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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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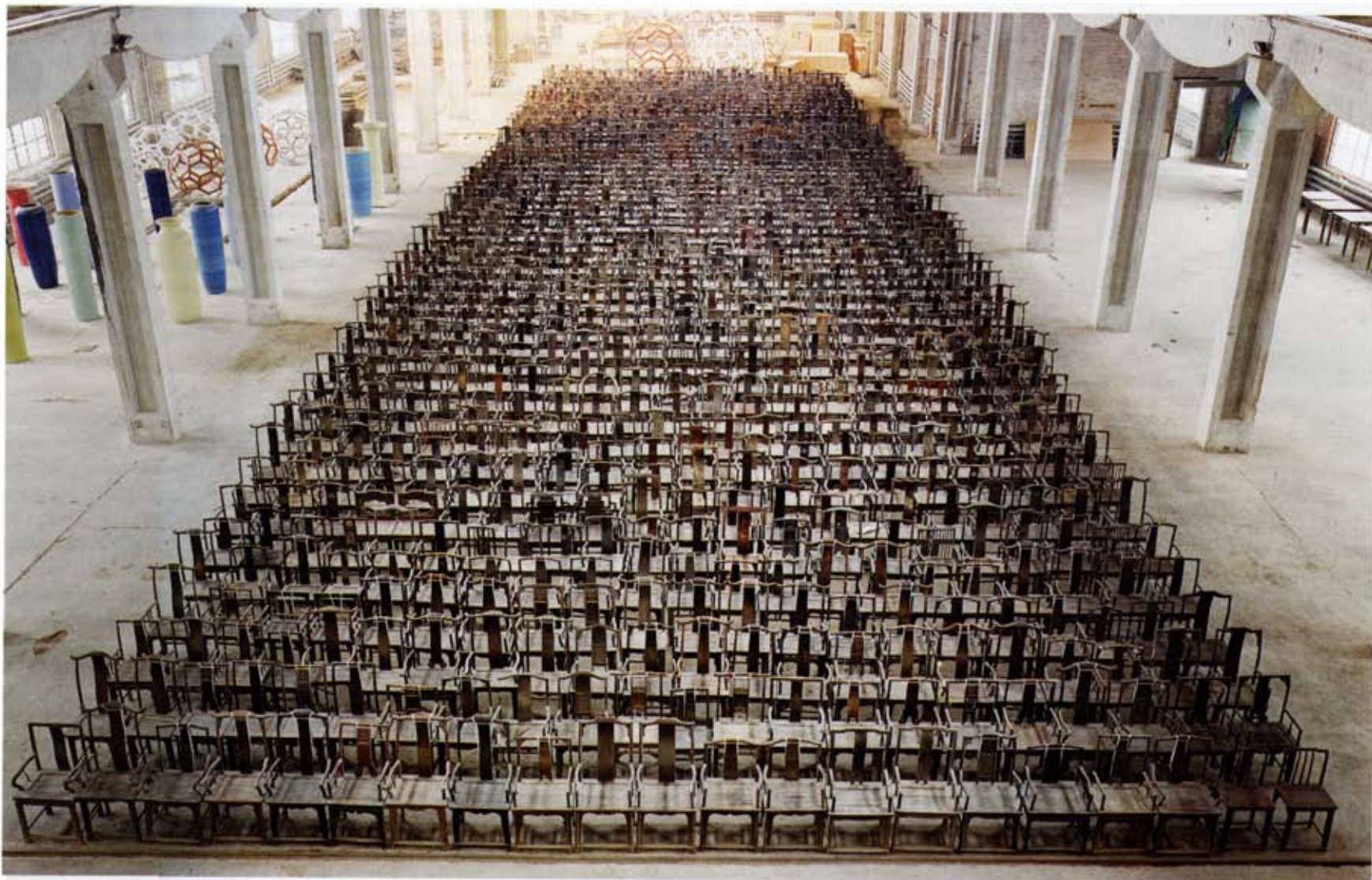


