

Spike Magazine

Mak, Geoffrey: Top Ten Art World Dads

Summer 2021 Issue #68

Ai's celebrity presence in the global art world casts an almost impossible standard on all contemporary artists working under totalitarian regimes.

## Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei going to jail wasn't part of a performance, but we treat it as if it were. It's difficult to determine where Ai's sprawling practice begins and where it ends. The sculptures for which he is most known often employ infographic techniques for journalistic ends. But how to consider his blogging and Twitter activism? Were the 1001 Chinese people flown in to live in his *Fairytale* (2007) installation at Documenta 12 part of the spectacle? Because he effectively collapses the distinction between art and life, the valuation of his cultural production is arguably derived from himself modelling as the ideal dissident, performed in mythic proportions in China. Ai's celebrity presence in the global art world casts an almost impossible standard on all contemporary artists working under totalitarian regimes: the expectation to agitate against state oppression, even at the risk of imprisonment. While Ai has aligned himself with modernism in the past – "Modernism at least says that every person is free and needs to honestly encounter his own life" – perhaps more than any other Chinese artist, he has dispelled the very modernist myth of social autonomy and medium-specificity, opting instead for a truly multidisciplinary social practice.

GEOFFREY MAK is a writer based in New York. He is a frequent contributor to Spike.

# 135