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Ai Weiwei's Humane Conceptualism

With a bevy of new sculptural projects, as well as a massive living intervention at Documenta, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei brings his brand of cunning, humorous—but ultimately compassionate—provocation to the global scene.

BY DAVID COGGINS

F*airytale*, Beijing artist Ai Weiwei's expansive piece at Documenta, began as a simple idea: invite 1,001 Chinese guests to come and stay temporarily in Kassel, Germany. Yet, as in much of Ai's work, what initially appeared to be an appealing, straightforward project soon took on increasingly elaborate social, political and logistical dimensions.

The growing convergence of China and the West suggested by *Fairytale*—especially the arrival of China as both a commercial and artistic power—makes this a work perfectly suited to our time. Yet Ai's brand of conceptualism does not settle for clever rhetorical provocation; his work is grounded in physical facts. The parameters of *Fairytale* were as much practical and mundane as they were political: How would the people get visas? Where would they sleep? What would they eat? Beyond that, the project needed serious capital. It cost \$4.28 million—which was largely supplied by Galerie Urs Meile, located in Beijing and Lucerne, and two Swiss organizations, the Leister and Erlenmeyer foundations.

For Ai, who is also an architect, designer, writer and curator, devising sensible solutions is integral to every undertaking. His preparations for the influx of the Chinese visitors, brought to Kassel in rotating groups of 200 to 250 between early June and July 9, may be his defining effort. He transformed a former textile mill, located in a lively fringe neighborhood near a university campus, into a living space that was at once grand and inviting. The interior brick walls were painted a soothing white. White sheets hung from translucent string acted as temporary walls, subdividing the open space into a series of rooms. These rooms, each shared by 10 people, were filled with beds covered in colorful fabrics, designed by Ai. The result combined efficiency with an engaging appearance.

Indeed, the warehouse was striking in its warmth. A sense of relaxation was felt through-





Views of Ai Weiwei's *Template*, 2007, wooden doors and windows from destroyed Ming and Qing Dynasty houses, wooden base; at Documenta. Left, as originally installed, photo Frank Schinski/Documenta. Above, collapsed after a windstorm, photo Laurent Lecat.

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out—on each of the two floors were large areas with communal tables where people could eat or drink tea or play cards (all of which they were doing when I visited). These, and countless other details of the surroundings, were conceived by Ai. He designed the furniture and the utensils, he hired the cooks; there was a rumor that he was even offering haircuts. He also organized the visitors' travel equipment, which included cameras and tape recorders to help them document the trip, thus encouraging personal responses to a situation in which they were otherwise relegated, in some measure, to membership in a group. This balance between individualism and group identity was a central theme of *Fairytale*.

As an amenity for Chinese and others visitors alike, Ai placed 1,001 Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) wooden chairs in the warehouse dorm and around the Documenta exhibition sites. The chairs immediately became a motif of the project, at once familiar to the Chinese visitors and a physical reminder to Kassel residents and Documenta attendees of the presence of the foreign guests.

Yet Ai's physical intervention at Documenta was slight compared to the changes he wrought in the lives of his countrymen, who eagerly took the opportunity to travel abroad and be on the inside of an art spectacle while they were simultaneously apart from it. After discussion of all the logistical concerns, Ai was asked at a press conference if he was worried about his guests adapting to their new surroundings in Germany. He smiled. "If they can survive China," he responded, "they can survive Kassel."

To encounter the project was also to contend with the indelible factualness of it—the piece was not a proposition, these people were *here*. The participants, who applied for the trip through Ai's blog, varied widely in their ages and personal histories (ranging from peasants to poets to students), their previous travel and their susceptibility to the romance of what, for many of them, would be their first trip outside China. The piece was at once invisible—the public could not enter the living area—and extremely physical. A crucial experience for Western viewers was imagining the reactions of the Asian visitors, which, rare in a conceptual work, created a sense of empathy. The Chinese travelers could be seen bicycling around town, playing soccer games, singing karaoke, or simply taking in the various exhibitions.

If the journey to the West was, ideally, a fairy tale for the participants, it was also something Ai could identify with. The dislocation mirrored his own departure from China in 1981, following his emergence in the late 1970s as a member of the controversial Stars group. Ignoring exhibi-



Views of Fairytale, 2007, communal living quarters, 1,001 Chinese visitors, 1,001 Qing Dynasty wooden chairs; in Gottschalk-Hallen and municipal area of Kassel. Sponsored by Leister Foundation and Erlenmeyer Foundation, both Switzerland. Photos this page Julia Zimmermann, except second from top Julia Fuchs.

tion vetting protocols, the avant-garde cohort mounted one of the first public challenges to China's cultural authorities after the demise of the Cultural Revolution. With the Stars' open-air shows and other activities largely (though not completely) thwarted, Ai left for New York, where he lived for 12 years. He studied at the Parsons School of Design and admired Duchamp's readymades in the Museum of Modern Art. Duchamp would become a lasting influence, particularly for his advocacy of art that was "at perpetual war with itself." Ai's reconfigured wire coat hanger, *Hanging Man* (1985), in the shape of Duchamp's profile, is a sly nod to the French master.

