

A close-up portrait of Ai Weiwei, a Chinese artist and activist. He has dark, slightly messy hair, a prominent mustache, and a full beard with some grey hair. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a solid, dark brown color.

DE PONT

Ai Weiwei

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DE PONT

Ai Weiwei

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Ai Weiwei

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is curated by Anders Kold

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is curated by Hendrik Driessen

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Foreword

It is with great pleasure and pride that we present this exhibition of work by Ai Weiwei. Our institutions have long cherished a wish to introduce this great Chinese artist to a broader audience. Many people know about Ai Weiwei: most have come across him in the media as a prominent dissident artist, but few have actually encountered his art. That is a shame, for Ai is an artist and can perhaps only be truly understood as a public persona through a confrontation with his visual art. He has created a highly diverse body of work, involving more common artistic forms and media, but also some that have rarely or never been used before. In 2007, for instance, he brought 1001 Chinese citizens to Kassel as part of the Documenta exhibition. In his work traditional crafts are given new life as their connotations are radically transformed. With empathy and irony, he both expresses and undermines our mental images of China.

In short, we are looking at an extremely sophisticated artist, a man who formally and conceptually turns the world upside down, often with surprisingly simple devices, and thereby generates new views of it. For Ai, life and art are interwoven to a rare degree, so closely that personal integrity and the threats to it inevitably become the centre of public interest. This is seldom the case for Western artists. For Ai Weiwei and a number of other artists outside our own relatively protected part of the world, art sometimes needs to be deadly serious. If it is able to be thoughtful and humorous under such circumstances, that is all the more awe-inspiring.

As many know, Ai's ability to work has been severely limited by his detention earlier this year. Therefore it is with particular pleasure that we now see the exhibition realized. This small catalogue is to be regarded as an introduction to the exhibition and, at the same time, as an account of the artist's generally diverse activities. We have opted for electronic publication, which allows for fast and multiple distribution. In keeping with the artist's own practice, we consider it important to spread the message widely. This is why we have chosen to make the catalogue freely accessible on as many electronic platforms as possible. So welcome to this one – and welcome to the museums where Ai's unforgettable works can be seen.

Poul Erik Tøjner

Director, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Hendrik Driessen

Director, De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art

AI WEIWEI: THE ARTIST AS HACKER

By *Lotte Philipsen*

Artistic Format

One of the Ai Weiwei's works consisted in sending 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel, Germany (*Fairytale*, 2007); he once filled London's Tate Modern with 100 million hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds (*Sunflower Seeds*, 2010); and he designed the Olympic Stadium in Beijing – to mention just a few of Ai Weiwei's artistic accomplishments. Add to that his social engagement that led to his detention in China for almost three months in 2011. On *ArtReview*'s latest list of the most powerful names in the art world, Ai Weiwei is number one.¹

Ai's work is hard to pigeonhole because he goes across traditional boundaries, both in terms of his artistic media and his role as an artist. To look at his artistic media first, Ai seems to work in a broad spectrum of seemingly familiar art forms, such as photography, sculpture, installation, and so on. But more than anything, his way of doing it conceives all these genres together in an overall conceptual practice, where the art form immediately encountered by the audience, e.g., photography, always turns out so strongly to indicate other art forms, such as craft or

¹ <http://www.artreview100.com/2011-artreview-power-100/> (visited October 19, 2011)



Interview with Ai Weiwei. Louisiana Museum, December 2010.

performance, that it would be more accurate to define Ai as a multi-media artist.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (which is not in this exhibition but was shown in the museum's 2007 *Made in China* exhibition) is by any measure a tightly composed triptych of photographs with a powerful visual simplicity that is impressive in a pictorial work, but the three photos, actually, are only a small part of the work. In its entirety, the work involves 1) Ai holding a Han dynasty urn in his hands and, as the title states, 2) dropping the urn, which 3) shatters against a tile floor. In the work, a choreographed, cinematic, and performative narrative fuses with the static photographs, giving them a distinct temporal dimension. Examining the work's formal structure, concepts taken from the world of theater, film, or literature, such as "staging," "dramaturgy," "editing," "narrative structure," and "rhythm"



Ai Weiwei: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995.

seem more relevant than strictly art terms, such as “perspective” and “composition.”

