

3 THEATER

Mary Todd Lincoln as a thwarted cabaret star?

5 COMEDY

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, forever friends, try stand-up.



7 TRAVEL

In the home of the Singapore Sling, bars that serve up unexpected delights.

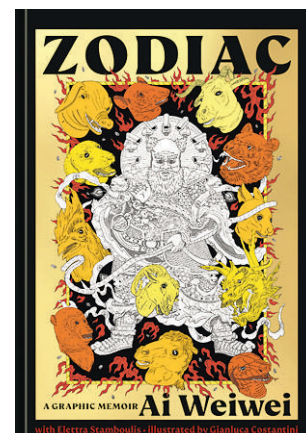
Arts

The New York Times



The artist Ai Weiwei in Berlin with "Water Lilies #2" (2022), his reinterpretation of Monet's work made from Lego bricks. "Zodiac," by Ai and two collaborators, was released last month.

A new book from Ai Weiwei draws on memories and mythology to explain his artistic philosophy and China.



Stories Shaped By Time And Loss

By JONATHAN LANDRETH

As the Year of the Dragon dawns, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has released "Zodiac," a "graphic memoir" of scenes from his career — both real (hanging with Allen Ginsberg, the O.G. of Beat poets, in 1980s Greenwich Village) and imagined (debating Xi Jinping, China's paramount leader). Each chapter frames the artist's take on traditional beliefs about the characteristics humans share with the 12 animals of the Chinese lunar calendar. Gianluca Costantini's intricate line drawings pair with Elettra Stamboulis's comic-bubble text to help expand Ai's lifelong campaign for free expression to a new medium for a new generation. Ai spoke with Jonathan Landreth about parents and parenting, punk rock and the passage of time, all via video chat last week from Berlin.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

A zodiac cycle ago, in 2012, you were just out of jail and tired of Beijing trying to silence you. "Twitter is my city," you told me. Now you live in Berlin, Cambridge and Portugal. Where's your city today?

Twitter was my city because it was the only place for my expression at that time. Since 2015, when I left China, conditions have changed. I was under such pressure in China. Suddenly, I came to the so-called free world and Twitter was not so important. It was just one of the tools.

I consider nowhere home. Not China and not outside China. It's strange. I just came
CONTINUED ON PAGE C6

JAMES PONIEWOZIK | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Legal Arguments Are Must-Hear TV

Supreme Court's ballot case over Trump led to some novel broadcasts.

IF YOU WERE to list the ingredients of riveting live television, you would probably not include still photos, empty TV studios and parsing the nuances between the nouns "office" and "officer."

Thursday's Supreme Court arguments over Colorado's attempt to remove former President Donald J. Trump from the ballot on the grounds of insurrection had all of those. But the proceedings, carried via live audio on cable news, also had two essentials of must-watch (or -hear) TV: High stakes and novelty.

The stakes were clear, whether or not you could follow the dissection of the insurrection clause of the 14th Amendment. There are few things as important in a democracy as the decision of who gets to run in the next presidential election, not to mention the responsibility, and the consequences, for attempting to overturn the previous one.

The broadcast was novel in more than one way. The Supreme Court only began livestreaming oral arguments in 2020, during the pandemic. Having such consequen-
CONTINUED ON PAGE C2

GIA KOURLAS | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Merce Is in the Purse

The current season of 'The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills' serves this incongruous mash-up of reality TV and a key choreographer of modern dance.

"CAN YOU GET my drink, and I'll get Merce?"

In certain circles — OK, mine — that name can belong to only one person: Merce Cunningham, the 20th-century choreographer who reshaped modern dance. Over the past few weeks, his name has come up in the strangest of places: "The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills."

On recent episodes, Sutton Stracke traveled to Spain with her fellow Housewives. Along with racks of designer clothes, she brought Cunningham's ashes packed in a Ziploc bag. Cunningham, it turns out, was one of the most important men in her pre-"Housewives" life, and she wanted to release the ashes "in a significant place and make this a really meaningful trip."

Dismay ensued. "Put me in a Birkin, fine," said Kyle Richards, another Housewife. "But a Ziploc? No."

And out of Erika Girardi's tipsy mouth poured this gem at dinner: "Merce is in the purse."

CONTINUED ON PAGE C5



Sutton Stracke with Merce Cunningham (in the purse) on "The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills." In her 20s, Stracke was a dancer and worked for the Cunningham Dance Foundation.



* From Ai Qing's poem "Hope" in *The Red Azalea: Chinese Poetry Since the Cultural Revolution*, Edward Morin, ed., Trans. by Fang Dai, Dennis Ding, and Edward Morin. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, November 1990.
** Xibo are burnt offerings common in Chinese ancestral worship.



Pages from "Zodiac," a book from Ai Weiwei, promoted as a "graphic memoir," with drawings by Gianluca Costantini and bubble text by Elettra Stamboulis.

Stories Shaped by Time and Loss

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

back from New York. I consider none of these cities home. Home means you close your eyes and imagine the street and recognize a few names you grew up with. None of these places have this.

In "Zodiac," you teach your son, Ai Lao, the legend of the Jade Emperor creating the calendar. What did you learn by explaining time?

Some say time is only an illusion. The illusion can be painful, or it can be happy. Some live in the past, and some struggle in the present. Someone may have no future. It's hard to explain what time is about. The new generation needs some kind of reference when we talk about time. I can talk about the years I lived in Xinjiang, or the time my father was dying so I moved back to China from New York. You really need events to illustrate time. My son will turn 15 soon, so his time will be in China, then Germany, then England. That's how he'll understand it.

In a few "Zodiac" illustrations we see your son speaking with an image of your father, the poet Ai Qing, at his grave. Do you speak to him too?

