aunt and a Web 2.0 version of Guanyin, the first tweet below ironically inverts “god Ai’s” gender:

- gcdsb: Aunt (*shen*), I’ve quit my job and don’t know what to do. Show me an enlightened path.  
– A horse astray @aiww
- aiww: Eat grass (24 March 2011)
- hanunyi: @aiww Right now I can’t afford to buy a house, not even to rent one! Is it that I should swap the money I have for grains, then go home and spend the days eating porridge? What to do?
- aiww: Live on the earnings of your own work (18 December 2010)

These tweets may induce laughter, itself a tool in the quest for freedom of expression (Arendt, 1970, p. 45). The language of the first tweet above mixes pseudo-spiritual terms such as “enlightened path” with elements of the agony aunt letter genre, such as the form of address and a signature (“a horse astray”) linking to the query posed in the letter. On the one hand, both questions reflect the ironic role of the artist as a wise and compassionate bodhisattva. On the other, his short, oracle-like answers can be read as suggestions aimed to provoke an individual “awakening” or intuition about life.

Below is one of his first tweets after being released from detention in 2011:

- Minnhuuu: @aiww Teacher Ai, may I ask your opinion on this: In today’s China, should we deal with everything by describing the actual situation, or live our lives ironically?
- aiww: Either confront things clearly (*qingxi*), or leave quietly (11 August 2011)

Linking the experience of the individual with the wider socio-political context, this tweet encapsulates Ai Weiwei’s philosophy of clarity. It also reveals how his online persona combines various and perhaps contradictory roles, including the online jester, the agony aunt and the political activist. This persona effects both laughter and reverence, spreading a message of awakening while cultivating the image of the concerned but approachable celebrity. After all, as Stevens (2012) suggests, “Ai’s persona – which, as with Warhol’s, is inseparable from his art – draws power from the contradictory roles that artists perform in modern culture”.

### ***Tweeting power***

This section aims to assess the impact of Ai Weiwei’s communication activism. The artist believes that his blogging “doesn’t so much represent reality but produces it”

(Ai and Obrist, 2011, p. 7). Analysis of blogs and micro-blogs needs to take into account their poetical (i.e. “productive”) and deceptive nature, to go beyond the illusion they simply reflect an individual’s daily life.<sup>24</sup> The perceived reality that a blog produces is shaped according to individual users and through real-time interaction with its reader. For Ai Weiwei censorship has represented the greatest limitation to this production process, but can blogging and micro-blogging affect socio-political reality?

In *Blog Theory* (2010) Jodi Dean has critiqued the ability of blogging to foster socio-political change by examining its relations with “communicative capitalism”, which she defines as the convergence of democracy and capitalism in networked communication and entertainment media. She maintains that while blogging and micro-blogging embody democratic values such as access, inclusion, discussion and participation, the speed, simultaneity and interconnectivity of online communication also produce distortions and inequality (2010, p. 4). Even worse, the fragmented and fast nature of online communication causes a deficit in symbolic efficiency – i.e. the possibility for a message to convey a clear and certain meaning outside a well-defined group (Dean, 2010, pp. 4–5). Consequently, social media’s invitation to participate by commenting and sharing, rather than reinforcing said values and aiding political mobilisation, becomes part of “communicative capitalism’s flow of information and entertainment” (2010, p. 29). In addition, “disintegrated spectacles” such as Twitter allow for “ever more advanced forms of monitoring, tracking and surveillance” (2010, p. 39). Even though Dean’s analysis is grounded in US politics and her objective is the end of capitalism, it is worth taking heed of her critique of blog activism when addressing online activism in China.

As seen above, for Ai Weiwei change arises from awakening to the misery of existence and realising the need for change. Therefore “blogging clarity” can help such change by bringing about awareness, or “awakening”. His tweeted pronouncements on life under the regime have this purpose. They are no mere documentation of it, but offer the possibility for a participatory production of reality by creating political awareness and engagement. Below is an example:

- rayrainka: @aiww God Ai, do the national treasures [*i.e. national guards*] have any basis for placing you under house arrest? Shouldn’t there be some form of explanation?
- aiww: There’s no explanation for this, just like for the existence of this government (08 November 2010)

Within his philosophy, snapshots such as this constitute fragments of activism insofar as they aim at eliciting the “miracle” that the meaning of a significant event or idea is “newly questioned” by netizens (see Ai, 2006b) and that individuals realise the need for change (see above). In other words, from his perspective the act of eliciting such a “miracle” (i.e. awakening and criticality) means enabling such change. In this sense, and *contra* Dean, they can be considered effective even though they are little more than fragments.