The work’s interdisciplinary, medial structure, however, on a formal level is closely connected to the semantic implications of the title. A 2,000-year-old urn must be considered a significant art-historical object of the kind we would normally treasure and handle with care. Should such an object break, it would be as the result of an unfortunate accident or uncontrollable vandalism. However, as Ai’s cool gaze into the camera and his calm posture make clear to the viewer, this is a deliberate act. The simplicity of the physical act itself, underscored by the simplicity of the work’s formal structure, is thus combined with a layer of meaning of almost immeasurable cultural complexity, raising a number of questions about the relevance of traditional Chinese culture in a contemporary context. This, precisely, is how Ai goes across artistic media: a fearless, devil-may-care way of combining a concrete material with the staging of that material and the semantic cultural references that adhere to the material, making the works, as overall constructions, seem both ingenious and

strikingly simple. That goes for all the works in this show: *Forever*, *Fountain of Light*, *Tree*, *Rock* and *Hanging Man in Porcelain*.

In that sense, it may be more meaningful to define Ai's artistic move as a form of radical remixing. Like a DJ on his computer ripping sound bites from existing material and mixing them into new tracks – a bass line from here, a guitar riff from there, a violin piece played backwards – Ai appropriates cultural references and concrete materials and recombines them in new ways.



Interview with Ai Weiwei. Louisiana Museum, December 2010

Porcelain

Porcelain is a recurring material in Ai's work. The current exhibition includes two porcelain works, *Hanging Man in Porcelain* and *Rock*, that embody two very different uses of the material. The scope of Ai's use of porcelain as an artistic material can be illustrated by taking a quick look at other porcelain works by the artist:



Ai Weiwei: *Blue-and-White Porcelain*, 1996. Replica in style of Qing Dynasty, Qianlong period (1736-95)

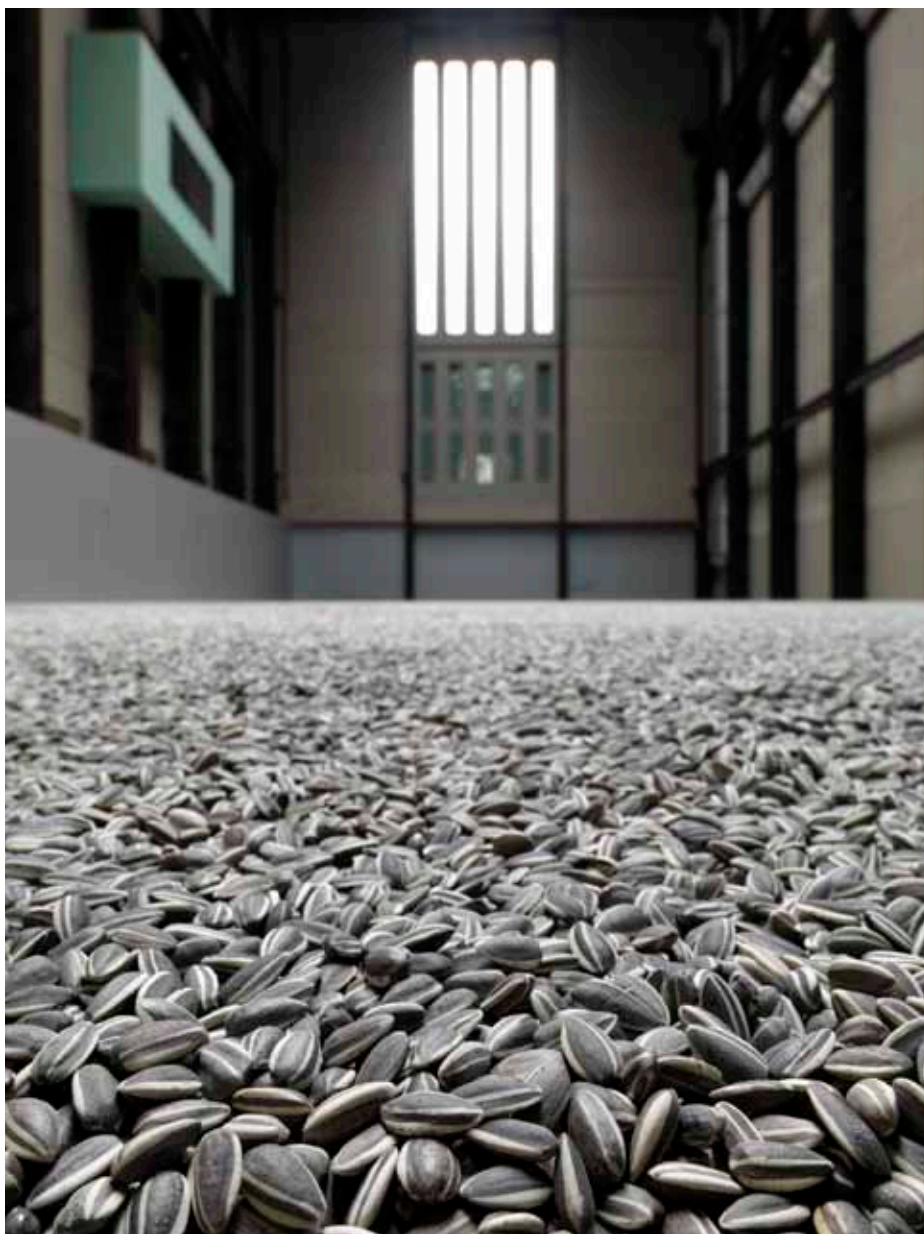
In *Blue-and-White Porcelain* from 1996 Ai has so painstakingly copied an earlier Qing vase that it is impossible to tell the copy from the original with the bare eye. Exhibiting these identical vases

