

Sidedoor Season 2 Episode 6 Artist in Dissidence Final Transcription

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Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Tony Cohn.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Time travel with me for a second to 1995. We're in Beijing. An artist walks out of his mother's house holding a large, rounded ceramic vase. It's priceless. It's more than 2,000 years old. It's survived earthquakes, fires, even the rise and fall of dynasties. Its value to Chinese culture can't be measured. The artist turns toward the camera, stares it down, and as the shutter snaps, he lets the vase slip between his fingers and it smashes onto a brick floor.

[SMASHING CLASS SFX]

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: The vase drop is shown in triptych. That's three photos shown in panels next to each other. The first image is pre-drop, the second, mid-drop, and the last? Shards are everywhere.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: The artist's expression doesn't change from photo to photo. For dropping a really historic object, his face is impassive. He doesn't seem mad, and he certainly doesn't seem apologetic. The resulting artwork, titled appropriately, "Dropping of a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995," reflects this face. It's almost aggressively bland. It makes a statement with its non-statement.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: For some, this was a necessary, provocative act. A reference to the way that Communist China controlled and erased dynastic history.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: For others, this brazen destruction of an artifact was highly controversial.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Okay. So, who is this guy? This is the artist, Ai Weiwei. And he's been using his work to make political statements, and courting controversy while doing so, since his public debut in the late 1970s.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: And in a second, we're going to meet him and find out more about his provocative works of art, right after this break.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Sometimes on Sidedoor, okay, maybe a lot of the time on Sidedoor, we get our wildest wishes granted. One of mine? A one-on-one sit-down with the iconic Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei. As a sorta self-proclaimed art buff who's worked at the Smithsonian for a long time, I was pretty freaking stoked!

Tony Cohn: (Whispers) I can like, see him kind of. My hands, my hands are sweaty. I hope he doesn't notice.

Tony Cohn: Ai Weiwei was coming to D.C. for a series of firsts: His first time at the Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and his first time seeing his current exhibit, *Trace*, in person. But before you meet him, you really need to be able to know his work to fully appreciate his voice. Ai Weiwei's debut as an artist was in 1979. And, by then, his relationship with his native country, China, was already complicated.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: His father, Ai Qing, was a renowned poet and scholar, who enjoyed a great deal of success in China during his early career, but in 1958, when Ai Weiwei was just one year old, Ai Qing was accused of voicing anti-Communist sentiments, and was forced to work in the northernmost regions of China, confined menial labor in work camps.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: And so, Ai Weiwei's formative experiences taught him about his country's ability to suppress political opposition by cracking down on anyone that thinks differently. When I asked him about his dad, here's what he told me:

Ai Weiwei: In my father's life has been reflected in the struggle of a Chinese, fighting for freedom through the Japanese occupation and fighting for fairness and justice for society. And also, he was punished by Communist society. So, I grew up with him in these kind of camps. So, I think his art and his poetry teaches me so much about human dignity and fight for the fairness and justice in the society.

Tony Cohn: He's a little hard to hear because he's so soft spoken. I found myself leaning in closer to hear everything he was saying. But basically, the gist of his quote is that his Dad fought for fairness and justice from both the Communists and the Japanese when they occupied parts of China in the 20th century. And because of his efforts, he ended up in work camps. Ai Weiwei's Father spent 21 years in exile, but was reinstated in 1979. By then, Ai Weiwei had grown up seeing firsthand what happens when a Chinese citizen speaks out against the government. And still, he started taking on the Communist regime himself. And as a result, his own path began to look like his Dad's.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Remember the Beijing Olympics?

IOC President: I now have the honor of asking the President of the People's Republic of China to open the games of the 29th Olympiad of the modern era.

[Cheers. President greets crowd in Chinese. Roar of applause.]

Tony Cohn: The year was 2008. The stadium, built exclusively for Beijing's Olympic Games, was massive. 91,000 seats with a \$400 million price tag and Ai Weiwei helped design it.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: It isn't exactly a place you'd expect to find a dissident artist: designing a stadium for the Chinese government to display its architectural and athletic power. And by the end of the Olympics, Ai Weiwei had reached the same conclusion. And, true to his nature, he was not quiet about it. Here's a report from the BBC that covered Ai Weiwei's displeasure.

Report from the BBC: Ai described the Beijing 2008 Olympics as a show that the Chinese Communist regime put on. He said quote, "The Beijing Olympics have oppressed the life of the general public with the latest technologies and a security apparatus of 700,000 police guards. It was merely a stage for a political party, the Chinese Communist Party, to advertise its glory to the world. Since the Olympics, I haven't looked at the stadium."