It was an awkward situation. Ai Lao is a very independent boy. Perhaps it's due to his experiences. He has his own perspective and independent way of thinking. Sometimes we tried not to let him voice his feelings, but he bowed to my father's image, which we never do — head down to the ground. We never had that education and we never taught him to do that. How could a child do that? This surprised me. But it was natural, to show this kind of respect.

I don't communicate with my father anymore. Not before he passed and not after. I regret I never asked him a solid question — what did he think about China or his time? I should have and it's too late. Each generation bears the same situation. I wouldn't want Ai Lao to ask me those questions. [But] his world will not be the same as mine. Probably my father never tried to pass his experience to me because he realized there was not much of a lesson to give to the next generation. That's tragic. There's a strong sense of loss that carries more value than any material life. It's like being cut off from the most intimate relationship.

Some of "Zodiac" looks drawn from photographs, and some seems to depict dreams. Describe the process and why you chose the graphic medium for the sequel to your 2021 prose memoir.

Gianluca, the illustrator, and his wife, Elettra, and I sat together. The idea was to gather things from my memory, like a timeline, and offer mystical stories from China's past. I explained it as a mix of memory and mythology. We thought this would relate not just my experience but general knowledge for whoever was interested. It's a story with so much related to my situation that the publisher called it a memoir, but it's not. Memory is subjective. We choose some things to remember and lots to forget.

Most images in the book are related to photos because I post all my images on Instagram. They did the research. They asked questions and I answered. I never wrote a sentence, but I did edit. All the dialogue in the book is based on my interviews.

So it's a collection of things you've said? Yes. It's almost like an A.I. work.



MARIA STURM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

'Memory is subjective. We choose some things to remember and lots to forget.'

AI WEIWEI
SPEAKING ABOUT THE PROCESS OF PUTTING TOGETHER HIS NEW BOOK, "ZODIAC"

Each animal represents a different characteristic. The mouse is a trickster, and the ox is loyal. Does birth year determine personality and compatibility?

When we were growing up as communists we didn't have these superstitions. Gradually I realized through my zodiac artwork the profound meaning of this mythology to help understand individuals and society. It's very different from the West, where you turn to the stars for meaning. Chinese relate to the animals around them. Only one of them is mystical, the dragon. This year, the Year of the Dragon, is supposed to be the most uneasy, uncertain, or dramatic year, which might be true. Us Chinese, we all believe in these animals, which, strangely enough, have often turned out to be more reliable about personal character, about who to associate with. It's friendly knowledge, but the ones who believe in it really believe.

You're a rooster who left China, which now

is led by Xi Jinping, a snake — a rooster's natural friend on the compatibility chart. We're supposed to be friends, but we've had no chance to meet yet. There are 100 million roosters and 100 million snakes in China.

Am I mistaken, or is there in "Zodiac" an imagining of you debating the snake?
It's a drawing by Gianluca. I think that face looks familiar to me. He is such a good illustrator. He can use simple lines to really capture the character.

If you met the snake, what would you say?
"Be a nice snake." In Chinese, every animal is not good or bad. They all can be nice.

As an example of a tiger, you name the Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo, who died in 2017 after his release from prison. Who are today's courageous tigers?

Internationally, the U.S. is still the tiger, but it's a pretty old tiger. We have a Chinese idiom, "Even a dead tiger still has power"—because it has that look, that skin. The U.S.

is still alive, still dominates and affects the global situation. In China, the Communist Party is the tiger. The party has existed for 103 years and reached almost 100 million people. No other party can be this big for this long and still function very well, even with tremendous internal problems. It's a system which is not just a political structure but has inherited a fatalistic society from the Qin dynasty 2,000 years ago. Now, under the so-called opening up, they have survived and are catching up in every aspect with a kind of state capitalism. They don't have the disadvantages of classic capitalism. They have a longer strategy, a bigger plan. They can play the game differently.

But who are the individual tigers with courage to speak out like Liu Xiaobo?

There's no such person in China. Cats and tigers look the same, but China doesn't even have cats.

The rabbit represents immortality and art. With the time you have left will you, like the German artist Joseph Beuys, who is featured in "Zodiac," plant trees that thrive outdoors in open, public spaces, for all to see, or will you continue to show indoors, at museums that charge admission and are subject to political pressures?

For artists today, there are so many possibilities to not repeat this old game, which has lost interest and doesn't connect with our human experience any more. I used galleries, museums and art fairs only because I saw them as ready-made. They're just platforms, but absolutely not necessary.

After you posted a polarizing comment about the Israel-Hamas war, London's Lisson Gallery delayed a show of your new art. (The tweet was deleted.) When will the show open?

I have absolutely no sense. Show or no show, it doesn't make any difference to me.

You've long stuck your finger in the eye of authority, and you remain committed to free speech. You arrived in New York in 1981 just before the British punk band the Clash stormed American radio with the song "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" That question appears in your chapter on the dragon, a symbol of individual freedom. Was that conscious?

It was a conscious choice by Elettra, who employed a lot of wordplay and verbal information.

How punk rock did you feel when you left China in 2015?

I was a punk rock singer without a voice. I love that medium, but I am the furthest I can be from being a musician.

Your art seems to express impatience with the world. Which artists in China share your impatience?

My art doesn't actually express impatience with the world. In reality, the world is indifferent, so my impatience doesn't hold much significance. Yet, there are frustrating moments in life, akin to a poorly written sentence that could be improved. My art is related to so-called contemporary practice, philosophy or ethics. In China, almost nobody has experience with this kind of modernism or contemporary culture. They have good, meaningful and skillful art, but it cannot be clearly discussed or interpreted. They are lost. The conversation is lost. It's not good or bad. It's just like the U.S.-China conversation, politically: also lost. They're not talking on the same page.