side by side, Ai triggers a series of thoughts in the viewer about the relationship between original and copy (and how skilled Chinese industry is in the art of copying), between high culture and mass society, and between the cultural heritage and the present day. Accordingly, not only the vases as concrete objects but just as much their abstract cultural-historical value is employed as signifying material. Accordingly, the work has traits in common with such works as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Forever*, as Ai consciously reinterprets the cultural meaning of different objects.

Ai does just the opposite in *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) – 100 million tiny pieces of porcelain, handmade and hand painted to accurately resemble sunflower seeds, covering the floor of the huge Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. Here, the material, porcelain, is detached from the traditional cultural forms of vases or china. In *Sunflower Seeds*, we do not immediately detect any formal reference to porcelain. As a material, it is so to speak hidden under the form of “sunflower seeds.” The dimensions of the work are almost unfathomable, both in terms of scale and production process. Moreover, the production process behind Ai’s porcelain works has cultural-historical significance, since he has them made in Jingdezhen, a city that is world renowned for its porcelain workshops.

Since the 6th century, China’s changing emperors, and now the Communist Party elite, have had their porcelain supplied from Jingdezhen, whose porcelain industry derives from the region’s rich deposits of kaolin rock, the source of an exceptionally fine, white clay.² By having his porcelain works made in Jingdezhen,

2 DILLON, MICHAEL: “Transport and Marketing in the Development of the Jingdezhen Porcelain Industry during the Ming and Qing Dynasties” in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1992), pp. 278-290



Ai Weiwei: *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010
Installation at Tate

Ai encodes a layer of meaning into his works that says “proud tradition of craftsmanship.” It might initially seem paradoxical to have 100 million by-all-appearances identical “sunflower seeds” handcrafted by top artisans, considering China’s knack for cheap, industrial mass production and copying. But it is precisely in the clash between overwhelming volume, mass, and the unique and carefully crafted individual object, which together with all the other unique individual parts comprises the mass, that *Sunflower Seeds* gains a conceptual impact that goes far beyond the work’s phenomenological and installational power.

Hanging Man in Porcelain

Ai's first one-man show, in New York, 1988, included a piece, a marvel of simplicity, consisting of a wire hanger twisted into a silhouette of Marcel Duchamp (*Hanging Man*, 1985).³



Ai Weiwei: *Hanging Man*, 1985.