Tony Cohn: Keep in mind that challenging state power is a criminal offense in China. And, not to belabor the point, but his Dad spent 21 years in exile. Ai Weiwei knew what he was doing and he was just getting warmed up.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: In 2009, he put together an exhibit called, "Remembering," a piece that was very contentious. A BBC documentary put it this way.

[MUSIC]

BBC Documentary: Ai Weiwei has always been outspoken, but a recent project put him in direct confrontation with the government. An earthquake in the Sichuan province in 2008 caused many school buildings to collapse, resulting in the death of thousands of children.

Tony Cohn: To honor their lives, and represent their loss, Ai Weiwei covered the entire facade of the Museum of Art in Munich, Germany with 9,000 children's backpacks in primary colors. the

BBC Documentary: They spelled out the heartfelt words of one grieving mother whose child was killed in the earthquake.

[MUSIC]

BBC Documentary: "She lived happily in this world for seven years."

[MUSIC]

Melissa Chiu: He began to have a kind of political commentary that was above and beyond art making. He kind of came out with a politically motivated statement that was in essence trying to memorialize those thousands of children who had been killed in the earthquake and subsequently because of shoddy construction.

Tony Cohn: That's Melissa Chiu. She's the Director of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Melissa Chiu: And so, in some ways the undercurrent was that he was calling attention to that the construction contracts, some of which were government, most of which were government, and so, it kind of was an implicit criticism of the government.

Tony Cohn: Melissa is also an Art Historian who's curated over thirty international exhibitions, mainly focused on the artists of Asia. We met in her office to talk about Ai Weiwei, who she's known for over 20 years.

Melissa Chiu: He in fact is an artist from the very beginning in the 70s; was very much an agent provocateur.

Tony Cohn: He told the ABC Australian news that in 2011, he was imprisoned for 81 days for tax evasion.

[MUSIC]

Ai Weiwei: I was locked into a room with 2 soldiers next to me. Of course, they could not talk to me. I would sit exactly like this, positioned all day and they would watch me for 24 hours a day. And they just look at me sternly at me like this.

ABC Australian News Reporter: That's torture.

Ai Weiwei: Well, it's mental torture.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Even after that traumatic run-in, Ai Weiwei still followed up, "Remembering" with an ambitious 2010 exhibition, "Sunflower Seeds," at London's Tate Modern Museum.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: He hired 1,600 Chinese artisans to paint 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds, by hand. Okay. Let me say that again. 100 million hand painted sunflower seeds. Each had its own unique pattern and style. The Sunflower Seeds exhibition was impressive for its own sake. I mean, it was this fascinating, sprawling artistic feat, but the exhibit also protested China's cheap labor and mass production practices and the toll they took on workers in the country. The choice of sunflower seeds is not random, either. During The Great Chinese Famine, which started in 1958, sunflower seeds were one of the few things around to eat. Before its end, over 25 million citizens starved to death. The Chinese government is often blamed. 100 million sunflower seeds in a museum is definitely one way to say, "never forget."

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: And by this point, China had had enough. The soft-spoken artist had bugged the power structure to the point where they felt they had to do something.

[MUSIC]

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Tony Cohn: Ai Weiwei's passport was confiscated at the airport in Beijing in 2011, but that didn't stop him from making big, provocative, authority-challenging art from within China; what it did do was prevent him from being able to see it on display around the world.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: After the break, we'll head back to the Hirshhorn to talk all about *Trace*, Ai Weiwei's ambitious new installation that he hasn't been able to see on display in person, until now.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: I recently walked through Ai Weiwei's new exhibit, *Trace*.

Tony Cohn: I am riding the escalator right now, up to the Ai Weiwei exhibit. The museum hasn't opened yet. I feel so super cool. And the first thing that I see is this gold wallpaper. It's filled with Twitter birds and surveillance cameras. And one of the Hirshhorn staff members pointed out to me that if you look closely at the surveillance cameras, that you can see a naked Ai Weiwei in them, which is kind of wild!

Tony Cohn: In addition to the dystopian wallpaper, the exhibit includes a series of 176 portraits of political dissidents. And while I was there, I asked a few visitors about their reaction to it.

Visitor: So, I just walked through four art installations by Ai Weiwei about the history of political dissidence and the number of countries around the world.