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A Kind of True Living

PHILIP TINARI ON THE ART OF AI WEIWEI

AI WEIWEI'S CONTRIBUTION to Documenta 12 is titled *Fairytale*, but in China, where Ai is as famous as a movie star, people have acerbically taken to calling it "Yellow Peril." The original concept for the artwork was simple: Round up 1,001 Chinese people from the artist's sprawling, blog-mediated social network, give them matching clothes and luggage, fly them en bloc to Kassel, billet them on bamboo bunks in Ai-designed temporary quarters inside an old textile factory, and set them to wandering the city for the three-month duration of the show, which opens June 16. A spokesperson at Ai's studio says, "To design also means to set up a condition, which makes individuals change. The project is about a new way to communicate, to participate, a new spiritual condition." The primary design object here, in other words, is not clothing or suitcases but the participants' experiences, even their spirits. In its emphasis on changing individuals by changing their material circumstances, *Fairytale* resonates with both midcentury Western architectural idealism and current Chinese political ideology.

Though practical considerations have necessitated separating the participants into five groups, each staying in Kassel for just eight days, the project (which will also include an installation of 1,001 chairs) will nevertheless effect a significant, albeit temporary, demographic shift in the smallish city. And even in its modified form, it will be the most logistically elaborate single-artist work in this edition of Documenta and, funded to the tune of four million dollars (by three Swiss sponsors: Galerie Urs Meile, the Leister Foundation, and the Erlenmeyer

Opposite page: Ai Weiwei, *Template*, 2007, wooden doors and windows from Ming- and Qing-dynasty temples and wooden base. Installation view, Ai Weiwei's studio, Beijing. This page: Component of Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale*, 2007 (1,001 Ming- and Qing-dynasty chairs).



Ai's activities are subsumed under a kind of brand name, Fake—a play on two Romanized syllables, *fa-ke*, which in Chinese sound like the Anglo-Saxon expletive. The profane pun seems a warning not to take anything the artist says or does at face value.



This page, from top: Ninety-six reproduction Yuan dynasty vases (materials for Ai Weiwei and Serge Spitzer's *Ghost Valley Coming Down the Mountain*, 2005–2006) at Ai Weiwei's studio in Beijing, 2005. Ai Weiwei, *Colored Vases*, 2006, vases and paint, dimensions variable. Exterior of Ai Weiwei's studio, Beijing, 2007. Opposite page: Ai Weiwei's studio, Beijing, 1999.

Foundation), one of the most expensive. As such, *Fairytale* continues, or exaggerates, Ai's career trajectory, which is one of increasing visibility in the global art world. His recent vita is a litany of museum shows: In 2006, he was featured prominently in both the Sydney Biennale and the Asia-Pacific Triennial and realized a two-artist project, *Ghost Valley Coming Down the Mountain*, with Serge Spitzer at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. His *Colored Vases*, 2006, ancient artifacts doused in gaudily colored industrial paints, graced the cover of Sotheby's catalogue for its second New York auction of contemporary Asian art last September. Another New York outing, a solo presentation of enormous celadon vases at the Robert Miller Gallery booth at this year's Art Dealers Association of America fair, even led Martha Stewart to visit his studio. His architectural sculpture *Fragments*, a mangrovelike construction of antique furniture and timber from destroyed Qing-dynasty temples, will feature prominently in the "Art Unlimited" section of Art Basel in June.

Ai, in short, may be the only Chinese artist to have transcended the role of "Chinese artist" in an international context. And while much of his recent work suggests the ironies and tensions inherent in such a position, *Fairytale* foregrounds them on a grand scale. It would be difficult in any case to situate *Fairytale* within a practice whose multitasking sprawl—encompassing artmaking, curating, publishing, and architectural design—threatens to answer the vaguely unsettling question, What would Andy Warhol's career have looked like if it had played out in turn-of-the-millennium China? (For one thing, architecture might have stood in for film; where Warhol created an alter-Hollywood, Ai is a self-invented starchitect.) Indeed, anyone mulling Ai's contribution to Documenta, and particularly the degree to which it seems to dovetail with discourses of social engineering, would do well to remember that most of his activities are subsumed under a kind of brand name, and that that name is Fake. The English word is discreetly emblazoned above the gate to his sprawling studio complex in Caochangdi, a semirural neighborhood on Beijing's outskirts that, largely due to Ai's presence, is becoming the next gallery district. In addition to its obvious assertion of inauthenticity, *Fake* is a play on two Romanized syllables, *fa-ke*, which in Chinese sound like the Anglo-Saxon expletive.

