

There is no future: An interview with Ai Weiwei

Natalie King

Based in Beijing, Ai Weiwei is one of China's most prominent artists. Born in 1957, he grew up in exile in the remote desert province of Xinjiang. His father, the renowned poet Ai Qing, was accused of anti-communist activities during the Cultural Revolution and was sent into political confinement there with his family. Enduring immense hardship, his father worked to survive by cleaning public toilets. Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing in 1978 to attend film school with directors Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Around the same time, he founded the subversive art group Stars.

In 1981 Ai Weiwei relocated to the United States, living in the Lower East Side of New York City. He enrolled in Parsons School of Design while taking road trips with Taiwanese performance artist Tehching Hsieh and befriending poet Allen Ginsberg. He discovered an affinity with Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp. Working part-time as a babysitter, construction worker and printer, he hit the blackjack tables in Atlantic City on weekends. After twelve years he returned to China when his father fell ill. During this period he published books about visual arts, poetry and music. With art historian Hans van Dijk and collector Frank Uytterhaegen, he founded the non-profit space China Art Archives & Warehouse in 1999.

In response to a municipally propagandising Shanghai Biennale, in 2000 he co-curated (with Feng Boyi) the landmark exhibition 'Fuck Off'. As a way of consolidating his interests in architecture, design and visual arts, he built his own design studio that became known as Fake, eventually working with Herzog & de Meuron on the concept for their Beijing National Stadium. Ai Weiwei spoke with Natalie King on the occasion of the artist's survey exhibition and special project at Sydney's Campbelltown Arts Centre.

Natalie King: How has your work been influenced by your early history as the son of a poet, Ai Qing, exiled and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution?

Ai Weiwei: I think my family imprints are not directly in terms of practice, and more in terms of growing up in a family that has an association with art and literature. My father was a very devoted literary man. His perspective and



understanding about the world made an impact on me. But he never forced us to study art or literature. We took it as our own decision.

NK: Many of your works involve redesigning or salvaging found objects, particularly those embedded with history. Can you tell me about your Duchampian approach to existing objects and your method of transforming them into sculptural and architectural forms.

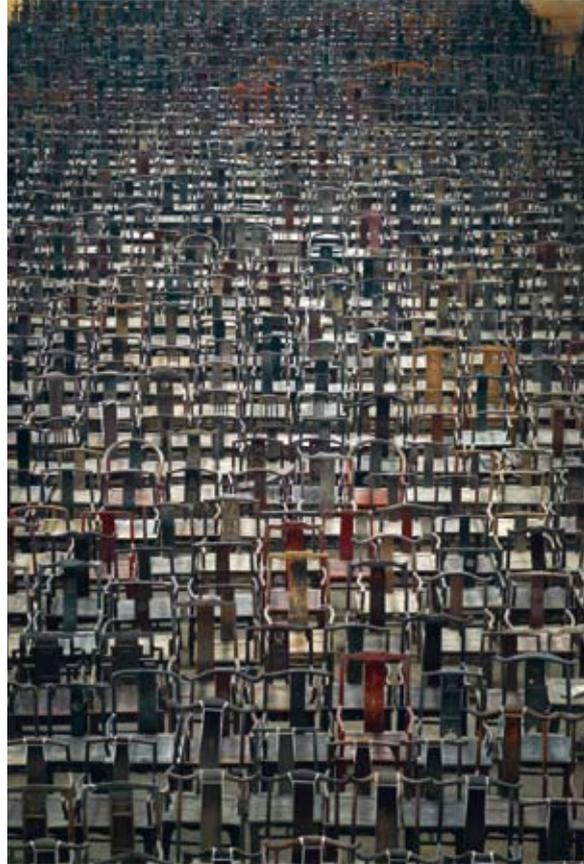
AWW: For me dealing with existing objects such as found objects or readymades is dealing with human perception and with the meaning that the object carries. A functional traditional object carries a message and meaning and by working and dealing with it you give it a reinterpretation. So the work would carry more arguments, more conflicts and more difficult conditions.

NK: Much has been written about your collaboration with Herzog & de Meuron in designing the centrepiece stadium for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games with its distinctive bird's nest shape made from steel lattice. Subsequently, you have refused to attend the opening ceremony in August, criticising 'the kind of feeling stirred up by promotion or propaganda'.¹ What are your current thoughts on this situation?

AWW: Firstly, nobody ever invited me to the opening ceremony and I didn't even have a chance to refuse. I have refused when people asked my opinion if I was willing to go there. I expressed the feeling that I don't care, because I am not so interested in sport; I am not so interested in this type of celebration. It's just a personal decision.

