

Opinion | Ai Weiwei: How Censorship Works

Ai Weiwei

The Stone



Image



CreditCreditJon Han

BEIJING — In the space of a month in 2014, at separate art exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai that included my work, my name was blotted out — in one case by government officials and by exhibitors themselves in the other case. Some people might take such treatment in stride, as nothing to get huffy about. But as an artist, I view the labels on my work as a measure of the value I have produced — like water-level markers at a riverbank. Other people might just shrug, but I can't. I have no illusions, though, that my unwillingness to shrug affects anyone else's willingness to do so.

Life in China is saturated with pretense. People feign ignorance and speak in ambiguities. Everyone in China knows that a censorship system exists, but there is very little discussion of *why* it exists.

At first glance, the censorship seems invisible, but its omnipresent washing of people's feelings and perceptions creates limits on the information people receive, select and rely upon. The content offered by the Chinese state media, after its processing by political censors, is not free information. It is information that has been chosen, filtered and assigned its place, inevitably restricting the free and independent will of readers and viewers.

The harm of a censorship system is not just that it impoverishes intellectual life; it also fundamentally distorts the rational order in which the natural and spiritual worlds are understood. The censorship system relies on robbing a person of the self-perception that one needs in order to maintain an independent existence. It cuts off one's access to independence and happiness.

Censoring speech removes the freedom to choose what to take in and to express to others, and this inevitably leads to depression in people. Wherever fear dominates, true happiness vanishes and individual willpower runs dry. Judgments become distorted and rationality itself begins to slip away. Group behavior can become wild, abnormal and violent.

Whenever the state controls or blocks information, it not only reasserts its absolute power; it also elicits from the people whom it rules a voluntary submission to the system and an acknowledgment of its dominion. This, in turn, supports the axiom of the debased: Accept dependency in return for practical benefits.

The most elegant way to adjust to censorship is to engage in self-censorship. It is the perfect method for allying with power and setting the stage for the mutual exchange of benefit. The act of kowtowing to power in order to receive small pleasures may seem minor; but without it, the brutal assault of the censorship system would not be possible.

For people who accept this passive position toward authority, “getting by” becomes the supreme value. They smile, bow and nod their heads, and such behavior usually leads to lifestyles that are comfortable, trouble free and even cushy. This attitude is essentially defensive on their part. It is obvious that in any dispute, if one side is silenced, the words of the other side will go unquestioned.

That’s what we have here in China: The self-silenced majority, sycophants of a powerful regime, resentful of people like me who speak out, are doubly bitter because they know that their debasement comes by their own hand. Thus self-defense also becomes self-comfort.

Because the censorship system needs cooperation and tacit understanding from the censored, I disagree with the common view that the censored are simply its victims. Voluntary self-censorship brings benefits to a person, and the system would not work if the voluntary aspect were not there.

People who willingly censor themselves are vulnerable to moral challenges of many kinds. They have never been victims and never will be, despite their occasional show of tear wiping. Each time they display their servility, they bring warmth to the hearts of the authoritarians and harm to people who protest. Their craven stance, as it becomes widespread, also becomes the deeper reason for the moral collapse of our society. If these people believe that their choice to cooperate is the only way to avoid victimhood, they are embarking on an ill-fated journey in the dark.

The system rewards ordinary people for their cooperation automatically; there is no need for them to compete for the rewards. Managers of artistic and cultural projects, though, need to do more than that; they need to show proactively that they “get it” and will accommodate the authoritarians and protect their public image. They know that if anything causes unhappiness higher up, a project, and perhaps an organization, will be scrubbed.

In this kind of system, where works of art rise or fall not in free competition but by corrupt criteria, any creator of art that has any genuine vitality must act dumb and agree to tacit understandings.

It is well known that I cannot speak in any public forum. My name is expunged everywhere in the public media. I am not allowed to travel within China and am banned from the state media, where I am regularly scolded. Commentators in the state media pretend to be evenhanded, but that’s impossible, given where they sit, behind the state’s protective curtain. They don’t address topics like the right to free speech or the quality of life for the vast majority of Chinese. Their special expertise is in unscrupulous attacks on voices that have already been repressed.

My *virtual* existence, if we can call it that, exists only among people who notice me by choice, and those people fall clearly into two categories: those who see my behavior as strengthening the meaning of their lives and those who see me as obstructing their roads to benefit, and for that reason cannot pardon me.

Only when China offers fair and just platforms for expression of public opinion will we have ways of meeting minds by using our words. I support the establishment of such platforms. This should be the first principle in making social justice possible. But in a place where everything is fake, right down to the last hair, anyone who stands up to quibble about truth seems naïve, even childlike. In the end, I find the “naïve” route the only one left open to me. I am obliged to be as narrow-minded as those “narrow-minded” Uighurs and Tibetans we hear about.

An artist is a mover, a political participant. Especially in times of historic change, aesthetic values will always have an advantage. A society that persecutes people who persist in cleaving to individual values is an uncivilized society that has no future.

When a person's values are put on public display, the standards and ethics of that person and of the society as a whole may be challenged. An individual's free expression can stimulate a more distinctive kind of exchange and will, in turn, lead to more distinctive ways of exchanging views. This principle is inherent in my philosophy of art.

The censorship in China places limits on knowledge and values, which is the key to imposing ideological slavery. I do what I can to show cruelties, the subtle and the not so subtle. As things are here today, rational resistance can be based only on the small actions of individual people. Where I fail, the responsibility is mine alone, but the rights I seek to defend are ones that can be shared.

Ideological slaves, too, can revolt. In the end, they always do.

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