Profane, punning, and prankish, the name seems a warning not to take anything Ai says or does at face value. But this sets up a classic conundrum: When a liar says, "I'm lying," what should you believe? Consider a speech Ai made in September 2006 at an Art Basel-sponsored panel, "China: New Opportunities in the Global Art Arena," at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. After noting that China is "in chaos" and that its recent history is one of "disasters and contradictions," he said: "Modernism represents . . . a kind of true living. . . . Modernism is not about form or method or the works of a few artists, but rather about a necessary way of living. And only this kind of lifestyle can save China, because if we don't have modernism, then we will die under the grasp of one or another ideology. Modernism at least says that every person is free and needs to honestly encounter his own life." He then went on to compare museums to suburban brothels—the "token bit of provocation," as one Beijing critic has put it, that all of Ai's public statements must contain. How is one to reconcile the endorsement of modernism (read: art) as the route to existential truth—and, indeed, as the route to national salvation—with such sallies, or with the laconic fuck-you of Fake?

Disasters, perhaps, beget contradictions. And in thinking through the contradictions in Ai's work and persona, the disasters of modern China's history, as they intersect with his own history, do indeed seem germane. Born in 1957, Ai was raised in a forlorn town called Shihezi in the far reaches of Xinjiang, or Chinese Turkestan, to which his father, the renowned poet Ai Qing, had been exiled. The offense was "rightism," but in fact Ai Qing was not so much a rightist as a modernist. He had been educated in the '30s in Paris, where he studied avant-garde art and literature and absorbed their influence, both aesthetically and in terms of a belief in the value of individual expression. Given this background, it was almost

inevitable that he would run afoul of the Communist authorities. In Xinjiang, he was given a job cleaning toilets; he was also prohibited from publishing his writings for twenty years.

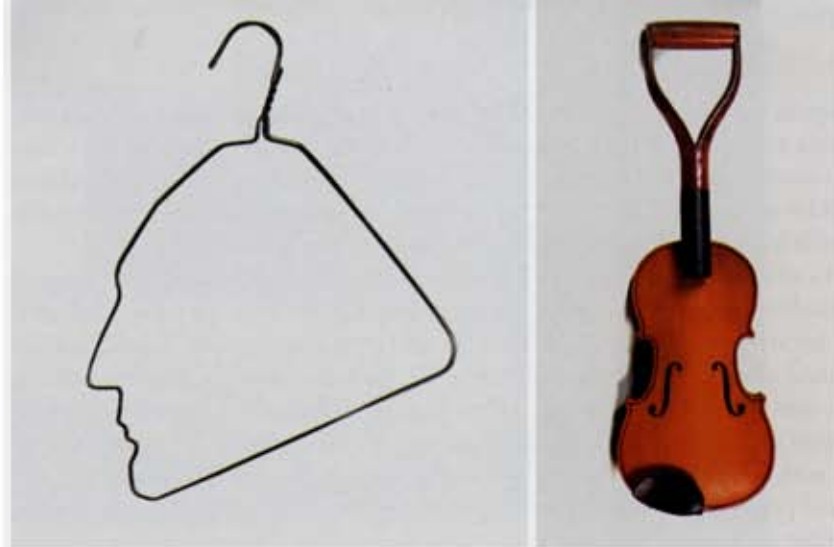
This is the beginning of a life story that seems almost too well suited to mythologizing, and Chinese and foreign media alike have developed this mythology and put it to their variant purposes. After all, a world system hell-bent on erasing distinctions between East and West in the name of neoliberalism, like a Chinese state driven to climb the value chain, needs a few good front men. The rest of the narrative goes like this: As a young man, Ai arrives in Beijing to attend the city's Film Academy, only to drop out and become a founding member of the loose collective of prodemocracy artists known as the Stars Group. In 1979, the Stars Group hold a salon des refusés outside the National Art Museum of China, which prompts government retaliation. In 1981, Ai decamps to New York, where he enrolls in Parsons and makes some modest artworks. But mostly he lives the life of a downtown bohemian, wearing army pants and a tuxedo jacket, taking road trips with Taiwanese performance artist Hsieh Tehching and spending Christmas with Allen Ginsberg (having met the Beat legend at a reading at St. Mark's Church, shortly after Ginsberg returned from a trip to China, where, it turned out, he had been hosted by Ai Qing). Ai works the night shift at a printing press in the meatpacking district and hits the blackjack tables in Atlantic City on weekends. A filial, if prodigal, son, he returns to China when his father falls ill in 1993. His parents are living in Beijing, their exile having finally ended some years before, and Ai stays with them until Ai Qing's death three years later. It is during this period that his art career begins in earnest, his works steadily growing in size and ambition. After designing a house for himself on a napkin and building it in ninety days, he launches an architectural practice, eventually helping Herzog & de Meuron come up with the "bird's-nest" concept for their Olympic Stadium in Beijing—the building in which China's emergence as a twenty-first-century power shall be, once and forever, declared. His atelier, dubbed Fake Design, eventually employs nearly forty people, who work in a studio next to his house. In that house, he holds court in a sitting room filled with hardwood furniture and playfully curated