Visitor: It's basically, in Legos, the pictures of a bunch of political prisoners, dissidents, um, you know, activists, people that he obviously wants to draw attention to. And so, yeah. If anything, I was struck by how many dissidents...

Visitor: It really gets you thinking, the wallpaper and things, just the whole security cameras and the Twitter birds, and it really makes you think about society as a whole and I guess that's what the artist wants, the impression he wants to give.

Melissa Chiu: So, *Trace* is a work that was originally commissioned for display at Alcatraz.

Tony Cohn: That's Melissa Chiu again, Director of the Hirshhorn Museum.

Melissa Chiu: It's portraits of prisoners of political conscience. And by that, I mean people who have been imprisoned for their beliefs.

Tony Cohn: Some of the prisoners of conscience include names that we all know: Nelson Mandela, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning, but Ai Weiwei also portrayed many people who are less famous like Shiva Nazar Ahari, an Iranian Journalist, and Miriam Ibraheem, a Sudanese woman imprisoned for her marriage to a Christian man.

Melissa Chiu: And Ai Weiwei looked very carefully at the Amnesty International lists of people and identified 170 odd people who he essentially created portraits out of Lego.

Tony Cohn: Yep! All the portraits are made out of children's toys. LEGOs. It may seem like an odd choice with such serious subject matter, but when Ai Weiwei explains it, it makes a lot of sense.

Ai Weiwei: Lego is only a media. And you know, we use pencil to make a drawing. We may use color to make a painting. We use mud to make a sculpture and the Lego is a modern media children would always use and I think it has a nice color and has all those little blocks, which can be precise in dealing with a shape or a form. So, I think it's modern language and it's a language that everybody understands and most people like it and had the experience in relating to it.

Tony Cohn: The Legos aren't the sole focus of the exhibit; neither, really, are the individuals they portray. It's about starting a conversation about the hidden power structures that make society tick, and sometimes, abused public trust. Melissa Chiu echoed this as she told us about one of her favorite Ai Weiwei memories from an Art Gala they attended together.

Melissa Chiu: And we had this glittering kind of curtain to hide all of the back end of the sound and AV. So, he came into the room. The first thing he did was go straight for that curtain to see what was behind it. And I always think that that is a really good example of his M.O. That he's interested in the power structures behind things and the understanding that and because of his life experiences, he's much more attuned. I wouldn't say cynical, but he's, he's sensitive to how that power structure works.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: And Ai Weiwei says he responds to that balance of power in his art.

[MUSIC]

Ai Weiwei: I think art and political struggle can never be separated. I think our life is full of past static judgement; same time, forward moral judgement and a less ethical understanding of who we are or where we come from and how the future is gonna be.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: What Ai Weiwei just said here really stuck with me. Art and political struggle can never be separated and that our future is up to the choices we make, informed by where we've come from and who we want to be.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: It makes me rethink some of my own ideas about the purpose of art. Yes, art can be admired for just its beauty, but it can also make big political statements that challenge the status quo, and make us ask hard questions, and think critically about the world we live in.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Ai Weiwei's political work does just that and it does so at great personal risk to the artist himself. It makes a strong case that personal freedom and creative freedom are worth the risk.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: A message just as relevant and powerful today as it was in generations past.
[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: You can see Ai Weiwei's, *Trace*, exhibit at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, here in Washington, D.C., now through January 1st 2018.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: We also have a very cool link on our website: si.edu/Sidedoor, where you can explore the LEGO portraits and learn more about the people who are depicted in them.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: We wanted to give a special thanks to Carly Lamke, our Sidedoor intern who did incredible work for us this summer. Carly, good luck on your Senior year and take us home.

[MUSIC]

Carly Lamke: Hi! My name is Carly and I go to the University of Wisconsin. Today is my last day as the Sidedoor intern and I'm going to read the credits.

[MUSIC]

Carly Lamke: So, wish me luck. Here it goes!

[MUSIC]

Carly Lamke: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Carly Lamke: If you like this episode, please leave us a review in Apple Podcasts. More reviews will help more people find this podcast or you can just tell someone about it in real life. That's what I always do.

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Carly Lamke: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Stacia Brown, Jason Orfanon, Gabe Kosowitz, Jess Sadeq and me. Extra support comes from Casey McAdams, Barbara Rehm, Nico Porcaro and Elisabeth Pilger. Tony Cohn is the host. I'm your intern, Carly Lamke. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]