And I have always held one position – no current or future or previous positions. It is always one position. The Olympics are a part of China's opening-up policy. Politically speaking it is good for China. It has to force the Chinese government to be a part of the international community, to speak the same type of language. What I am disappointed with is the so-called preparation and celebration. There are so many important issues that are not being raised. But it became a showcase just to show how glamorous or fine China is, which is not the truth. I think China still has tremendous problems. Some problems are from





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Ai Weiwei, Dropping a Han Dynasty urn, 1995, detail, gelatin silver print, triptych, 126 x 110 cm each unit, courtesy Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing – Lucerne.

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Ai Weiwei, Through, 2007–08, iron wood (tieli wood), Qing Dynasty tables (1644–1911), parts of beams and pillars from dismantled temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), 550 x 850 x 1380 cm, installation at Ai Weiwei's studio, 2007, courtesy the artist and Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney.

clockwise from top left

Ai Weiwei, Fairytale, 2007, 1001 Chinese visitors, Type-C print, 100 x 100 cm, courtesy Leister Foundation, Switzerland; Erlenmeyer Stiftung, Switzerland; Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing – Lucerne.

Ai Weiwei, Birds Nest Olympic Stadium, 2007, Beijing, courtesy the artist and Herzog & de Meuron. Photograph Andri Pol.

Ai Weiwei, Template, 2007, wooden doors and windows from destroyed Ming and Qing Dynasty houses (1368–1911), wooden base, 422 x 1106 x 875 cm after collapsing, installation view documenta 12, Kassel, 2007, courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing – Lucerne.

Ai Weiwei, Template, 2007, wooden doors and windows from destroyed Ming and Qing Dynasty houses (1368–1911), wooden base, 720 x 1200 x 850 cm before collapsing, installation view documenta 12, Kassel, 2007, courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing – Lucerne.

fifty or a hundred years of history; some problems from current bureaucratic structures. And if those questions are not clearly answered that means that China hasn't enough courage to face those problems and the Olympics is only a party with masks – it's not interesting.

NK: You work across disciplines as an artist, architect, designer, writer and curator with a thriving blogsite read by 10,000 people a day. How do you negotiate these positions? How does your Beijing studio and Fake design operate?

AWW: All my works are led by one clear goal, which is: no goal, no real purpose. Under that structure everything is possible and everything is equally important. So as long as I am still alive, I have all the time I have. I don't see that many problems. You can only take as much as you can take. There is a limit – we all know that.

NK: Can you elaborate on the complex social, political, aesthetic and logistical dimensions of your practice, in particular your work *Fairytale*, 2007, for documenta 12, which invited 1001 Chinese visitors to Kassel, Germany, as a kind of social and human intervention.

AWW: I think we are living at a stage where we need people to take different actions and to raise the consciousness to be individual and to be motivated by different initiations. These kinds of actions put us in the condition to look at the world differently and to approach it differently. Facing the change and to be part of the change gives meaning to our life, our society and our understanding about who we are and what kind of stage we are at. I think there is nothing so profound about this idea; it's just the willingness to become a force for change.

NK: For Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF) you are making a new commission, *Through*, 2007–08, comprising parts of beams and pillars from dismantled Qing Dynasty temples. There seems to be a sense of gravitas through scale as these gigantic beams are threaded perilously through tables. Can you discuss this work?

AWW: The work itself is made less ordered and less predictable, but the same time it is very precise and clear and controlled in the details. It is about maximum freedom under maximum control in the so-called freedom.

NK: Alongside your new commission for SCAF, Campbelltown Arts Centre is staging a survey exhibition, 'Under Construction' curated by Charles Merewether. Having participated in the 5th Asia-Pacific Triennial in 2006–2007 and the 2006 Biennale of Sydney, what are your thoughts on bringing together work spanning twenty-three years?

AWW: I am always surprised what it will look like. I never had a show like this and I am kind of shy looking at works that I have almost already forgotten. I don't know – I'll just see what it is going to be.

NK: Apart from architecturally derived sculptural formations, you have made more irreverent, humorous and violent works depicted through photographs such as *Dropping a Han Dynasty urn*, 1995, *June 1994*, 1994, and the 1993–2003 photographic series 'Study of Perspective'. It has been said that your work is 'both statement and playful event'.² Do you agree?

AWW: It is very difficult to analyse your own works. Sometimes my work has a certain charm when I do it; most of the time it is a boring and mindless act. But even so, you still can't avoid some other reasons and meanings in there. So I don't know.

NK: What are you working on in the future?

AWW: I have no future.

¹ Quoted in Jonathan Watts, 'Hello Beijing!', *The Guardian*, 9 August 2007.

² Quoted in Daniel Aloï, 'Ai Weiwei literally smashes China's traditions in art and architecture', *Cornell University Chronicle*, 15 November 2006.

Ai Weiwei: Under Construction, curated by Charles Merewether, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, 2 May – 29 June 2008; Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, 1 May – 26 July 2008.