

From The Series Narro, Audio, Perceptum: Untitled Opus June 9, 2013
Neo-Constructivist Wall Sculpture by William A. Noguera

P H O T O G R A P H Y B Y M E L I S S A Y S A I S
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WILLIAM A. NOGUERA

LANDSCAPES OF CONFINEMENT

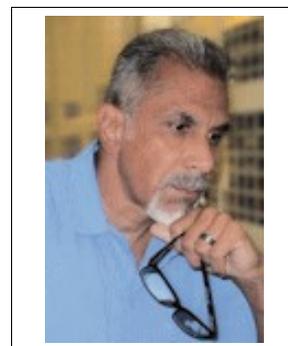
A FICTIONAL INTERVIEW WITH AI WEIWEI



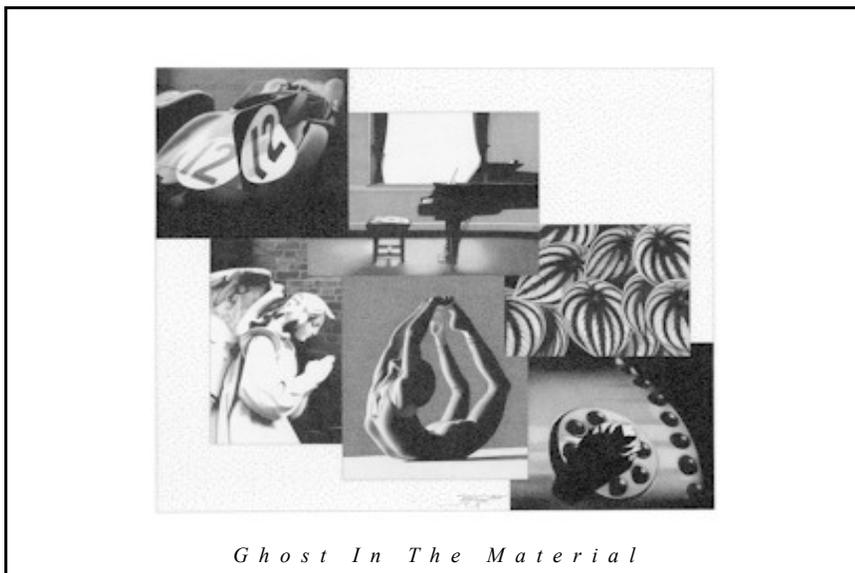
From his 4x10 foot cell on Death Row at San Quentin State Prison, the dissident artist, William A. Noguera, speaks candidly with Ai Weiwei, the internationally recognized leader of the global revolution for free expression. Via Skype, in the first, history-making fictional interview, both artists discuss individualism, the process of art, fear, prejudice and the specter of death.

During the past thirty years, the world has been on a fast track. Never in its history has there been the technological advancements and achievements seen today. With

these advancements, the art world has also seen an up-tick in ways artists use materials, media and technology to express themselves and reach a larger audience. The past thirty years has also seen a massive growth in the building of prisons in the United States. Like the technology sector, the prison industry is a very lucrative sector, where humans, not computer chips, are its main source of commodity and profit. Where human beings spend months, years and even decades locked inside cages of concrete and steel. Faced with little encouragement and even less opportunity for rehabilitation. That is, unless, you're William A. Noguera.



Art has healed William and given him a sense of what could have been. And what still might be.