antiques. On nice days, visitors sit on the patio, drinking green tea from weighty glasses and looking at the verdant lawn, waiting for Ai to finish with a local television crew, a museum board, an architectural client. The grass is dotted with his giant vases, and the wall that screens out the surrounding neighborhood is hung with four black letters, outlined in neon: F-U-C-K.

All of the above is true, but it elides a great deal, and in such elision there is inevitably distortion. A more nuanced story is told through the particularities of Ai's creative production, which are exactly what the popular tale leaves out. Looked at through the prism of the work itself, the primary disaster—that of exile and censorship—no longer seems like the jumping-off point for a satisfying revenge narrative. (Angry young man comes to the city from the provinces, tangles with authority, is exiled himself, and eventually triumphs by seizing the position of privilege that was taken from his father.) It looks, instead, like the opening chapter of a more complicated story about how the notion of art as a "necessary way of living" can be adhered to in a set of political and cultural circumstances that may make such adherence dangerous or, worse, irrelevant.

So to begin again at the beginning—not of the life but of the work: Ai's "modest" pieces of the '80s are indeed stunning in their simplicity, but, given Ai's status as a newcomer to the metropole, are also remarkable for the knowingness of their dialogues, particularly with Marcel Duchamp. Ai's first gesture: In 1985, just after leaving Parsons (without a degree), he used a wire clipper to bend a coat hanger into the profile of Duchamp, titling the piece *Hanging Man/ Duchamp*. Like Duchamp's bicycle wheel, the work hid for a few years in the studio, its status as a work of art denied by its maker. Only in 1988 did it emerge, as part of his solo show "Old Shoe—Safe Sex" at Ethan Cohen's Art Waves/Ethan Cohen in New York. Also featured in that show were a Beuysian raincoat with a condom (another "raincoat") dangling from its pocket; a violin in which the instrument's neck is replaced by a shovel handle; a pair of black brogans, heels severed, stitched together back-to-back; and a few Pop-arty paintings of Mao, postdating Warhol but predating the ubiquity of the deceased leader in mainland Chinese art. A second series of New York works realized in 1990—paintings onto which Ai poured paint to gradually obscure and





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ultimately erase his subjects—were put into a crate before his return to China a few years later and have never been shown, or even unpacked.

The real starting point of Ai's career may lie here, in this utter lack of connection to the domestic ferment of his native country of the '80s. He missed the two watersheds so often glorified (along with the first Stars exhibition of 1979) as the founding moments of Chinese contemporary art: the "1985 Art New Wave" movement and the 1989 show "China /Avant-Garde." He was thoroughly away for twelve years, a period during which he claims to have cared not at all about what was happening artistically in his homeland, convinced as he was that a closed system could not produce interesting art. When he moved back, he was "without a diploma or even a wife" (as he put it in a recent interview) to show for his sojourn. Nonetheless, he had carved out a position for himself in China without quite realizing it: Everyone in Beijing knew that his basement apartment on East Seventh Street in New York had become an unofficial embassy for the avant-garde in exile. It even served as the set of the landmark post-Tiananmen telenovela *Beijingers in New York* and, after Ai's return to China, became home to a string of Chinese artists.