Current events in mainland China feature most recurrently as topics of his tweets:

- China is an unprincipled corporation. Let’s feed the Party with Yili.<sup>25</sup> (08 June 2010)

Tweets such as this exemplify Ai's strategy of eliciting political awareness and anti-government resistance. The tweet above also shows the relatively high-context quality of many of his online exchanges – i.e. the significant amount of context-specific information required to decode their meaning.<sup>26</sup> In turn, the high-context nature of these texts corroborates the impression that, through micro-blogging, he and his followers share a virtual reality that is both public and private, non-local (like the Web) but context-related. Such high-context discourse may affect the clarity of the message for “outsiders”, but not for its intended audience of Sinophone netizens. While such high-context character could confirm Dean's theory on the decline of symbolic efficiency, Ai Weiwei's tweets always make it clear what he opposes (the Party-state) and what he supports (freedom, other activists etc.), thus helping one to “distinguish between contestatory and hegemonic speech” (Dean, 2010, p. 89).

Ai Weiwei has also used Twitter as a platform for sensitising and mobilising his followers on rights-related issues. For instance, in 2011 he called on his followers to support Wang Lihong (b. 1955) and Ran Yunfei (b. 1965) (aiww, 09 August 2011), two of the several Internet-based rights advocates arrested in a crackdown on activist bloggers that year. Ran Yunfei was released hours after his tweet (Jacobs, 2011). Such campaigning would be impossible within the Great Firewall or off-line.

The following tweet exemplifies his political pamphleteering, in that it goes beyond the single event to summarise the artist's view on the Party-state:

In what sense may we say it is a country? It has established a powerful military, but shows contempt for and tramples on judicial transparency and fairness. It has collected tens of millions of followers, but deviates from the shared beliefs and hopes of humankind. It is infatuated with rapid change, but suppresses free voices. It has the largest population, but supports vicious education and health service systems. It practises a form of extreme power and autocracy while behaving and organising itself like a triad (09 November 2009).

Although this tweet is composed of “factual” statements, its communicative purpose is not informative but persuasive. It compels the reader to realise the need for change and take action against the status quo. This short text of linear and parallel sentences applies Ai Weiwei's philosophy of clarity to the form of social media writing. Thanks to their simplicity and conciseness, tweets such as this represent a way to impart the follower-reader with a certain intuitive awareness of the situation; an “awakening” so sharp that it calls for action. Below is another example of these tweets:

Asylum, demolition, patriotic songs, putting an end to panhandling. Hmm ... fascism has a good outlook in China (10 February 2011)

Within Ai Weiwei's communication activism, tweets of this kind represent critical flashes that illuminate what he considers to be reality in its brutal and paradoxical nature. Such awakening is an individual experience, as reading tweets constitutes a form of private telematics.

Through a mechanism that the artist himself has compared to multi-level marketing or a “pyramid scheme” (*zhuanxiao*) (aiww, 23 June 2010), the quotable aphorism is broadcast from aiww into the homepages of his followers. Some of them will re-tweet

the message from their pages so it will appear also on the homepages of their followers. Each receiving user at each level of the “pyramid” experiences the tweet in a private reading experience, potentially anywhere. At the same time, the diffusion of the tweet creates a virtual network of connections linking aiww’s followers, their followers etc. to each other.

The formulation of these tweets into smart quotations summarising a thought makes them effective within the mechanisms of distribution and consumption typical of social media. Dean’s (2010) theory suggests viewing critically the effectiveness of this genre in regard to the author’s declared purpose of promoting democratic change. In particular, such fragmented insights and snippets of information can hardly be re-composed into a coherent whole that can shape off-line mobilisation. Ai Weiwei’s way of summarising his viewpoint in short, linear messages may, however, counter Dean’s pessimism on the ability of political communication via micro-blogging to be “systemic” and elicit action. Brevity and lucidity represent the very formal features these tweets rely on to be effective, also thanks to the semantic density of written Chinese.

Dean’s pessimism is nonetheless relevant when applied to Ai Weiwei’s opposition strategy. His mode of activism, rich in communicative potential, is relatively poor in off-line action. His writings within the Great Firewall could easily disappear due to censorship and in any case his tweets are rapidly submerged by new ones. His blogging and micro-blogging may sow the seeds of the change he hopes for, but the effectiveness of communication activism is nonetheless limited insofar as it lacks off-line, grassroots organisation and action, which is what the Chinese regime resists most strongly.<sup>27</sup>

### *The paradox of surveillance in the age of Web 2.0*

The implied yet unspoken presence in these exchanges is the Party-state. As mentioned above, Ai Weiwei is aware that the authorities monitor his online writing as well as his actions. This awareness has not stopped the artist from playing with the “ritual of transparency” of a frenetic tweeting activity, to the point of turning it into a sort of self-surveillance of his social engagement and of the government’s actions against him. Awareness of surveillance may well have encouraged him to turn his life into a global spectacle. This suggests to us a parallel between his use of Web 2.0 and the reality show trend in China.