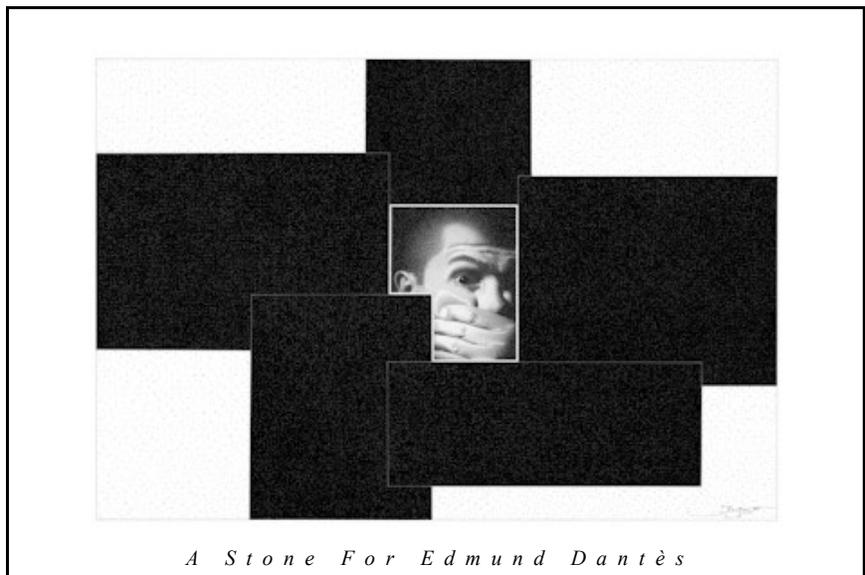


Ghost In The Material

From a somewhat less than auspicious beginning in 1964, William's childhood was not easy nor inspiring and his troubles were two-fold. Caught between a ceaseless war his parents waged against each other, coupled with being discriminated against because he was the only Colombian in a Mexican and Black Los Angeles suburb. It's not unusual for minority groups to discriminate, ostracize and victimize against other minority groups. William was exposed to insurmountable dosages of physical and emotional abuse on a daily basis from both inside and outside of his home. To escape, he hid in his imagination. To protect himself against school bullies and street gangs, young William was enrolled in martial arts training. Art has always been his refuge.

By 1978, at age thirteen, William's father gave him anabolic steroids and the directive to use them as his father would say, "to make you bigger and stronger, to make a man out of you." unaware that although his son would increase in size and strength, his emotional and mental capacities would also amplify and intensify. By 1980, age sixteen, the talented William became Hapkido Middle-Weight Champion.

It was in 1983 that all of these underlying multifactorial troubles came to an unimaginable and highly traumatic peak: prolonged years of enduring familial abuse, anabolic steroid-use and its unknown 'roid-rage' side-effects, commingled with grief and agony. It was ultimately the unforeseen roid-rage explosion over the pitiless abortion of his unborn baby. William, only 18 years old, succumbed to a deadly outburst during an argument with his girlfriends mother, who was responsible for the illegal abortion and termination of the nearly 20-week pregnancy of his girlfriend, her daughter. By the end of that same year he was arrested, tried, then later wrongly convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

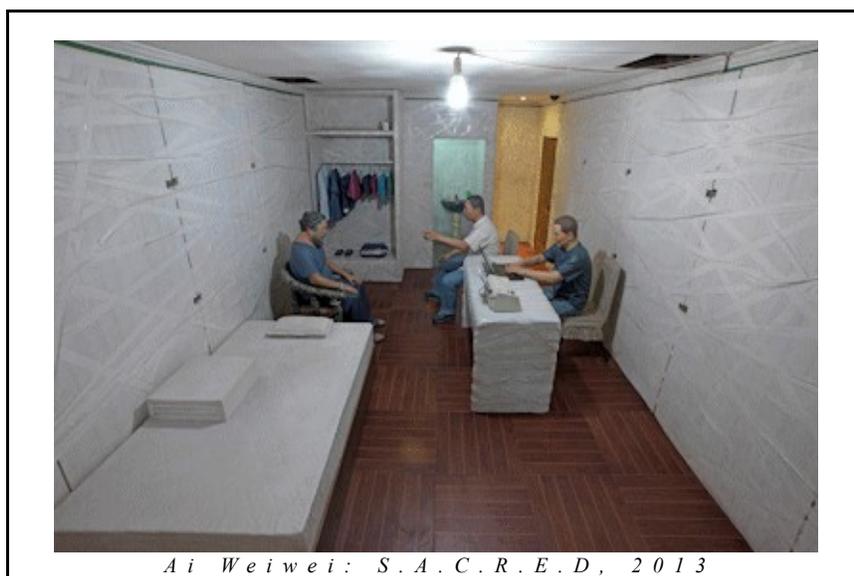


Over thirty years ago, the artist, began his journey of self reflection and profound remorse. With an unyielding focus aimed at steadfast rehabilitation. William, now age fifty, maintains accepting personal responsibility and never stops in making a difference by presenting himself as a positive role model and leading by example.