Back in a capital only just beginning to stir, living with his parents at age thirty-six, he countered boredom with daily trips to the antiques markets. From the malaise surrounding his homecoming came the first of his ancient readymades, a Han-dynasty urn on which he painted the Coca-Cola logo in 1994. This was his initial gesture toward an entire language built on the alternating destruction and reconstruction of the remainders of past glories, which he stitched into works as textural as they are conceptual. He continued these early experiments with works like *Still Life*, 1993–2000, an installation of thirty-six hundred individually catalogued Stone Age tools, and then with a group of works, begun in 1997 and presaging *Fragments*, in which he took Ming and Qing furniture of the highest quality and rendered it absurd and useless, slicing and retooling it so that, for example, two table legs lean against a wall, or the planes of a chair tilt at odd angles so as to prevent anyone's sitting down. Much like the series "Whitewash," 1993–2000, in which ancient urns are obscured by layers of

white industrial paint, the furniture works find their maker generating contemporary art from the destruction of ancient objects, simultaneously sending up the antitraditional cultural mandate that grounded the vandalism of the Cultural Revolution and the full-speed-ahead economic mandate that justified the demolitions of the '90s.

The stance embodied in these gestures is most directly presented in the photo triptych *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, in which Ai himself makes a rare appearance, standing in front of a brick wall like so many he would later design. This work's three images, shot within a single second, depict exactly the process the title suggests: A priceless "cultural relic," to use the official parlance, is shown first in the artist's hands, then in midair, and finally in shards on the ground. But not all of Ai's photographic experiments have been so theoretical. His photo *June 1994* commemorates the five-year anniversary of the student movement's culmination at Tiananmen by depicting artist Lu Qing (whom he later married) provocatively lifting her skirt in the square. It's a satire of tourist snapshots that gives visual form to the weird limbo in which the country was hovering. The point of the image seems to be that no one (especially not the Mao likeness over Lu's shoulder) is looking, and yet there is still space in which to read her gesture as one of defiance. In *Seven Frames*, shot on the same day, Ai dissects state power with a seven-frame head-to-toe portrait of a young soldier guarding the square; the last image shows the soldier's untied shoelace. It seems a natural leap from Lu's hoydenish pose and the soldier boy's straggly laces to the series "A Study of Perspective," 1995–2003, in which Ai's middle finger splits the distance between the lens and seats of political and cultural authority from around the globe. In each of these pictures, the camera focuses on a monument—the White House, the Eiffel Tower, the Reichstag—and Ai's finger appears blurrily in the midground. If the images seem a bit crude or facile, they nonetheless offer an interesting triangulation of the artist's own position in relation to power and architecture.

But one might still argue that Ai's most important activity in this transitional era was less as an artist than as an impresario and mentor, however poorly the



Opposite page, from left: Ai Weiwei, *Hanging Man/Duchamp*, 1985, coat hanger, 26 1/2 x 20". Ai Weiwei, *Violin*, 1985, shovel handle and violin, 9 x 24 1/2 x 2 1/2". Ai Weiwei, *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1994, Western Han-dynasty urn and paint, 9 1/2 x 11 x 11". This page, clockwise from top left: Ai Weiwei, *Stool*, 1997, Qing-dynasty stools, 11 x 23 1/2 x 23 1/2". Ai Weiwei working on *Still Life*, 1993-2000. Ai Weiwei, *Safe Sex*, 1986/1988, raincoat on hanger with condom, 61 x 39 1/2 x 4 1/2". Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, three black-and-white photographs.



latter role might seem to jibe with his persona. A group of young artists, including Zhang Huan and Rong Rong, had gathered in a village on the eastern fringes of Beijing, where they put on performances mostly for one another. Ai, who had long been skeptical of a PRC art scene that seemed capable of producing nothing but trite "political Pop" art or "cynical realist" paintings of bald-headed yawning men, became a frequent visitor to the neighborhood. (Perhaps in a nod to Ai's old home, his protégés eventually dubbed their community the East Village.) "They always want[ed] to have discussions about how the world looks at Chinese art, or how Chinese art can find some unique identity," Ai recalls. "I would tell them not to worry about the West, to concentrate on their own life conditions, because the Western art world could never imagine those conditions." Zhang's iconic 1994 endurance piece *12 Square Meters*, in which he coated himself in honey and fish entrails and sat in a public latrine for an hour as flies attached themselves to his body, has been called a response to those conditions and, indeed, an homage to Ai's father.