Ai Weiwei’s creation of a personal *Big Brother* show with *Weiweicam* (2011) reinforces this parallel. In April 2011 the artist started a one-man reality show, beside the one he already staged via blogging and micro-blogging. Still under house arrest, he installed webcams in his house and made the video-feed available on a website. Soon afterwards the authorities – the same ones who keep him under round-the-clock surveillance – ordered him to shut his reality show down (BBC, 2012). *Weiweicam* combined celebrity voyeurism with satire on state surveillance.

Since the beginning of his activism in 2008–09, supervision and monitoring have indeed become a frequent topic in Ai Weiwei’s art as well as his writing. *Surveillance Camera* (2011), a large marble reproduction of a surveillance camera, and *Weiweicam* are two examples.<sup>28</sup> His installation for the Danish pavilion at the 2011 World Expo also revolved around a CCTV camera. The camera filmed *The Little Mermaid* while it was exhibited inside the pavilion in Shanghai. What it broadcast – the “surveillance



video” of the statue – was displayed in real time on a screen at the original site of the statue, in Copenhagen, and could also be watched on a dedicated website. The people in charge of the Danish pavilion reportedly found the camera unattractive. “That’s our real life,” Ai Weiwei told them. “Everybody is under some kind of surveillance camera. It’s not beautiful” (Osnos, 2010).

The phenomenal exposure of Ai Weiwei’s life in his tweets and blogs, as well as in interviews and even self-documentaries,<sup>29</sup> makes the surveillance efforts of the authorities almost superfluous. At the same time, as Nørgaard Glud et al. (2012) argue, works such as *Weiweicam* may constitute a strategy of self-empowerment. The extent to which his tweets and international coverage reach mainland netizens remains to be explored, but it is worth noting how this exposure/surveillance constitutes both the source and the effect of his celebrity status and his image as an anti-government activist.

## Conclusion

Relying on the interactive and real-time nature of Web 2.0, Ai Weiwei’s blogging and micro-blogging represent a mode of activism aiming to change society by implementing ideals such as freedom of speech and democratic collaboration. The consideration that his use of social media constitutes a form of activism is grounded in his definition of the artist as a “virus” of change and art as the practice of challenging established values and concepts. In this regard, this study has shown how his communicative strategy is part of a broader artistic and political program that long predates his online presence.

This study has shown how Ai Weiwei has become a communication activist by experimenting with the potential of social media and by virtue of his celebrity status. Web 2.0 provides him with the possibility to interact in real time beyond the limitations of physical distance and personal relations. Web 2.0 offers not only a platform to spread one’s ideology – as another artist describes Ai Weiwei’s use of social networks<sup>30</sup> – but also a space to organise grassroots activism and awareness campaigns. Ai Weiwei has made limited use of the latter dimension, relying more on online communication than off-line mobilisation. In this effort to spread his ideals, he has defied the limitations of censorship and repression while gaining fame and perhaps influence by turning his clashes with these boundaries into media spectacles.

The persona Ai Weiwei has sculpted for himself on Web 2.0 mainly employs communication for a two-fold function – to highlight the absurdity of life under the regime and to spread humanistic compassion. The metaphor of the bodhisattva as a being who combines the dimensions of awakening and compassion has served here to analyse this persona. Irony, at the same time, distances this persona from the dimension of faith and devotion.

It is crucial to stress that Ai Weiwei’s public persona evolves constantly, subject to his creativity, technological evolution and the actions of the Party-state. As the artist continues to experiment with Web 2.0, he remains a pioneer among civil rights activists who look to the Internet for new channels of resistance and dissent. Further research will need to assess the influence of Ai Weiwei’s media politics on other artists, activists and intellectuals. Finally, while this study has focused on blogging and micro-blogging, further analysis of the artist’s presence in mass media may shed light on the link between his fame and celebrity culture.<sup>31</sup>