Today, I sit down with William via Skype from my walled compound in the Chaoyang District of Beijing-China, which serves as my studio and prison.



William, is still on Death Row at San Quentin State Prison and works sixteen hour days surrounded by killers. He is also known as "*The Escape Artist*" which is the title of his soon to be published memoir. Now, instead of escaping through his art, William meets with us to discuss the meaning behind his newly created body of work. Based on the *landscape of his confinement* where he makes the *site of conflict* visible to the viewer.



Ai Weiwei: S.A.C.R.E.D., 2013



AI WEIWEI: Good morning William. Can you see and hear me?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Good morning, yes I can. The feed is very clear.

AI WEIWEI: I spent the last couple of days thinking of what to talk about. It's important to cover a great deal of material to give the audience a clear picture of who William Noguera is and what inspires you to create and express yourself so vividly.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: My journey. The road I've traveled has placed me in situations very hard to explain, but even more difficult to understand. Art has given me the ability to convey what I can't in words, through a visual and emotional vocabulary I'm comfortable with. I suppose that's a good starting point.

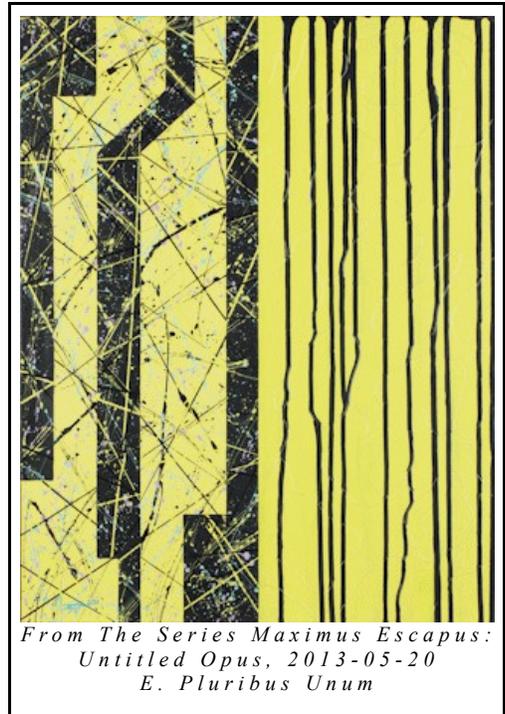
AI WEIWEI: You arrived at San Quentin, one of the most notorious prisons, in 1988 at age twenty-three. What was it like?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Terrifying. At the time, I was one of the youngest persons to be sentenced to death and San Quentin was legendary for its brutality. I was flown in by plane from Southern California, shackled in chains, then thrown into a filthy, dark, rat-infested cell. I was only supposed to be in

solitary confinement for ten days, but was forgotten about and left inside for nearly one month.

AI WEIWEI: I read somewhere that you said alone in that dark cell, where most men become twisted hate-filled creatures of violence, you died as a criminal, and were born as an artist.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Yes. During that traumatic time, I re-lived my childhood, the abuse, the fear and uncertainty. Internally, I returned to a time when to survive I hid in my imagination. But a curious phenomena took place: I split into two halves. One half endured all the abuse and ugliness I experienced as a nine year old child. The other half, the radiant child, was protected deep inside where nothing and no one could harm him. His freedom was to draw, paint and create. The radiant child is the artist, whom I re-discovered inside that cell. I allowed myself to cry from the deepest part of my soul. When he re-emerged, it was as if the blindfold had been lifted from my eyes. I found three pencils hidden in that cell and I began to draw. The flood-gates opened and for sixteen days and nights I escaped that cell, the filth and hate surrounding me., I created a mural on the wall, portraying my subconscious wanderings in photographic detail. Since finding the key, I've escaped this prison every day. My interpretation of perfection is self-reflection. Art is not a luxury. It's a necessity. It was also during this time that I made the conscious decision to rebel against conventional prisoner behavior. That rebellion was to rehabilitate myself. I took responsibility for my actions and restored my state of mind to a time before detrimental influences altered my behavior. I would be forced to live in this world, inside of the prison, but not be of it.





