

Hackers attack petition to free Chinese artist

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Graffiti on a Hong Kong wall demands the release of famed mainland Chinese artist Ai Weiwei on April 19. Hackers based in China have disrupted an online petition signed by nearly 100,000 people which urges Beijing to free Weiwei, who has not been seen since he was stopped and detained at Beijing airport on April 3.

Hackers based in China have disrupted an online petition signed by nearly 100,000 people which urges Beijing to free outspoken artist Ai Weiwei, the website operator said Wednesday.

Heads of major museums around the world had spearheaded the petition seeking the release of Ai, an acclaimed artist who was taken into custody on April 3 as he tried to fly from Beijing to Hong Kong.

Change.org, a US-based online activist network, said that the website has gone down intermittently since Monday due to a so-called denial-of-

service attack originating in China.

Ben Rattray, the founder of Change.org, said the website had boosted its engineering staff and was increasingly successful in warding off the attack, allowing a growing number of people to sign the petition.

"I think the attempt to suppress both free speech and organized dissent around the detention of Ai Weiwei will backfire and already has," Rattray told AFP.

"It is actually increasing the awareness, and the appetite of people around the world who care about human rights and [freedom of speech](#) and organizing to be more likely to take action," he said.

The petition for Ai's freedom was launched by New York's Guggenheim Museum and signed by heads of other leading museums including New York's Museum of Modern Art, London's Tate Modern, the Musee National d'Art Moderne in Paris and the Art Institute of Chicago.

"We members of the international arts community express our concern for Ai's freedom and disappointment in China's reluctance to live up to its promise to nurture creativity and independent thought, the keys to 'soft power' and cultural influence," the petition says.

More than 94,400 people had signed the [petition](#) as of 1930 GMT Wednesday.

Ai is known for his "Sunflower Seeds," an exhibition of millions of seemingly identical but in fact unique mini-sculptures, at the Tate Modern. He also helped design the Bird's Nest stadium for the Beijing Olympics.

Ai has not shied away from political criticism. A 2009 exhibition in

Munich featured thousands of backpacks, a reminder of the children killed in the Sichuan earthquake due to what many parents said was shoddy construction.

Chinese authorities generally tolerated Ai but recently launched their biggest clampdown on dissent in years amid a wave of pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East.

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