3 SIEMONS, MARK: "China as Readymade: On the Ai Weiwei System" in *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry* (exhibition catalogue), 2009, Prestel, pp. 24-28



Ai Weiwei: *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, 2009

The Louisiana is showing a work, *Hanging Man in Porcelain* from 2009, that redevelops this earlier work. The French-American artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), along with Andy Warhol, is one of Ai's greatest idols. Duchamp, who came out of Dadaism, is perhaps best known for his use of readymades – everyday objects introduced into an art context – as exemplified by perhaps his best known work, *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal that Duchamp adorned with a fake signature and submitted to an art exhibition in 1917.



Marcel Duchamp: *Fountain*, 1917/16

In *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, Ai refers back to his own *Hanging Man*, but he adds another dimension to the updated Duchamp portrait by executing it in porcelain, a material that is generally associated with delicacy and fragility. Here, though, it is also the concrete material of Duchamp's *Fountain*. Portraying Duchamp in porcelain must be considered a worthy homage to the artist.

The porcelain profile is encased in a simple wooden frame, a choice of material that is not accidental, either. The frame is made from huanghuali, an exclusive wood once used to make the finest furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties. More than a handsome wooden frame, it is made from a material that has a singular, elevated significance in Chinese culture.

Entirely in Duchamp's Dadaist spirit, the work thus appears to stage and recode the cultural meanings that we assign to concrete

objects and materials: the finely painted gold trim of the porcelain, which is usually applied as an abstract decoration, here produces a trompe l'oeil effect by its resemblance to the 1985 work, *Hanging Man*. The white background, which normally serves to create a neutral space (stressing the person depicted rather than environmental attributes), can here – because it is porcelain and the painted profile refers to Duchamp – be said to allude to the white surface of a urinal, on which backdrop one can further interpret the meaning of the profile's yellow line. Articulating a meeting of meanings from the history of both Western and Chinese art and culture, *Hanging Man in Porcelain* thus challenges the traditional high- and low-cultural rooting of those meanings.

While porcelain in the context of Duchamp has a decidedly scatological, industrial character, it is generally associated with finer household goods.



Interview with Ai Weiwei. Louisiana Museum, December 2010

Rock

One of the porcelain works in the exhibition, *Rock* (2009-2010), is a series of “rocks” in white porcelain with blue trim. Unlike a work like *Sunflower Seeds*, in which the porcelain was shaped and painted to look exactly like sunflower seeds, no one would ever doubt that these rocks are made of porcelain. Their shape, white surface, and blue decorations look like culturally manufactured elements in stark contrast to our usual understanding of rocks as a natural raw material. We pretend they are rocks.



Ai Weiwei: *Rock*, 2009 - 2010

In that sense, the work can be said to indicate the principles of the classic Chinese garden, which is artistically designed to make the interplay of water, trees, rocks, and pavilions look “natural.” Nature and landscape as two radically different things – one consisting of biological and geological processes, the other of cultural processes – are staged here, apparently with top billing going to the latter. Even so, there is a concrete kinship between porcelain and rocks, since porcelain is made from clay from rocks containing kaolinite. Ai, so to speak, has the porcelain mimic its original, geological source. A similar device is employed in another work in the exhibition, *Tree*.

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Tree

Tree (2009-2010) consists of chunks of wood from dead trees from southern China that have been assembled to resemble whole trees.



Ai Weiwei: *Tree*, 2009 - 2010

In *Tree*, Ai Weiwei performs an artistic move that can best be described by referring to Aristotle's distinction between "matter" (or raw material) on one hand and "form" (or object of meaning) on the other. A form is always composed of matter – for instance, the form, "knife," is composed of the matter, "iron." The form takes precedence over the matter, because the form has actuality, while the matter has potentiality: the knife is realized, while iron in itself has no purpose to us, although it does have the potentiality to be constituted into forms.

Tree articulates the relation between wood as matter and tree as form by experimentally collapsing the two dimensions into one. What was once the form, tree, somewhere in southern China, has, now that the tree is dead, been dissolved into the matter, wood, whereupon Ai once again seeks to make the matter a tree, complete with a trunk, crown, and branches. However, because these pale and dried-out pieces of wood are all different and the joints clearly show, we never get the illusion of standing in front of a natural tree. So, even though the matter, wood, is real enough, the form remains artificial, and the work prompts reflection on the relationship between the two dimensions. What is made to appear as a living, meaningful form is in reality a dead construct. The joints between the different pieces of wood, as so often is the case in Ai's art, are fitted with the same classic Chinese craftsmanship that was once used to build temples, which adds a distinct cultural layer to the matter, wood, but the forced compaction of the overall form might suggest a critique of the broader societal structure in China.