Ai Weiwei: S.A.C.R.E.D., 2013

AI WEIWEI: I imagine that isn't easy to do. In 2011, I spent eighty-one days in prison. But in China, I didn't have to worry about being killed by prison gangs or the constant surveillance by prisoners searching for weaknesses to exploit.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: It isn't easy. But I've survived for thirty-one years. I am not a member of any gang. I am surrounded by violence, crime, drug-use, hate, ignorance and racism. An act of goodness or living by a moral code is not seen as things to strive for. Just the opposite is true. The society I live in respects only a convicts potential for violence. In simple terms: his potential to kill.

AI WEIWEI: How have you survived? What makes you so different from others who are there?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: I am different simply because of my decision to be an individual. From that decision, forward, I've never looked back. The difficulty is in order to become an individual, one must come to terms with fear and respect it.

AI WEIWEI: I'm smiling because your words strike a chord with me. And I think of courage being not fearless, but the ability to act or perform in the face of fear.

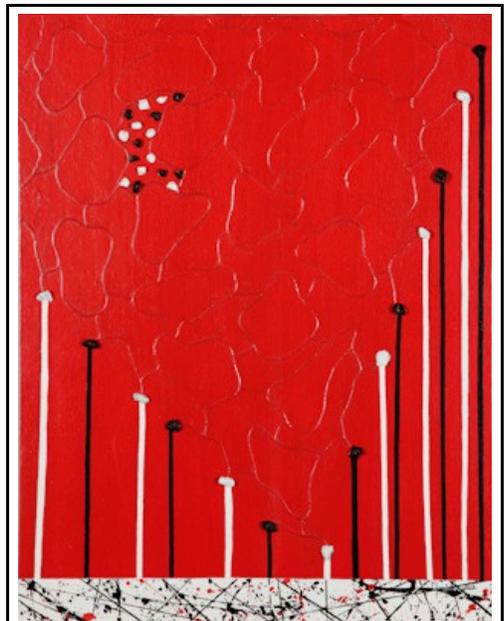
WILLIAM NOGUERA: Absolutely. I never want to lose fear. Only a fool is fearless and I never want to return to the foolishness I once lived my life by.

AI WEIWEI: So would you say the difference between you and other prisoners is your honesty?

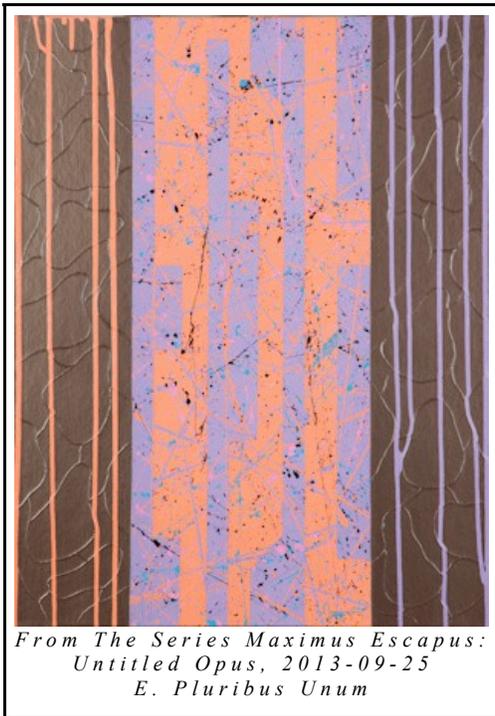
WILLIAM NOGUERA: That's not such an easy question to answer but, yes. It's honesty with myself. I know my strengths, my weaknesses and I embrace them both. In doing so, I understand my potential and fully exercise it. I am also optimistic and recognize how I can help others. I owe a great debt to society. One I'll never forget or ignore. I work at helping others and paying the debt to society by giving back. All of these points of differences I've mentioned lead to individualism, which is based on fear. I fear becoming one of 'them.'

