

The Guardian

O'Hagan, Sean: 1,000 Years of Joys and Sorrows by Ai Weiwei review – a life of dissent

24 October 2021



Observer book of the week

## 1,000 Years of Joys and Sorrows by Ai Weiwei review - a life of dissent



**Sean O'Hagan**

Sun 24 Oct 2021 07:00 BST

**I**n 1957, the year of Ai Weiwei's birth, China's leader, Chairman Mao, launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign, a purge of intellectuals whose work was deemed critical of the state. By the end of the year, about 300,000 people had been rounded up, the majority of them exiled to the country's remote border regions to undergo "reform through labour". Ai's father, Ai Qing, a respected poet, was one of them.

“The whirlpool that swallowed up my father upended my life too, leaving a mark on me that I carry with me to this day,” Ai writes in the opening chapter of this ambitious memoir, in which his father’s story gives way to, and often echoes, his own. In 1967, his father’s life was upended once again, when he was transported to a desert region known as Little Siberia to undergo political “remoulding”.

His wife, exhausted and demoralised, returned to Beijing with their youngest son, but Ai, not yet 10, chose to go with his father. For almost a decade, they existed in “a square hole dug into the ground, with a crude roof formed of tamarisk branches and rice stalks, sealed with several layers of grassy mud”. His father was assigned to trim trees on a nearby farm and, after a long day’s labour, was forced to attend a public gathering of his fellow exiles, during which he would often be singled out and denounced as a “bourgeois novelist”.

**“ His sense of isolation was so acute that he refused to answer the door to callers at his grotty apartment in New York**

While Ai undoubtedly inherited his father’s stoicism, the defiance that would characterise his later activism was all his own. It initially took the form of a blog that first appeared towards the end of 2005. The first post read: “To express yourself needs a reason, but expressing yourself is the reason.” For the Chinese authorities, who would take time to come to terms with and control the internet, this was the first of many transgressions that would lead to his blog being

shut down in 2009 and to his subsequent arrest and detention in 2011. As Ai puts it himself, the blog propelled him into “the public’s field of vision with the force of a bullet from a gun”.

His creative life, which began in 1978 when he enrolled on an animation course at the Beijing Film Academy, had taken time to find its footing. That same year, he also became one of the founders of the mostly self-taught avant garde art group Stars, who were pioneers for today’s thriving art scene in China.

In 1981, during a period of tentative reform by the Chinese government, Ai was among the first group of students to be granted a visa to study in America. He remained there for 12 years, mostly living in New York, where he won a scholarship to Parsons School of Design, only to forfeit it with an impetuous decision: leaving an art history exam paper blank save for his signature. As protests go, it was oddly self-defeating in its vagueness. “I was simply ambivalent,” he writes. “I didn’t know what I liked.”

He survived in New York by doing part-time jobs and becoming a street artist sketching tourists in Times Square. He had few friends and, at one point, his sense of isolation was so acute that he refused to answer the door to callers at his grotty apartment on the Lower East Side. For inspiration, he lingered long in downtown galleries and secondhand bookstores. He met, and briefly befriended, Allen Ginsberg, a champion of his father's poetry, and for a time shared a loft with the performance artist Tehching Hsieh who happened to be spending a year tied to fellow artist Linda Montano with an 8ft rope. They were, writes Ai, "models for me in terms of their unflinching commitment to an artistic vision".

It was in New York that Ai held his first solo show, the intriguingly titled *Old Shoes, Safe Sex*, at a small SoHo gallery. It received a single, short, affirmative review in *Artspeak*, which described it as "a neo-dadaist knockout". On 4 June 1989, and for several days afterwards, he compulsively watched CNN reports of the massacre of pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square. It precipitated a long bout of soul-searching that, alongside anxiety over his ageing father's increasing ill health, culminated in his return to Beijing in 1993. "Freedom with no restraints and no concerns had lost its novelty."

The second half of Ai's book documents his art world ascendancy alongside his bruising battles with the Chinese authorities. In November 2010, he was placed under house arrest after the authorities suddenly authorised the demolition of his newly built studio in Shanghai. Then, in April 2011, he was arrested at Beijing airport as he prepared to board a flight to Hong Kong.

**Night and day, he shared his living space with two guards, whom he was forbidden to look at**

So begins the most Kafkaesque section of the book, a detailed account of his 11-week detention in an anonymous government building on the outskirts of the city. His prose is determinedly matter of fact, which imbues the events he describes with an even more absurdist aspect. Held in a small room with sealed windows, he was interrogated daily, the

questions circling continuously around the same false charges of inciting unrest and evading tax. Night and day, he shared his living space with two guards, whom he was forbidden to look at and whose permission he needed for every movement and utterance.

Five hours of each day were taken up with enforced exercise, which consisted of walking seven steps, back and forth, within an allotted space in the middle of the room, all the time flanked by his two attendants. “They’re here to protect you,” his investigator informed him. “If you walk fast or walk slow, they have to do exactly the same. The regulations make things clear and easy.”

In the west, unbeknown to him, his supporters staged protests calling for his release. Tate Modern posted a giant “Release Ai Weiwei” sign on the facade of its building; it was also home to what has since become his most celebrated piece of art: an arrangement of millions of tiny, hand-carved porcelain sunflower seeds symbolising hope and survival. “When I was growing up in China, we had few possessions,” he writes. “But even in our darkest days, we might well have a little handful of sunflower seeds in our pockets.”

Since his release from detention in June 2011 and the subsequent return of his passport in 2015, Ai has lived in Berlin, Cambridge and, since last year, rural Portugal. His art and activism, and the price he has paid for both, have made him the most emblematic artist of our turbulent times, with the *New York Times* describing him as “an eloquent and unsilenceable voice of freedom”. *1,000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* touches on the inevitable contradictions of being an activist and an art superstar, but it is above all a story of inherited resilience, strength of character and self-determination. “Like a star in the sky or a tree in a field, he was always there as a compass point,” Ai writes, reflecting on his father’s death in 1996. “And in a quiet and mysterious way he helped me navigate in a direction all my own. By the very absence of explicit guidance, a spiritual connection was forged between us; Father, in his own way, protected me.”

*1,000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* by Ai Weiwei is published by Bodley Head (£25). To support the *Guardian* and *Observer* order your copy at [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply