



Marcia G. Yerman, Contributor

Writer on women's issues, human rights, environment and culture



Chinese Dissident Wei JingSheng featured at International Human Rights Art Festival in NYC

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On the weekend of March 3, *The International Human Rights Art Festival* was held in New York City. Presented by [The Institute of Prophetic Activist Art](#), it was co-sponsored and housed at [Dixon Place](#).

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Tom Block, who wears a number of hats including activist, writer, and artist, was the producer of the event. His goal was to bring together various art forms in the service of activism.

I reached out to him, to learn more about the objectives of the event.

What is the mission of the International Human Rights Art Festival?

“The International Human Rights Art Festival was conceived to offer a salving balm to our raw and injured society, using art as the impetus. As Lao Tzu said: ‘Nothing is as soft and yielding as water, but for dissolving the inflexible, nothing is more powerful.’ We looked for art that would use its gentle power to dissolve the inflexible hatred, divisions and anger that is currently so prevalent in our land.”

How did you choose the participants?

“The artists were chosen for the quality of their artwork, their heart and soul, their passion and sincerity, and their honest assessment of the issues they were dealing with. In all cases, they were driven by the ‘I should’ instead of the ‘you should.’ We were very careful to keep a positive and gentle atmosphere, even more so in light of the tremendous divisiveness in our society at this time.”

The Festival covers topics ranging from the death penalty to the environment to disability identity. What is the connective thread?

“All of the work is sincere, beautiful and often very raw. It takes art to its highest level: At that knife’s edge between pain and beauty. Here, resides truth. Here can be found the answer to the anger and divisions in our society.”

With the Trump administration on the cusp of disenfranchising the human rights of many groups in our country, how does this event speak to that concern.

“By softening hatred, opening conversation, expanding ideas of ‘us’ as opposed to ‘them,’ and using soft power to heal wounds rather than exacerbate them.”

Are you concerned about the fate of the arts and creative expression during this administration?

“Many dictatorships have tried to kill artists and control creative output, putting it in service to the state. All have failed. I have no doubt that Donald Trump will fail, as well. Art will still be here when he goes.”

A top highlight of the festival was the presence of Chinese dissident [Wei JingSheng](#), who served as an Honorary Co-Sponsor for the event. He is a renowned human rights activist, a key player in the movement for democracy in China. In 1978, Wei Jingsheng wrote the essay, [Fifth Modernization](#). He posted it in Beijing on what became called the “[Democracy Wall](#).” As a result, Wei JingSheng was arrested and found guilty of “counter-revolution propaganda and agitation.” He remained in jail from 1979–1993. Upon release, Wei Jingsheng resumed being proactive. Speaking to foreign journalists led to his

reincarceration the following year (1994), which lasted until 1997. After eighteen years in various prisons, Wei JingSheng was exiled due to “medical parole.” He came to America in November of 1997.

The testament to his time in prison, [The Courage to Stand Alone: Letters from Prison and Other Writings](#), was released in 1997.

Mr. Wei gave this speech at the opening festivities of the event:

“What is the relationship between art and human rights? As if it were two completely different areas, but it is not so. In countries where human rights are not guaranteed such as in China, where all the spiritual activities are controlled by autocratic government, human rights and art definitely have a very close relationship. In Beijing in 1978, my friends and I launched a Democratic Wall movement. The reason the democratic wall caused a stir in the Chinese society then, was because I and many of my friends published political essays to oppose the one-party dictatorship of the Chinese Communist Party. Interestingly, meanwhile this political movement also gave birth to an artists’ movement. A large number of painters who were repressed in the past and had no place to publish their works, exhibited them on the wall of democracy. They soon formed a new school of painting, called the [Star Exhibition](#). There appeared a large number of famous artists, such as painters Ai Weiwei, Huang Rui, Qu LeiLei, Ma DeSheng; sculptor Wang Keping, and so on. Thus was created a new look of Chinese art since then. In the many publications on the Democratic Wall, there were two famous literary journals. One was by the famous poet [Bei Dao](#) (North Island) who hosted the “Today,” and another called the “Fertile Soil” which gathered a large number of famous writers. They were the pioneers of the new literature of the 1980’s in China, which broke the monotonous style of propaganda by the Communist Party. It created a flourishing situation of various styles, like hundreds of different flowers blooming at the same time. It produced a large number of famous poets and writers, such as Huang Xiang, Shi Zhi, Mang Ke, Gu Cheng, Lao Gui, and so on, as well as a lot of novelists who wrote anonymously. They were all participants of the Democratic Wall movement. Why is the movement of literature and art needed to be combined with the political movement that rebel against an autocratic system? This is because we are all rebels of the Communist system that suppresses human rights. The protection of human rights, freedom of speech, publication, assembly and association are the common need of all. It is like people are indispensable to the air and water — everyone is indispensable to the air and water. Chinese people and Chinese artists are still under the oppression of the Communist autocracy. It is the responsibility of all of us to appeal and strive for their human rights.

Human rights are the common ideals of all of us, and the necessities of those who are still struggling under oppression. Let us fight for the legitimate rights of all the people.”

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