Also in the mid-'90s, Ai began to discover that his diasporic network had the power to make significant interventions in the local Beijing context. In 1994, with the aid of Zeng Xiaojun and Xu Bing, two Chinese artists based in New York, he set out to put together *Black Cover Book*, a publication conceived as a response to the lack of space for artistic exchange in China. Proposals for projects were solicited from around the country, then spliced together with texts by Duchamp, Warhol, and Jeff Koons—thus explicitly anointing these three as the trinity from which Chinese conceptual artists should take their lead. The book's content—both the graphic violence of some of the works it depicted and its implicit antigovernment stance—provoked the public-security bureau to track down and threaten the managing editor, curator Feng Boyi. Nevertheless, *White Cover Book* and *Grey Cover Book* followed, in 1995 and 1997, respectively, providing Chinese artists with a major conduit of information about the West and about one another's projects and, more important, offering a new sense of avant-garde possibility to a generation caught between the shadow of Tiananmen and the grasp of foreign curators and collectors. The intellectual authority the three publications conferred





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allowed Ai to move into another phase of organization. With art historian Hans van Dijk and collector Frank Uytterhaegen, he founded the nonprofit space China Art Archives and Warehouse in 1999, and the next year he and Feng cocurated the epoch-making warehouse show “Fuck Off” in Shanghai. In response to a municipally propagandizing Shanghai Biennale eager to declare its internationalism by showing Matthew Barney alongside state-system ink painters (theme: “Shanghai Spirit”), Ai and Feng pulled together an intergenerational group of artists from all of China’s major cities in a fleeting alliance against the co-optation of contemporary art by the state and of contemporary *Chinese* art by the international art world.

A show like “Fuck Off” would be hard to imagine today, because, sometime in 2001, everything changed. Not the overall world picture—although that, of course, changed too—but locally, or perhaps nationally, a shift was under way from a system whereby the party crudely repressed creative expression to one in which, allied with capital, it began to channel such expression to spendier purposes. High-end condos appeared where factories had once stood. For the opening of SoHo NewTown—a much-hyped new development that marked the arrival of a kind of prefab, or readymade, urban-hipster style in the city’s architectural lexicon—a group of public sculptures was unveiled, nearly a year to the day after the opening of “Fuck Off.” Ai’s contribution, a massive poured concrete *C* simply titled *Concrete*, was a joke at the expense of it-couple developers Pan Shiyi and Zhang Xin; Ai was quoted in the media saying he had intentionally installed something so heavy it could not be dismantled cheaply.

From here on, Ai’s work took a turn from Duchamp toward Joseph Beuys, from the readymade toward “social sculpture,” as he traded the refinement of his earlier pieces for a gravitas achieved partially through scale. For the first Guangzhou Triennial, in 2002, Ai commissioned a chandelier nearly twenty feet high from the Beijing company that produces such fixtures for government buildings. His comically oversized chandelier was installed outside the museum in a giant, rusty scaffold, making for a luminous if slightly obvious commentary on wealth disparities and official kitsch. Shortly thereafter, he realized “Forever” *Bicycles*, 2003. A shiny mass of brand-new bikes disassembled and tessellated into a giant sphere, the work is at once a refutation of the developmental teleology at the heart of current state ideology; an allusion to the manual laborers, themselves “interchangeable parts,” who are powering China’s rise; and a biting commentary on the eclipse of socialist-era brands. For another group of works from 2003, Ai used traditional carpentry methods to piece wooden fragments of a destroyed temple into three-dimensional contour maps based on the official national map (which includes Taiwan).

