

musicians, punks, Buddhists and Hindus, junkies and thieves, at the mouth of a smoking volcano, as he called it.

In October 1988, I arrived in New York for the first time. Poet and painter Yan Li, a member of the Beijing artist group The Stars, took me to meet Ai. He had wild hair, a Chinese army coat and was already gaining weight. Whenever he met someone new, a shy smile creased his face. He even blushed a little. Then he would say, in the most natural voice: "Let's get naked together! This is New York."

I had just arrived and was completely dazzled by this chaotic city. Yes, I was a rebel at heart, but I wasn't ready for a nude photo. He saw that I was bewildered, smiled his mischievous smile and said again: "How about a picture? Let's take our clothes off together!"

After hanging out with him on the streets for a while, I was quickly persuaded to do it. But then I sobered up, so to speak, and reneged. If I had had the misfortune of staying at his place for a few days, like many of my friends, I wouldn't have been able to escape his camera.

When Ai felt bored, he took photos of himself in the mirror. That was the beginning of his craving for "the naked". But what he really enjoyed was taking the pictures in the street, where it was forbidden. He would look around for police and if they weren't watching, he pulled down his trousers, took a shot of himself, got dressed again and disappeared.

In Ai's basement I saw dozens of photos of naked artists and friends, many of them pictured with Ai. The best one was from 1986: Ai and Yan in the square in front of the World Trade Centre, on what today is known as Ground Zero (see magazine cover). Two skinny naked young men laughing merrily into the camera.

In May 2009, Ai told mainland magazine *Southern Weekend*: "Yan Li wanted to take a photo of us there; that was too boring for me. I said let's get naked and then take a picture. He hesitated, but he felt that his figure was better than mine, so he did it. This was great. There we were in the sun, nobody else around. That was a time without emperors."

Ai's apartment was also an underground shop for second-hand cameras. He always had dozens of cameras lying around, bought on the cheap from fences and thieves. He became adept at repairing them and would sell them on.

After the 1989 massacre in Beijing, I stayed in the US as a kind of literature refugee. I had an invitation from Brown University. I became a resident writer there, with a monthly stipend of US\$1,500. I had won the lottery, so to speak, and Ai got wind of this. Whenever I was in Manhattan, he would want me to come to his famous basement. Once, as soon as I was inside, he led me to a bed covered with cameras and introduced me to all kinds of features on every one of them. He was determined to share my fortune and I was overwhelmed by his mercurial effort, so I pulled out more than US\$400 for one of his cameras. As soon as Ai pocketed the money, he was so happy he took me to Chinatown for dinner. The camera didn't have extra lenses, and I never used it. It got lost somewhere in those restless years.

He was boundless and carefree. Those 10 years in New York were, in his own words, "a time when I opened my eyes in the morning and didn't know what I would do the whole day".

Ai doesn't like to have conversations with serious or boring people.

As soon as he encounters serious talk, he becomes uncomfortable, so he has to do something absurd, any kind of practical joke, to turn a boring situation into something funny. He has always thought there are too many serious people in this world, keeping up appearances. So he has to try to make people laugh, show them the naked truth.

In the late 80s and early 90s, American beat generation writer Allen Ginsberg set up reading events with mainland poets in New York. Ginsberg organised visits to the US by several Chinese poets he called "heretic". They were to take part in a conference with American poets. The invited writers were Gong Liu and Li Gang, from Sichuan province, as well as Bei Dao, Jiang He, Gu Cheng and others from Beijing. Yan and I were already in New York. We had a sort of underground status in the mainland, because Public Security kept tabs on us, so we couldn't be part of any official Chinese team, but Ginsberg let us tag along.

The American-Chinese poetry conference took place in a posh building in downtown Manhattan. Because they had grown up in "the New China", the Chinese poets couldn't speak English. Ai was called in by his friend Ginsberg as interpreter.

Every one of the poets, Chinese and American, sat erect around the large conference table as Ginsberg made a serious opening speech. Then came a recitation; it was Gong, reading a prepared thank you note from the National Chinese Writers' Association. And then the conference began. Every poet got his chance to say a few pleasantries to one or all of the poets from the other country. Hardly anybody understood what anybody said, but Ai started to translate everything seriously.

This was during a time in the mainland when the official writers' association was very powerful. Any poet or writer who was invited abroad had to be vetted. You had a better chance of being allowed to travel if you held any kind of office in the writers' society. And if they let you go abroad, you had to remain disciplined, you could not go anywhere alone during the day and had to return to your hotel by nightfall. And once you returned to the mainland, you had to write an official report. So the Chinese poets at the conference kept very calm and chose their words very carefully.

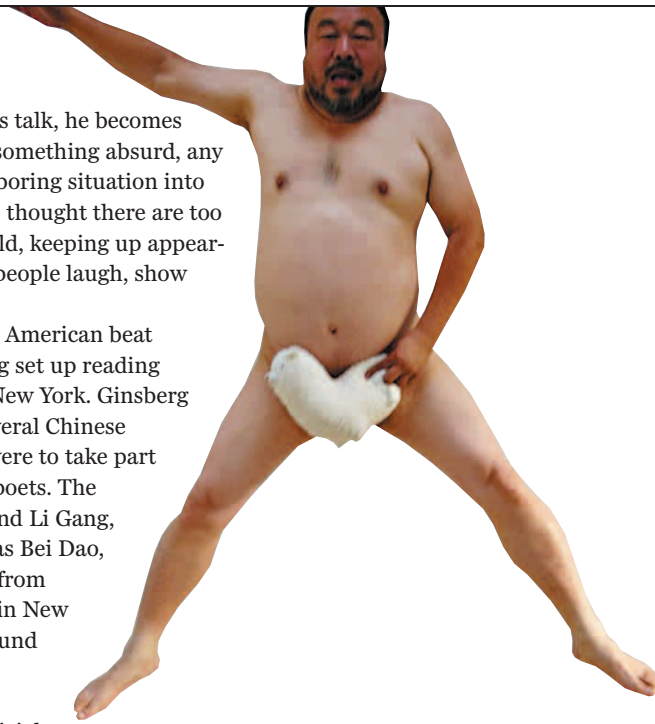
Ginsberg had eyes only for Bei. The whole conference became a dialogue between these two writers while the others made polite faces, like distant relatives at a wedding. Ai had to translate every question and answer between them. After a while he started to add some spice. When Ginsberg asked Bei about a deeper topic in his poems, Ai began to add the word "sex" into every sentence.

"What is the deeper sexual topic in your poetry?"

The Chinese poets were dumbstruck and started to whisper among themselves. Maybe this was the famous decadent spirit of the beat poet coming out into the open.

Bei was embarrassed. He started to explain in Chinese: "Sex is not the main topic, not the deeper topic in my poems ..."

He had not yet finished when Ai began to translate: "Sex is essential for poetry, everything in my poems points towards sex." >>



**Top far left:** Ai Weiwei on the *Grass Mud Horse*.  
**Bottom far left, centre and above:** photographs from Ai's *The Grass Mud Horse Blocking the Centre*.

# Who are it