Many of Ai's early works are found objects redesigned in some improbable way, with a certain amount of Dada's matter-of-fact mischief. He often mixes everyday banality with an implicit understanding of human nature—as in the laconically humorous *Safe Sex* (1986), a raincoat whose mid-section is conveniently augmented by an attached condom. *One Man Shoe* (1987) consists of two shoes that have been sewn together at the heels, rendering them useless. The simple connection makes the shoes an entirely new object, one with no useful purpose at all.

Two views of Qing chairs placed throughout the exhibition.
Photos Julia Fuchs.



Already evident here are many of Ai's abiding themes, particularly his use of familiar, easily overlooked objects that reveal some basic aspect of humanity. He's also attracted to the ways people identify value and authenticity. Not surprisingly, perhaps, his design company operates under the name Fake.

Ai's return to China in 1993 corresponded with more overtly political work. But his engagement with topical issues and cultural touchstones resulted less in strident declarations than in cunningly elusive gestures. Since the 1989 uprising in Tiananmen Square, the dynamics of Chinese society had shifted. And it is Tiananmen Square that's the setting for his black-and-white photograph *June 1994* (1994), where we see an ambiguity that will come to characterize Ai's work for more than a decade. In the middle of a crowd, a young woman casually raises her skirt to the photographer. Two uniformed police officers walk behind her without noticing, while an oversize official portrait of Mao gazes down from above, surveying the entire scene. The sight of her white underwear, something extremely intimate, becomes less a sexual ploy than a bold step in a generation's liberation from social restraint. The woman's face, not quite smiling, is poised at a moment of possibility, and her provocative pose represents a willful desire for change—for an individual, and, by extension, a society.

A vibrant era of cultural activity awaited the returning Ai, another stunning shift for a man who once shared his parents' exile from Beijing. In 1957, the year Ai was born, the family was sent to the remote Xinjiang region in northwest China. Their displacement was part of a campaign against intellectuals like his father, Ai Qing, a well-known poet. They lived in harsh conditions for 20 years before Ai Qing was welcomed back to Beijing in 1978 as a member of the National People's Congress, and there openly lauded and encouraged to resume his career as a writer.

Considered in this light, political undertones become an understandably complex element in Ai Weiwei's work. Many pieces reveal a healthy irreverence toward the power of the state, any state—as seen in his series of photographs, "Studies of Perspective" (1995-2003), where his arm extends in front of the camera lens as he gives the middle finger to nationalist icons such as the White House, the Eiffel Tower and Tiananmen Square.

Ai focuses on more specifically Chinese traditions in his works involving ceramics that range from Neolithic pots to exquisite dynastic ware. His treatment varies from playful to downright rough, whether he marks them with commercial emblems (*Han Dynasty Urn Painted with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1994), paints over their existing markings ("White-wash," 1993-2000) or smashes them to pieces (as documented in photo sequences like *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995). The spectrum of emotion conveyed by these works passes from distrust to hostility, but finally settles on a sort of wary appreciation. In the instances cited, the objects are—or were—originals; in other cases (for example in the 99-pot *Ghost Valley—Coming Down the Mountain*, 2005-06), they are expertly made replicas. Always there is friction between what authorities (and the market) have decreed to be valuable and those who, like Ai, rebel against the very idea of cultural prestige. It's something, Ai contends, that must be reassessed ceaselessly, skeptically.

Many of Ai's early works are found objects redesigned in some improbable way, mixing Dada-style mischief, banality and regard for human nature.



Above left and right, two examples from "Whitewash," 1993-2000, clay urns from the late Stone Age (10,000-4,000 B.C.) and industrial paint.

Right, Tables at Right Angles, 1998, Qing Dynasty tables, 69 by 49½ by 68½ inches.



manship and speculate about their inherent worth—or worthlessness.

"Objects carry a lot of our understanding about who we are," Ai told me. Repeatedly, he responds to forms that are fundamental to our ease and well-being. He aspires to make our daily culture visible, and asks us to reevaluate what we expect from our surroundings, what gives us comfort, what gives us pleasure.

It is not surprising, then, that Ai has taken to designing buildings and spaces. First among them is his two-story Beijing studio, built in 1999, an unadorned L-shaped brick building that is both elegant and functional. He also recently collaborated with Herzog & de Meuron in designing the stadium that will be the centerpiece of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. His input was crucial to development of the building's distinctive bird's-nest shape.

Though Ai has already greatly affected the new Chinese art scene through critical publications and through China Art Archives & Warehouse, the nonprofit Beijing exhibition space he co-founded in 1997, his reach has now greatly expanded via the Internet, where his blog has thrived. He writes about art, culture and even politics, and displays



Above, June 1994, 1994, black-and-white photograph.

Left, Safe Sex, 1986, raincoat, hangar, condom, 61 inches high

All photos this spread courtesy Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.