AI WEIWEI: You mentioned giving back. You are known for offering charity donations from the sale of your work. Is that what giving back means to you?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Well, yes and no. In 1998, my work started receiving international attention. But I believe my work had to be more than simply creating and selling. I anonymously donated to children's charities. The reason for remaining anonymous is because there was no need to receive praise for doing a good deed. It's what we, as human beings, should do – give to those in need.



*From The Series Implosion:
Untitled 31S, 2013-07-13*



AI WEIWEI: But that's changed now. After establishing The William A. Noguera Trust, donations are given in your name and the world knows it's from you.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Yes. I'm able to do much more good in demonstrating to other prisoners and to lead by example. More importantly, it allows these other prisoners to believe that they can also exemplify the true meaning of rehabilitation and live their lives in a selfless manner and to show this side of themselves to society as a whole. I believe a person sentenced for a crime doesn't only pay the debt to society by simply doing the time behind bars that's prescribed by law. That debt to society is partially repaid by being able to reintegrate into the population and to become a citizen who can show forthright abilities as well as worth. I work towards those things I mentioned each and every day. The judicial system is not perfect, and many people are falsely accused of offenses and wrongly convicted for crimes they did not commit. Therefore my answer is only applicable to those who have made mistakes and want to make choices to right the wrong.

AI WEIWEI: You work from a 4x10 foot cell that serves as your studio and sleeping quarters. This is also where you live. Do you feel at times that the walls are closing in on you? And how does this effect your work?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: The only effect it has on my work are the dimensions and size. And it's unfortunate because the proportion and size is critical to the creation of some pieces. I mean, some pieces must be made to be overwhelming at first glance, in order to impose the magnitude of the conflict and chaos expressed. And that can only be done through size and proportion. In terms of the creative process, it doesn't have a negative effect at all. It actually enhances the effect because I abandon myself to the process and disconnect in order to re-connect to my internal sight.

AI WEIWEI: How important is the process and how important is it for you to maintain physical contact to your artwork?

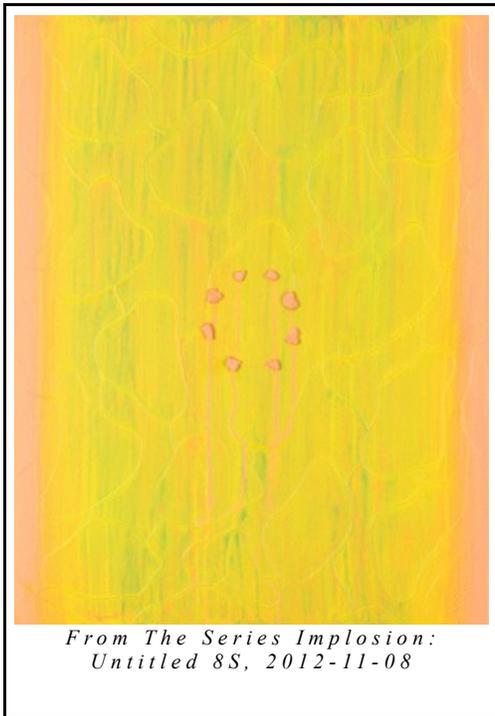
WILLIAM NOGUERA: The process is very important because it's the only way to know something on a conceptual and sensitive level. My art is deeply personal and I must feel, touch and create it from start to finish in order for it to have life, energy and emotion after I've set it free into the world where it will encounter interpretation from eyes permanently impaired by prejudice.

AI WEIWEI: Explain prejudice and your experience with it. Some of us experience it at different degrees. How has it been different for you regarding your work?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: You're right. Some of us do experience it at varying degrees. For me, it was during childhood and being the only Colombian in my neighborhood. I was singled out, bullied, and beat up. As an artist, the art world hasn't been any less discriminatory or any more compassionate. This is not to say that other civilian artists have fared better. But even though I've hurdled countless obstacles I still encounter prejudice based on ignorance, stupidity and hypocrisy.

