

Ai Weiwei – Interlacing

May 28 to August 21, 2011, Fotomuseum Winterthur (Main Gallery + Gallery)

Ai Weiwei is a generalist, a conceptual, socially critical artist dedicated to creating friction with, and forming, reality. As an architect, conceptual artist, sculptor, photographer, blogger, Twitterer, interview artist, and cultural critic, he is a sensitive observer of current topics and social problems: a great communicator and networker who brings life into art and art into life.

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957, the son of the poet Ai Qing. Following his studies at the Beijing Film Academy, he cofounded in 1978 the artists' collective *The Stars*, which rejected Social Realism and advocated artistic individualism and experimentation in art. In 1981 Ai Weiwei went to New York, where he studied at Parsons School for Design in the class of the painter Sean Scully. In New York he discovered artists like Allen Ginsberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and, above all, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp is important for him because he understood art as part of life. At this time, Ai Weiwei produced his first ready-mades and thousands of photographs documenting his life and friends in the Chinese art community in New York. After his father fell ill, he returned to Beijing in 1993. In 1997 he cofounded the China Art Archives & Warehouse (CAAW) and began from then on to deal with architecture as well. Ai Weiwei opened his own studio in 1999 in Caochangdi and set up the architecture studio FAKE Design in 2003. In the same year, he played a major role, together with the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, in the construction of the Olympic stadium, the so-called *Bird's Nest*. Following its completion, it became a new symbol of Beijing. In 2007, 1,001 Chinese visitors traveled, at his instigation, to Documenta 12 in Kassel (*Fairytale*). In 2010 the world marveled at his large, yet formally minimal, carpet of millions of hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds at the Tate Modern.

Ai Weiwei deliberately confronts social conditions in China and in the world: Through photographically documenting the architectonic clear-cutting of Beijing in the name of progress, with provocative measurements of the world, his personal positionings in the *Study of Perspective*, with radical cuts in the past (made to found pieces of furniture) in order to create possibilities for the present and the future, and with his tens of thousands of blog entries, blog photographs, and cell phone photographs (along with many other artistic declarations). This first, large exhibition and book project of his photography and videos focuses on Ai Weiwei's diversity, complexity, and connectedness, his "interlacing" and "networking" with hundreds of photographs, blogs, and explanatory essays.

The artist as network, as company, as activist, as political voice, as social container, as *agent provocateur*: at every moment – in the past, present, and future – every society on Earth needs outstanding unique figures like Ai Weiwei in order to stay awake, to be shaken awake, to be made to recognize their own obstinacy, and to be able to avoid tunnel vision. We are therefore deeply saddened that the opening of this show is overshadowed by Ai Weiwei's arrest. We are extremely concerned about the artist. And we wish that this great thinker, designer, and fighter will remain a resistant public voice for all of us – and especially for China.

Listed below you find descriptions of the larger groups of works in the exhibition:

Provisional Landscapes

This series was photographed between 2002 and 2008 throughout cities in China. Since 1949 all land in China belongs to the State, which allows it to develop – and in many cases demolish – large parcels of land without negotiations with land owners. Before a new development is begun, vast open lots suddenly appear. Where once stood traditional *hutong*-buildings unique to China now lie only piles of rubble and debris. Sometimes entire villages are uprooted and relocated, often inadequately compensated. Centuries of history and cultural heritage destroyed overnight to make way for “progress.” These provisional landscapes exist only temporarily, a void that marks the end of the old way of life before the arrival of the new.

Beijing Airport Terminal 3

In preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics Beijing underwent tremendous changes in its landscape. To accommodate the anticipated influx of visitors from all over the world a new airport terminal was designed by Norman Foster and construction began in 2004. During the same time Ai was documenting the building of the Olympic Stadium, for which he served as artistic consultant, and proposed to do the same for Foster’s project. Access to the site was highly restricted and only after a series of triumphs over bureaucratic red tape was authority granted. For Ai this made it all the more important that the work was documented, as for him architecture is not just about the end result of a building but also the struggle, process, and evolution of an idea from start to finish. These images are only a selection from an exhaustive record that spans over four years.

Bird’s Nest

Ai Weiwei was part of a joint venture along with Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Stefan Marbach, and CADG chief architect Li Xinggang to design the Beijing National Stadium which would host the 2008 Summer Olympics, serving as artistic consultant for the design. Given the seemingly random placement of many trussed columns which encase the inner bowl the stadium was nicknamed “The Bird’s Nest,” which can also be defined as a compliment, as in China a bird’s nest is an expensive delicacy only eaten on special occasions. Although Ai eventually distanced himself from the project as the opening for the Olympics neared (he was critical of the Chinese government using the Olympics as propaganda), when asked why he participated in the design process he says he did so because he loves design. As with all of his projects, Ai documented the construction religiously, sometimes even over a period lasting 24 hours.

Study of Perspective

The first “Study of Perspective” was shot in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1995, and the work is continually growing. It is a simple gesture that speaks volumes about the artist’s perspective on authority and the autonomous right of the individual for freedom of expression. We see a repeated template of the left arm extended forward with middle finger standing upright against backdrops all over the world, often in front of iconic landmarks. These photos ask viewers to challenge their own unquestioned deference towards any establishment, be it governments, institutions or even culture.