As his artwork became increasingly architectural, Ai’s practice expanded outward to encompass architecture proper. Fake Design, officially founded in 2003 as the artist sought to consolidate the interests in design and architecture that had been growing ever since he built his home in 1999, realized its first built projects, notably a riverside architectural “park” in Ai’s ancestral home, Jinhua, a town in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang. For this endeavor, he enlisted sixteen different artists and architects to design small pavilions, each with a different function—restroom, restaurant, reading room, multimedia space, etc. Back in Beijing, he put together a team of photographers, designers, and architecture students to work on a project referred to simply as the “China book,” a sort of glossary profiling the social and material phenomena at the heart of the current transformation. The book is still unrealized, but the team has produced a group of videos that document the condition of Beijing’s “ring roads” (its major thoroughfares). These videos lead nowhere and everywhere; they are exacting investigations of the city’s urban DNA, weirdly analogous to Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966. When the former Swiss ambassador to China and collector of Chinese art Uli Sigg introduced Ai to Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron in early 2003, as the duo were preparing their proposal for the Olympic Stadium, the architects brought

Ai on as consultant. Inspiration for the bird's-nest design, Ai tells reporters, came from the woven baskets that Lu collects on the couple's still-regular trips to Beijing's antiques markets.

But Ai's signature architectural gesture has been to sculpt Beijing's most commonplace materials—brick and concrete—into boxy yet somehow poetic volumes. His airy cubic or pyramidal low-rises, which are becoming de rigueur for artists and gallerists in Beijing, obscure an interventionist impulse behind their own mundane qualities: They are at once witty applications of vernacular materials and implicit indictments of the overwrought glass-and-steel skyscrapers of the current boom. The buildings' relationship to the inescapable double influence of Chinese tradition and Western modernism feels subtly and intelligently resolved—something that can be said of almost nothing else now being built in China. This is not to say that they are feel-good East-meets-West spaces. Rather, the nuance contained in their deceptively simple plans hints at a moment in the near future when such dichotomies may cease to operate. Unable, in its ordinariness, to signify a rising China, gray brick comes to frame zones of discursive freedom from the monster narrative of national ascendancy.

The broader social engagement manifest in Ai's architectural practice expanded into the realm of electronic media when, in late 2005, he agreed to write a blog for the popular Web portal Sina.com. The blog quickly staked out a place for itself, read by trendy young people from across the country looking for some sort of avant-garde compass. Its content can be startlingly quotidian—pictures of Ai's many cats, studio assistants getting haircuts, dinners with crowds of wizened writers and young disciples. But sometimes the blog contains the sort of heated political writing whose publication would have been

unthinkable just a few years ago. In June 2006, Ai wrote an essay, ultimately syndicated in more than two hundred newspapers, excoriating a well-connected Guangzhou doctor named Zhong Nanshan, who had summoned the full resources of the state security forces to find his stolen laptop. Migrant populations were targeted in the search, exacerbating social tensions in Guangzhou, and Zhong was quoted to the effect that "a fine line separates urban transients [i.e., migrant laborers] from thieves and petty criminals." Ai countered, "More precisely, a fine line separates Chinese intellectuals and professors from the political gangsters who protect them."

A few months later, Ai told curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist that authorities had recently contacted him, asking him to remove a particularly sensitive post: "I said to them, 'Block it if you want, but I cannot self-censor, because that is the only reason I have the blog. We both know this is a game. You have to play your part, and I have to play mine.'" In light of this Brechtian utterance, the four-letter neon manifesto hanging on the compound wall seems less a contrarian posture than a fluid negotiation with an ever-changing social order. For all his power, Ai Weiwei knows that even conceptualizing the Olympic Stadium means being only a bit player in a historical transformation bigger than any single person and yet no bigger than the gang of thugs up top. The entire Fake conceit, then, is perhaps less outright manifesto than a rebuke of easy narrative from a man caught among storytellers, even as he remains intent on telling his own stories. Some are fairy tales, some are bluntly true; the viewer puzzles over which is which, while the artist moves freely in the space between. □

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Opposite page, from top: Ai Weiwei, *June 1994*, black-and-white photograph. Ai Weiwei, *Concrete*, 2000, concrete. Installation and interior views, SoHo NewTown, Beijing. Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective—Tiananmen*, 1995–2003, color photograph. Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective—The White House*, 1995–2003, color photograph. This page, clockwise from left: Ai Weiwei, *Chandelier*, 2002, crystal chandelier and scaffolding, 17 x 13 x 13". Ai Weiwei, *Map of China*, 2003, wood from Qing dynasty temples, 31 1/2 x 39 1/4 x 39 1/4". Herzog & de Meuron's Olympic Stadium under construction, Beijing, 2006. © Herzog & de Meuron.

