

The Almost-All-Asian Issue: Channeling Ai Weiwei and the Grass-Mud Horse

THREE YEARS AGO I WAS TEACHING A COURSE ON CITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BEIJING AND WAXING ECSTATIC ABOUT THE TRANSGRESSIVENESS of contemporary Chinese visual art. The class had just made a field trip to Caochangdi, a hip art district that had until recently been a small village off Beijing's Fifth Ring Road. In the midst of a discussion of Wu Hung's *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*, a student asked, "If this art is so revolutionary, why are all these upscale studios and galleries displacing so many workers and villagers who made their homes in Caochangdi? And why are so many artists opening elite restaurants in downtown Beijing?"

The art and architecture of Ai Weiwei were at the center of our field trip. Ai built the first studio in Caochangdi—an airy, tumultuous space filled with art and ideas. His art *is* revolutionary. It includes an installation made from 1,001 wooden doors and windows wrested from destroyed Ming and Qing dynasty houses, backpack-stuffed installations representing the schoolchildren killed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and an image of Tiananmen Square that foregrounds an underwear-flashing young woman (a casual version of the skirt-lifting women who terrified royalist soldiers during the French Revolution). This flashing woman pushes Mao Zedong's square-dominating portrait into the background; Ai transforms the Tiananmen Mao into a miniature, salacious voyeur (Wu 198). Because of his outspoken opinions about the Chinese Olympics and the deaths in the Sichuan earthquake caused by substandard construction, Ai has been the subject of horrific government abuse: a beating by police in Sichuan resulted in brain damage; the gratuitous bulldozing of his atelier in Shanghai also destroyed a complex of studios he had built for young artists; in addition, the Chinese government held him under arrest from April to June 2011. His incarceration was part of a government crackdown on the "Jasmine Revolution" motivated by paranoia that the Arab Spring would galvanize activists throughout China. In June 2011 the government detained Wang

Jun, an artist and curator, because he helped organize an arts festival in which a blank wall was emblazoned with Ai's name (Jacobs).

And yet my student got something right. The relation between aesthetics and politics on global and local scales is contaminated and vexed. In this almost-all-Asian issue of *PMLA*, scholars explore this relation in the context of literatures and cultures that have often gone missing from the pages of the journal. The issue focuses on Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Turkey, Vietnam, and the Russian Empire in Central and East Asia. Its essays stretch beyond the limits of area studies and consider the multiple theaters of Asian literatures and cultures.

What better way to begin this issue than with a glimpse of an exuberant, naked, leaping Ai Weiwei—his legs and tummy flailing in space, his genitals covered with a stuffed animal known as the “grass-mud horse.” The grass-mud horse is a mythical Internet creature that began to appear in China in January 2009 in response to a government crackdown on political Web sites. In corners of the Internet, the grass-mud horse goes to battle with the “river crab,” a word that connotes the slang for “censorship” in Chinese (Wines). The caption of Ai's boisterous self-portrait, “Grass-Mud Horse Covering the Middle,” has a sly double meaning: it sounds like the Mandarin for “Fuck your mother, the Communist Party Central Committee” (“Ai Weiwei”). This self-portrait, like the thought-provoking essays in this issue, summons ideas about the contestatory relations between art and politics, Asia and the West, Asia and its future. It seems especially poignant when juxtaposed with Ai's government-mandated silence following his months of incarceration.



How can the disciplined artist speak? The world demanded Ai's bodily freedom (during his imprisonment the Tate Modern bore a sign on its facade: “RELEASE AI WEIWEI”), but will we continue to advocate for his right to speak? Will we insist on his right to make antiestablishment art in which the grass-mud horse struggles with the river crab? We need to work collectively to protect the rights of artists who lose their voice in China, as well as the rights of citizens returning from prison in the United States who also lose a crucial voice: their right to vote.

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