Yet Ai's stance is not merely rebellious. Witness the monumental but seemingly weightless "Forever" Bicycles (2003). A take on a utilitarian staple of Chinese life, it connects 42 bicycles in one of Ai's typically quasi-architectural installations, yielding a sort of broad, immobile, open-work tower. Conjoined this way, the Forever bicycles (which have been built in Shanghai since 1940 and are China's bestselling brand) assume a new, unending abstract form—one that alludes to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), with word play on a cyclical "forever" for good measure.

Ai sometimes hires an expert carpenter to reconfigure original Qing Dynasty furniture so that a table will have three legs (*Table with Three Legs*, 1997-98) or an impractical angled surface (*Slanted Table*, 1997-98). A variation of the technique informs Ai's installation "Fragments" (2005), a small forest of furniture parts and wooden posts flared with timbers from dismantled temples. When these objects, like the sewn-together shoes, are stripped of their usefulness they enter the realm of sculpture, with a touch of the absurd. One tends to admire their crafts-



"Forever" Bicycles, 2003, bicycles, 9 feet high by 15 feet in diameter.

photographs, instantly transmitting his views to an ever-wider audience. The site has received over three million hits and is read by 10,000 people daily. This complicates Ai's position, of course, making him a critic of the milieu he's very much a part of. Like the visitors at Kassel, he's situated inside and outside of a culture at the same time—except that this culture is his own, and presided over by an officialdom not greatly tolerant of critique. "Everything I do is political," he told me at Documenta, "I don't have to announce it as political." Maintaining that delicate balance allows him an exceptionally high level of creative freedom.

Fairytales is perhaps a logical step away from the strictures of conventional exhibiting, for an artist who finds those strictures almost embarrassing. The distinctions between mediums, and indeed professions, have less and less import for a man whose influence is witnessed in the galleries and building sites of Beijing and, increasingly, online.

Still, Ai clearly remains enthralled with sculptural presence. *Template* (2007), a towering outdoor installation at Documenta, was built of wooden windows and doors from Ming (1368-1644) and Qing era houses that were torn down in Shanxi Province in northern China, where entire old towns have been razed to clear way for development. The pieces

of wood were fitted together to form eight large panels, attached at a common center like those of a large revolving door. The monumental work was one of the most visible icons at Kassel before it collapsed in a wind storm. Cagily, like Duchamp endorsing the accidental cracks in his *Large Glass* (1915-23), Ai says it looks better now, though there is wide disagreement on that point. There remains, in any case, a perverse analogy to the fate of China's leveled towns. This play of stability and instability, material permanence and vulnerability, is echoed in *Monumental Junkyard* (2006), a work currently on view outside the Lewis Glucksman Gallery in Cork, Ireland. Resembling a pile of discarded doors ("my art," Ai said in a 2003 interview, "always has something related to the ordinary"¹), the piece is actually rendered in one of the most venerable of sculptural materials, white marble.

That dichotomy is typical of the artist. For all his love of the quotidian, Ai also embraces the power of envisioned forms. Consider his recent floating installation, *Fountain of Light* (2007), which was conceived for the Tate Liverpool and displayed at the Albert Dock. Referencing Tatlin's famous unbuilt monument, the work is an impressive symbol of the possibility—and the limits—of imagination.



Above, Fountain of Light, 2007, mixed-medium light installation, approx. 23 feet high; at Tate Liverpool.

Right, Monumental Junkyard, 2006, marble, 40 pieces: 84 by 36 by 2½ inches, 16 pieces: 82½ by 31½ by 2½ inches; at Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, Ireland, 2007. Work courtesy Uli Sigg Collection.

Opposite top, the Beijing Olympic Stadium under construction, February 2007. Photo Andri Pol.

Far right, Fragments, 2005, iron wood, Qing Dynasty tables, chairs, parts of beams and pillars, approx. 16 by 28 by 23 feet; at Art 38 Basel, 2007.

All works this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Galerie Urs Meile.





For all his love of the quotidian, Ai clearly remains enthralled with sculptural presence and the power of envisioned form.

It is *Fairytale*, however, that most vividly embodies Ai's ongoing examination of human need. His sensibility encompasses both clear-eyed functionality and conceptualist high jinks. He understands that the endless redefinitions of value can never be settled. Instead of deferring to any fixed standard, Ai seeks to show us what we can never be sure of knowing. □

1. "Changing Perspective," interview with Charles Merewether in *Ai Weiwei Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, Hong Kong, Timezone 8, 2003, p. 25.

Ai Weiwei's Fairytale and Template are included in Documenta 12, on view in Kassel, Germany, through Sept. 23. His Monumental Junkyard is installed at Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, Ireland, through Oct. 7. He has upcoming solo exhibitions at Galerie Aedes, Berlin [Oct. 27, 2007-Jan. 9, 2008], and Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne [Nov. 3-Dec. 22, 2007]. Ai is also included in three current group shows: "China Welcomes You . . . Desires, Struggles, New Identities" at Kunsthau Graz, Austria [through Sept. 2], "Metamorphosis: The Generation of Transformation in Chinese Contemporary Art" at the Tampere Art Museum, Finland [through Sept. 30], and "Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection," Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria [through Nov. 11].

Next spring, Ai Weiwei will have a one-person show at Mary Boone Gallery, Chelsea [Mar. 8-Apr. 26].

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