

**Editor's note:** This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA). The work of NCTA is directly related to the theme of this issue, "What Should We Know About Asia?", and core components of NCTA professional development courses are classroom innovation and implementation, with NCTA teacher-participants developing lesson plans as part of their completion projects. To both commemorate NCTA's anniversary and, as important, to provide middle, high school, and perhaps some beginning university instructors with rich but practical teaching ideas, *EAA* invited NCTA alumni to submit "Best Practices" Teaching Resources Essays, the following of which are published in the print issue. Please see the online supplements for another useful NCTA Best Practices TRE.

## Ai Weiwei

### *Artist Activist Best Practices for Teaching Modern Art in the History Classroom*

By Stephanie Lee Rizas



Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. Ai as he drops a 2,000-year-old Han dynasty ceremonial urn. Source: *Guggenheim* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yc2y7p84>.

The twenty-first century has seen both widening and narrowing of the level of free speech the Chinese Communist Party is willing to allow. Under President Xi Jinping, the level of openness is shrinking.<sup>1</sup> Since the 2008 Olympics, China has "come out" as a global economic power to be reckoned with—in many ways, they have achieved great success since Communist leader Deng Xiaoping, beginning in the late 1970s, promoted policies that transferred much of China's government-controlled economy to a growing private sector. However, this success has come at a price. One dissident who has been outspoken against the CCP ignoring human rights to maintain economic stability has been the artist, architect, and activist Ai Weiwei.

While I do not teach art history, I have found that using Ai as a window through which students examine the role of art in understanding history has been empowering and enlightening for my students. Using his works and exhibitions, students are able to engage with art as a form of political dissent. Ai proves to be one of the most popular topics and inspirations for my students. We often follow up our examination of his works by analyzing art from other nationalities as a form of political protest, which helps connect the Chinese experience with that of so many others in history.

Students relate to Ai's art quickly. We begin by looking at the *Bird's Nest*, a structure made famous in the 2008 Olympics and designed by none other than Ai himself. Unfortunately, Ai did not attend the opening ceremonies that began the Olympics that year, nor did he involve himself in any of the Olympic promotional activities taking place throughout China leading up to the event.

In fact, he refused to even appear in photographs with his own design. All this was done in protest to what many human rights activists saw as well: an Olympic Games taking place in a nation with continual human

rights violations and near-police-state controls on citizens' freedoms.<sup>2</sup> After discussing the Olympics and what it meant for China to have an incredible opportunity to show off on the world stage, we view a short clip describing the human rights issues China is facing so that students understand the context in which Ai is creating his art.<sup>3</sup>

Ai is no stranger to the suppression of rights employed by the Chinese government as a way to, in their opinion, ensure a stable and continuous upward swing for their nation's economy and development. His father, a poet and intellectual, was detained by the Chinese government during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Students see the traumatic effects history might have on families that suffer under oppressive rulership and how further generations deal with that past. While Ai had been outspoken about suppression in China in the past, the tipping point for Ai's role as a dissident came shortly before the Olympics when he began questioning the government's actions in response to the Sichuan Earthquake in May 2008.<sup>4</sup> The earthquake occurred just three months before the opening ceremonies and devastated Sichuan Province. The most alarming devastation occurred across the province in elementary and middle schools. The schools had been constructed in what is now referred to as "tofu construction"—essentially shoddy construction. Had the schools been more carefully engineered, then their immediate collapse during the earthquake may have been avoided or mitigated. Ai, along with other activists, began a sort of rogue investigation of the earthquake to try to determine an actual number of schoolchildren killed that day. In Ai's opinion, the government's rush to build schools cheaply in order to enable more workers to move into factory-laden areas in Sichuan Province led to this disaster's high death rate. Students engage in discussion of this scandal by examining the cost-benefit analysis of how much economic development is worth in human cost, both in terms of freedom and physical safety.



*Snake Ceiling* commemorates the more than 5,000 students killed in the Sichuan Earthquake with a giant snake constructed from gray and green backpacks. Source: CNN slideshow at <https://tinyurl.com/y9pmfzbn>.

We delve deeper into the artworks of Ai Weiwei by viewing a documentary about the *According to What?* exhibit, titled *Never Sorry*. Students then have time to research and view the exhibits mentioned in the documentary, and our discussion of Ai's activism around the 2008 earthquake helps them gain a better understanding of how art is being used to make a statement about the Chinese government. Students are then split into groups to examine specific works by Ai and connect them to current issues in China. In particular, we focus on the exhibits *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995/2009; *Colored Vases*, 2007–2010;<sup>5</sup> and *According to What?*, 2012–2013,<sup>6</sup> and students gain an understanding of how Ai's works address government corruption, oppression, and abandonment of tradition.

Students are then tasked with connecting this method of political protest to another example from history. Students are divided into groups and assigned an artist to research—popular choices in the past have included Jacques Louis David, an artist who depicted scenes from the French Revolution that were often critical of the old regime; John Heartfield, who used Dadaist art to mock the Third Reich, despite a threat of being sentenced to a concentration camp for his work; Peter Seger, an American folk singer who raised awareness about a variety of causes, including the labor movement and the Việt Nam War; and Fela, a Nigerian singer who used pidgin English to speak against the government. As a culminating activity,

students compile their research into a museum exhibit on their assigned artist. We invite students from other classes to come and explore the dissident art museum we have created in my classroom.

While not entirely Asia-related, this topic engages students, and Ai's importance in understanding twenty-first-century China is not lost on them. I find the connections to other artists enhances students' international-mindedness (a key topic in my IB world school!) and enables them to understand artists and protests from other cultures in a more empathetic lens. Ai Weiwei's exhibits are so provocative and engaging that there are often more available than I can include in classroom time, so please consider examining some of his other installations such as *Sunflower Seeds*, *Alcatraz*, and *Zodiac Heads*. ■

#### NOTES

1. James A. Dorn, "Why Is China's Xi Cracking Down on Free Speech?," *Newsweek*, May 22, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybgdwrk4>.
2. "China: Olympics Harm Key Human Rights," *Human Rights Watch*, April 17, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/ygcgvzazz>.
3. "China's Human Rights Record—in 60 Seconds," *The Telegraph*, October 19, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y89jmbg6>.
4. Clifford Coonan, "China's Quake Cover-up," *The Independent*, October 23, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/yaql734k>.
5. Chin-Chin Yap, "Devastating History," *ArtAsiaPacific* 78 (2012), <https://tinyurl.com/k2vjb3m>.
6. Leah Binkovitz, "Ai Weiwei Takes Over the Smithsonian: 'According to What?' Opens at the Hirshhorn," *Smithsonian*, October 3, 2012, <https://tinyurl.com/yd85bw6g>.



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