AI WEIWEI: You're saying the art world is ignorant? [chuckles into a laugh]

WILLIAM NOGUERA: [laughs] To a degree. Yes. There are exceptions but the one's I refer to, their ignorance only exists because they can't get their minds around the fact that art has no boundaries and therefore, no exclusive cliques should exist: but they do.



AI WEIWEI: But you are a nationally and internationally recognized artist. The fact that we're speaking right now gives merit to what you've accomplished.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Perhaps. But the fact remains that many artists, including me, experience the door of exclusion to which exclusivity is only an open door for a select few.

AI WEIWEI: Your earlier works are black and white photo-realistic images. When I first encountered these images, I was so compelled that in gazing at them, I lost track of all time. I felt a familiar connection as if maybe I'd seen them before, but I couldn't put my finger on it. These elegant pieces flowed into my eyes and into my core of understanding: like a song I once knew. Explain this.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: [laughs] There is no explanation. What you experienced is the power of art. It can heal, make you cry or even help you find what you'd once lost. I created these pictures because they lived in my subconscious. These images manifested from my dreams and I wanted to share them with everyone. During this time I created images that I fractured into geometric forms based on high mathematics which conveyed my surroundings.

AI WEIWEI: Your work, like mine, has continued to evolve and take on new facets of expression. Is it important that there be true meaning and purpose in your work?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Absolutely. True art cannot be a bunch of empty gestures. If it is, no matter how well it is executed, it's as immaterial as wallpaper. I'm very aware of this and if I ever get to the point that I have nothing to say or express and my work reflects empty gestures, then I'll stop creating and cease to exist. There would be no reason to continue.

AI WEIWEI: During my imprisonment in 2011, I was in the most restricted penitentiary in China. The toughest. I was under constant surveillance, twenty-four hours a day with two guards eighty centimeters away looking at me. When I slept, ate, even when I showered. They did all of these things to intimidate and harass me. I was calm but angry, and I feel the impact of my imprisonment lives with me every day. How have you survived for so long and has being confined on Death Row had emotional and psychological repercussions on you?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: The scars I bear are substantial. Yes, it effects me and will for the rest of my life. Any sane person could not be imprisoned for this long and not sustain deep, emotional, psychological and physiological repercussions. However, I pour it out in each and every artwork I create. Truthfully, I believe your imprisonment was much worse than what I've endured. I don't know how you dealt with constant surveillance by two guards, eighty centimeters away and the uncertainty of what might happen to you next.





AI WEIWEI: But I didn't think they'd one day execute me. You, on the other hand, live with death every day. That is more severe. Is that why you create work that is, in itself, the site of conflict?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: My works are not calm or peaceful. The tradition of combining opposites in an attempt to reconcile them within the piece is a symbolic position of Catholicism. Instead, I put together parts of a conflict and allow it visibility in the work, not to try to solve it.

AI WEIWEI: Is conflict the point of origin?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: No. I live the conflict. Its point of origin is fear and rebellion.

AI WEIWEI: Fear and rebellion against what?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Fear is the cornerstone of my existence. I fear for my life, of disappearing as an individual, of becoming like other prisoners. It is from this fear that my rebellion is born. And the reason I fight against the notion I will be defined by my surroundings, boundaries, prejudices, and so many other methods of restriction imposed upon me. My work reflects my resistance and is the antithesis to this mindset.

AI WEIWEI: Is that what the series Maximus Escapus, Implosion and your newest work is about?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Yes. But all of my work has led to this. I had to travel the road in order to reach this point. And create work that makes the site of conflict visible and allow the viewer to experience through a personal narrative. The landscape of my environment is key. Through it, an understanding of each work can be gained, and a perspective formed. Only I can do this because of my unique perspective. By creating a format for it to be displayed, I invite the viewer into my world. Take the work of Mark Rothko, for example. You can write a whole book on it but you will not express what it expressed. Now, stand before one of his paintings and no words are needed. It's very important to me that every art remain intrinsically idiomatic to its means of expression.

