



Bei Ling is an exiled poet and essayist. In 1988, in the United States, he got to know Ai Weiwei. Here he describes some of the antics

his outspoken and outrageous friend got up to in New York and offers interpretations of the controversial artist's work.



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i Weiwei is a big, brawny hulk of an artist who has given his weight as 280 pounds (127kg). He has a tiger's back and a bear's waist, with a bearded face that shows he's from the north. His good-natured smile hides a certain scorn. He is not loquacious but when he speaks, his words are sharp and to the point. He has a vast knowledge of political reality in the mainland. Ai's blog was visited 3.5 million times before it was closed. It was an important sign civil society was growing in the mainland. Ai kept up his dialogue with internet users on Twitter: @aiww had 70,000 followers. Ai enlightened their civil conscience and revealed to them a dark side of one-party rule.

To be photographed naked or half-naked is part of Ai's character, and a trait of his artistic career. He began to take nude pictures of himself and others in the mid-1980s, in his basement apartment and on the streets of New York's East Village. It was fun; it was a kind of catharsis, and developed into a deliberate show of scorn, a physical confrontation with state power.

WHEN DISCUSSING Ai, you have to begin with his innate wildness. He was born in 1957 in Beijing. When he was two, his father, poet Ai Qing, was banished to the remote western region of Xinjiang. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Weiwei had to help his father clean public toilets every day for five years. He has claimed he did not brush his teeth before he turned 17.

In 1978, Ai was accepted into the Beijing Film Academy. In 1981, he quit and flew to New York, in the United States. He enrolled in language courses in Philadelphia and California but didn't like the schools and would not graduate. Nonetheless, in 1983, Ai won a scholarship to Parsons School of Design in New York. After a year, he failed an art-history test because, it was said, he had skipped too many classes. After the school had stopped his scholarship, Ai became an illegal alien. He lived in the East Village for 10 years, along with poets and

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