Fairytale Portraits

In 2007, Ai Weiwei was invited to participate in Documenta 12, one of the world's most important exhibitions of modern and contemporary art in Kassel, Germany, held every 5 years. For his involvement Ai undertook arguably one of his most ambitious art projects, which had many layers and components. The centerpiece involved bringing 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel, as a kind of "living installation" and conduit for cultural exchange. In China, obtaining a passport, let alone a visa for foreign travel, is extremely difficult, and for most of the poor, more like a fairytale dream than a reality. For the project Ai recruited Chinese people from some 20 provinces in China. Workers, farmers, minorities, highway patrols, jail guards, artists, students, teachers, all types of people were invited to participate. Each person was photographed in China near the various embassies where they were interviewed prior to getting their papers processed. The portraits show the anxiety and hope of each individual.

Earthquake

On May 12, 2008 a catastrophic earthquake of magnitude 8.0 on the Richter scale occurred in the central province of Sichuan, China. Within minutes, entire villages lay in piles of rubble, killing at least 69,000 and leaving almost 5 million people homeless. A week after the earthquake Ai traveled to the area to document the devastation. He realized while staring at the hundreds of bags and belongings of innocent children strewn about that all the effort and life before the disaster hit was sadly reduced to nothing but crumbled bricks, as a result of corruption and negligence. The death of thousands of schoolchildren in shoddily constructed schools became a sensitive political issue and Ai's attempts to obtain an official list of fatalities was met with fierce resistance and even violence (he suffered head injuries in a police beating in August of 2009 that resulted in emergency brain surgery to alleviate a cerebral hemorrhage a month later). The photographs serve to record and memorialize a tragedy and also Ai's frustration with the lack of accountability of those responsible. Upon return to Beijing Ai and his team supported an investigation into the student casualties, resulting in a list of 5,385 names published on his blog on the first anniversary of the earthquake. He subsequently also made a work entitled *Remembering* in 2009, using 9,000 children's backpacks on the Haus der Kunst art museum's façade in Munich, Germany, spelling out the sentence "She lived happily for seven years in this world" in Chinese characters, a quote from one of the schoolchildren's mothers.

Shanghai Studio

In early 2008 Ai was invited by the Shanghai local government to build an arts and cultural studio on the outskirts of the city. Though he hesitated strongly at first, having given up his architecture practice, the officials were insistent and seemingly sincere, repeatedly visiting him in Beijing. Eventually Ai conceded and construction commenced under the local government's supervision for the next two years. However, immediately upon completion in August 2010, the authorities announced it was an illegal building that needed to be torn down immediately. From Ai's perspective this was clearly a politically informed decision to keep him in Beijing where his activities could be better monitored by the government. In January 2011, by cover of night, demolition of the building commenced without any prior warning. Ai went to the site early the next day, but by the time he arrived the dismantling was already well under way. In just a few days all evidence of the building ever existing was meticulously removed, including the foundations, and

the site was re-plowed to look like an unassuming agriculture field. Fortunately, Ai has a visual record of the process from the expectant beginning to the untimely and unjust end.

Cell Phone Photos

Since Ai Weiwei's blog was shut down in 2009 he has used Twitter as his online communication platform. Embracing the technology of cell phone cameras, Ai often takes photographs with his phone and transmits them immediately onto his Twitter page. Communication is instantaneous, and netizens are able to see in real time what is happening. This immediacy is an interesting phenomenon, especially within the highly monitored and censored media-sphere of China. News outlets are also able to access these images and transmit them via their own sites. Information becomes viral and spreads faster than ever before. These cell phone photographs depict the breadth of Ai's activities, as an artist and a committed advocate for freedom of expression and an open society.

Blog Photographs

Ai Weiwei hosted a blog in China from 2005 till 2009 before it was shut down by the Chinese authorities due to his "politically sensitive" critiques of the government. He often posted photographs, showing everything from his quotidian life and travels to social and political issues. His photography archive numbers approximately 200,000 photographs. For this exhibition we have divided the images into broad categories, which are named at the beginning of each section. They are a tiny fraction of the archive yet show the breadth of Ai's photographic interests. For Ai these photographs are a way to engage and connect with the world in order to promote open uncensored communication. The blog archive in its entirety was taken from the studio by the police after Ai Weiwei has been detained. Fortunately a pre-selection was already made and sent to Fotomuseum Winterthur before the police searched the studio.

New York Photographs

In his late twenties and early thirties Ai Weiwei continuously lived in New York for ten years, from 1983 up until 1993. He himself often described this time as "aimless hanging around with friends." During these years in New York he was taking pictures of the East Village, where he lived, places he went to, himself and of the people he met: the Chinese artist community visiting him at his small apartment and also his American friends, most famously poet Allen Ginsberg. In 1988 the mood changed radically, Ai moved away from these tranquil, casual portraits and townscapes and started to focus on the "dark sides" of urban life, on decay and homelessness, but also on the human rights demonstrations in the streets and the police brutality accompanying them. In the end, he had "accumulated" more than 10,000 photographs that were developed only after Ai Weiwei had returned to Beijing in 1993. There are fascinating correspondences to be detected between these analog, diary-like photographs from New York, and Ai Weiwei's digital blog and cell phone photographs from more recent years (after 2005).

Curator: Urs Stahel

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