



A Willow for Ai Weiwei



Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was detained by plainclothes police officers at Beijing airport on 3 April 2011. He was hooded before being put in a car and driven to secret locations where he was held until his release on June 22.

For a time 'two officers watched him round the clock, their faces often inches from his, even monitoring him as he slept and insisting he put his hands on top of the blanket. He was not allowed to speak and had to request permission to drink water and use the toilet. "It was immense psychological pressure," a Reuters' source said. When Ai told police their actions were illegal, officers replied: "Do you know before Liu Shaoqi died, he was holding the constitution?... Talk about illegality, there's no difference between the country that we are in now and the time of the Cultural Revolution." Liu was one of China's top leaders but was purged and died during the brutal political turmoil which Mao Zedong unleashed in the 1960s.....

Even on the day of his release, officers reminded Ai he could still face 10 years in jail for inciting subversion to state power – a vaguely-worded charge often used against dissidents – the source said. He had to agree to conditions including no media interviews, no meetings with foreigners, no use of the internet and no interaction with human rights advocates for one year from his return home.

Ai has given few details of his detention, beyond saying that he experienced "extreme conditions", and says he is not able to give interviews. But he has spoken to media including the Guardian, and [attacked the treatment of friends held because of him in several Twitter messages](#).¹

A Willow for Ai Weiwei (Wen Tao, Liu Zhenggang, Zhang Ginseng and Hu Mingfen) was conceived whilst the artist was in detention. It commemorates his disappearance, and the continuing harassment of his friends and colleagues.

He appears to have been held by the Chinese authorities because of his practice as a contemporary visual artist. As well as campaigning for more openness in Chinese society, through his work Ai Weiwei has also been responsible for a growing awareness in the West of the richness of Chinese art, history and culture. He is a great example of the positive, growing cross-cultural activity in Sino-European relations in recent years.

The *Willow Pattern* was designed in Stoke on Trent in the early part of the nineteenth century. It was loosely based on imported Chinese porcelain with painted landscapes. It is the most commonly produced printed ceramic pattern ever made, and is familiar to millions the world over. Weiwei too has become an international phenomena through his artworks and installations.

All the figures in *A Willow For Ai Weiwei* have been erased, alluding to the disappearing artist and his friends. Where Weiwei might have been can be seen as a white silhouette in the centre of the bridge as he drops a Han dynasty urn (a reference to one of his earlier artworks).² Sunflower seeds are scattered around the platter alluding to his installation in Tate Modern 2010/11.³ The back of the plate also has sunflower seeds and features the spray poster 'Who's afraid of Ai Weiwei' which appeared all over Hong Kong shortly after his detention. Also listed are the names of his friends and colleagues, several of whom remain in police custody. The original makers mark is joined by Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) and Real Art stamps which are

¹ Guardian newspaper 10/8/11. www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/aug/10/ai-weiwei-chinese-police

²Ai Weiwei Artwork 1995.

³ <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/unileverseries2010/>

signature marks on all my artworks. The Willow plate by an unknown factory is probably nearly nearly 200 years old and was purchased on ebay in 2011.



The artwork is one of a small series of *Weiwei Willow* plates. The first is in the collection of the National Museum of Art Architecture and Design in Oslo, purchased during *Ting Tang Trash* exhibition at Bergen's Permanenten Vestlandske Kunstindustrimuseum in the autumn of 2011. In 2013 another was purchased by The Crafts Council⁴ and a small Weiwei platter was acquired by the Arizona State University Art Museum.

Paul Scott June 2014



⁴ www.craftscouncil.org.uk

www.cumbrianblues.com