AI WEIWEI: You mention Mark Rothko. What is your link to him?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: For me, Rothko represents the truth in art. I came across his work and the works of Motherwell, Still, Pollock, Kline and others from the New York School a quarter of a century ago. But it was Rothko whose work spoke to me. In his words, I found kinship. In his work, I found freedom and the understanding the power of art possesses if used properly.

AI WEIWEI: Are you using the power of art properly? And if so, what do you seek to accomplish?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: If I am truthful in my intention, the intention is accomplished – whatever it may be, then I am using the power I invoke properly. As for what I seek [pauses to think] I wish to give life to an idea. In doing so, I report what I see and feel each and every day. My artworks will carry this knowledge to an audience who will experience and interpret it as only they, as individuals, can.

AI WEIWEI: Your last solo exhibit in 2008 was at The Braunstein/Quay Gallery in San Francisco. Why did you stop showing your work? And are you ready to once again begin showing?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Yes. I'm ready. But I've never stopped showing my work. All my new work is showcased at my online gallery at www.WilliamNoguera.com – However you are correct. I stopped showing at physical venues altogether.

AI WEIWEI: Are you seeking representation?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Yes. I am. But I'm being very careful and selective of a new dealer and gallerist.

AI WEIWEI: Some artist's work can be felt or understood in an online gallery or through prints. Is this the case with your work?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: With my earlier work, the answer is yes. The work can be felt and understood by simply looking at it. Ideally, the viewer is best served by an in-person experience. However, my abstract paintings, constructs and sculptures should only be experienced in-person in order to feel what these pieces have to offer. The eye must feel and touch the work with a sense of exploration – to grasp what would otherwise be invisible.

AI WEIWEI: Also after your last solo exhibit, you self-wrote your autobiography titled “The Escape Artist” and you've teamed up with a director and film company to produce a documentary about your life and art. For a man in your situation, you are positively busy.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: I have greater ambitions other than accomplishing simple goals. I am making a difference by giving insight into what I've experienced. It's the reason I wrote “*The Escape Artist*.” It would be a shame in allowing what I know and have experienced to die with me when it can secure a higher purpose and change a life before it's too late.

AI WEIWEI: You have given me a one-of-a-kind experience by allowing me to read your memoir before it's published. I felt a number of emotions as I read each page – from sorrow and anger in what you endured as a child to exhilarating excitement as you gained a foothold in a brutal and stony world. I also shed tears for the young man who died inside but arose to his potential. Your story has transformed me and I see all of you in your works. You have lived a beautiful life. Full of hope, despair, fear, courage, love, sadness, pain, and loss. A life which make your perspectives unique and ultimately epic. It is a read that I highly recommend. When can we expect your book to be released?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Thank you for your kind words. It means a great deal to see the story of my life and my art moved you in such a way. My literary agent has submitted the manuscript to several major publishers, so we anticipate it will be published very soon.

AI WEIWEI: I'm looking forward to the documentary. What stage of production are you in and when will it be released?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: Right now we're in the early developmental stages of production. We're in the process of setting up and securing funding through www.kickstarter.com – with the production company fielding location settings as well as obtain childhood photographs and 8mm film footage to include in the film. I will definitely make sure you get a private showing before its public release and screening premiere.

AI WEIWEI: Thank you, I look forward to watching it. Finally, if you could describe your life, what would you say?

WILLIAM NOGUERA: [pauses to think, then sighs] I have many regrets. And if I could change several things, I would, but I can't. All I can do is learn from those mistakes and attempt to bring order to the chaos within. By doing this I'm able to reach out and bring order to another soul in need. My life holds tragedy but not without triumph. The triumph serves a higher purpose that is much larger than myself. A purpose I embrace with driven sincerity. A few moments of heaven are worth all of this hell. Or so they say...

AI WEIWEI: William, it's been a pleasure speaking with you and an encounter I will not soon forget.

WILLIAM NOGUERA: The pleasure has been mine. Thank you. [William is lead away in chains by two armed guards]

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