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## Notes

1. On online dissent see, for example, Chase and Mulvenon (2002), MacKinnon (2008; 2011), Lagerkvist (2010), Thorton (2010), Herold and Marolt (2011) and, as a sample of the ongoing debate, Leibold (2011) and Yang (2011).
2. Ai Weiwei posted a selection of his New York photographs on his Google+ account. Available at <https://plus.google.com/106372800511710859472>, accessed 10 June 2013.
3. See Art Review (2011–12). In 2012, *Art Review* ranked him as the third most powerful figure in the art world, first among the artists. On Ai Weiwei’s art see also Smith et al. (2010).
4. On Web 2.0 see DiNucci (1999) and O’Reilly (2009). Upon its advent in 1999 Web 2.0 included new online applications such as blogs and social networks, evolving then to offer enhanced interactivity and user-centred design.
5. Guangxi Normal University Press has published a selection of his blogs (Ai, 2010a). Selected blogs are also published in German and Italian.
6. Since the original blog on Sina.com was deleted in 2009 we refer to the online archive at <http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/aiww/>, accessed 20 November 2012. The blog version also appears in Ai (2010a, pp. 3–5).
7. With regard to Ai Weiwei’s word choice, it is worth noting that *juewu* in Buddhism denotes one’s achievement of the ultimate truth. It is linked to the concept of *bodhi* (*puti* or *zhengjue*), the supreme intelligence of a bodhisattva (Etet, 1904). Central figures in the Mahāyāna tradition, bodhisattvas strive to awaken all living beings to the knowledge of the deep root of existence, i.e. *bodhi* (Jan, 1981; Lancaster, 1981).
8. In another blog post he wrote: “Safeguarding individual awakening means protecting others and social ideals, it means pursuing the truth and appreciating beauty” (Ai, 2006f).
9. Such views on art and its function are diametrically opposed to those advocated by Mao Zedong in the 1942 *Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art*, where he declared that life as reflected in works of art should be “on a higher plane” and “nearer the ideal” than “actual everyday life” (Mao Zedong, 1942).
10. See aiww (Ai Weiwei’s Twitter feed), 9 September 2010. Ai Weiwei blames poor construction standards for the collapse of many schools in the quake-hit area and accuses the government of covering up the scandal (aiww, 25 February 2013).
11. Ai Weiwei introduced the “Wenchuan rebars” works *Straight* and *Forge* (both 2008–12) as attempts to express the Wenchuan disaster in the most “simple and direct fashion” (Ai, 2012b).
12. With “democracy” Ai Weiwei mainly refers to electoral democracy with human rights and a free press. In the Chinese intellectual sphere this constitutes a “liberal” definition of this complex and debated concept (see e.g. Ogden, 2002, pp. 9–39; Balme, 2008, pp. 55–61).
13. Both Internet strategies and counterstrategies are constantly evolving. See Marolt (2011), Davies (2012) and Goldkorn (2012) for more on strategies and counterstrategies.
14. On art and communication, see also Reyes (2013): “I constantly search for new channels to convey ideas and communicate with the public. I am very much interested in the function of art’s language in the transmission of ideas and in establishing a dialogue with the public. The communicative act is in itself a topic for art”. See also Ai Weiwei (2012).
15. See, for example, Marolt (2011, pp. 55–57) on self-censorship.
16. That is, the system aimed at preventing mainland users from accessing forbidden online content.
17. For tentative data on Twitter usage in China, see McMillan (2012). On micro-blogging in China see Sullivan (2012).

18. Reuters (2011b). On censorship of Chinese social media see also Thorton (2010) and Bamman et al. (2012).
19. Both figures as of 16 September 2013. Twitter users are identified here by their login names.
20. This stylistic choice could be interpreted as one way in which the artist shapes his public persona as tough and rebellious.
21. Emily Dickinson, "Forever – is composed of Nows –" (1863).
22. See, for example, aiww, 28 October 2010: "If you are against Japan but not against the US, you are retarded. If you oppose the US and Japan, you are a member of the 50 cents army. If you oppose the US, Japan, China and Communism, then you are me".
23. On 17 May 2010 a follower of aiww (nkxinzuo) tagged the artist's profile in a tweet in which they wrote: "God Ai is really like a bodhisattva ahah". Ai Weiwei replied: "I am increasingly like that".
24. On the poetical dimension of media, see Bachmair (2000). According to Bachmair, media practices that purport to represent reality (i.e. "mimesis", or mimetical function) often produce new realities (i.e. "poiesis", or poetical function). Based on Ai and Obrist (2011), the artist maintains that blogging is one such practice.
25. Yili was among the dairy companies implicated in the 2008 milk-poisoning scandal.
26. For instance, the piece of information in the previous note. On the concepts of low- and high-context communication see Hall (1976, pp. 83–103).
27. On the criticism of online activism as a lazy form of political participation, see Christensen (2011). It is worth noting that such criticism refers to online activism in Western countries and is based on the possibility for their citizens to carry out off-line activism (for example, campaigning, demonstrating, unionising). Such activities (and online activism) are significantly more perilous in mainland China.
28. For an insightful analysis of *Surveillance Camera* and *Weiweicam* see Nørgaard Glud et al. (2012).
29. See, for example, *Shen biao yihan* ('So Sorry') (Ai, 2011).
30. Authors' interview with Deng Dafei (b. 1975) of the Utopia Group, Beijing, 16 May 2012.
31. On China's celebrity culture and "cultural celebrities" see Edwards and Jeffreys (2010).

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