Ai has used wood in a number of works, as he, so to speak, hacks classic Chinese furniture by cutting it up and rewriting its code, so that it loses its original identity and instead looks alienated and fundamentally redefined.



Ai Weiwei: *Table With Two Legs on the Wall*, 1997.

Ai demonstrates a similar hacker practice in another work in this exhibition, *Forever*.

Forever



Ai Weiwei: *Forever*, 2003. Installed at Louisiana.

Forever (2003) is a large installation consisting of 42 bicycles welded together. The allusion to China as a distinct nation of bicyclists is right at hand, linking in to the understanding of China as a distinct mass society. The bicycles in *Forever* are identical and connected in one big overall structure in a way so that the individual bicycle could not be separated from the whole without destroying the whole. In its composition, the construction merges a complex, helter-skelter tangle of bicycle parts with a simple and light expression. In that sense, the work could be said to anticipate Ai's best known architectural work, the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, popularly known as the "Bird's Nest."



Ai Weiwei and Herzog & de Meuron: Bird's Nest. National Stadium, Beijing, China. 2004-2008.

One way to look at *Forever* is as a piece of conceptual design, that is, as existing in the field between design and art, now that the bicycles have been robbed of their usual design functionality. Ai has, so to speak, hacked the bicycles by intervening in and destroying (literally cutting the bicycles into pieces) their original design that coded them as a functional means of transportation and writing a new code out of the material in the form of the installation *Forever*, where what was once bicycles has now become “bicycles,” in quotes. They have, in other words, been transformed from functional to conceptual design. Bearing in mind Ai Weiwei's admiration for Marcel Duchamp it seems appropriate to refer to one of Duchamp's works, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), which consists of a bicycle's front fork with its wheel mounted on a stool.

Apart from the work's design dimension, it is obvious to view *Forever* as Ai's interpretation of Chinese society, in which

the system of communist government, unlike representative democracies, to a radical degree assigns power and importance to the common whole, while dismantling the individual's opportunities for acting independently. Depending on one's political viewpoint, this priority on community could, in theory, be a beautiful thought, but judging from *Forever*, the practical potential of community has been replaced by an empty postulate. Instead of projecting an image of forceful progress, the interlinking of the many bicycles appears meaningless, literally without common direction, as the bicycles head in all directions, some even upside down. The whole construction seems to go in circles without getting anywhere. In his socio-critical work, Ai has often indicated the negative consequences of China's neglect of individual rights, as expressed in these words posted on July 15, 2006:

*"I've never seen 'the People.' What is the People? [...] Just like gravity, the People will always exist, but they will never reveal themselves ... we see the house collapse, and the apple falls from the tree, but no one has ever seen gravity. Someone who helps another is a nice person, someone who helps a few people is a good person, but someone who helps the People – something that never even existed – is a fool."*⁴

Though the background for the above quote does not directly tie into *Forever*, Ai's criticism of the abstract "People" and its wrongful precedence over individual persons is an obvious parallel to the work's implicit dialectic between

⁴ AI WEIWEI: Ai Weiwei's blog. *Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants 2006-2009*, 2011, MIT Press, pp. 75-76

bicycles as functional individual objects and as monumental art(ificial) installation.

While a kinship can be traced between the formal aesthetic devices in *Tree* and *Forever*, as both works consist of familiar objects whose “natural” functions have been reprogrammed, *Forever*, its content indicating a more social theme, has something in common with *Fountain of Light*.

Fountain of Light



Ai Weiwei: *Fountain of Light*, 2007

Fountain of Light (2007) is monumental in several ways. For one, it is seven meters in height, and for that reason it is being exhibited outdoors, in the museum gardens. For another, the piece is a paraphrase of an iconic Soviet monument, the *Monument to the Third International*, designed by Vladimir Tatlin in 1919-20. The vision behind this never-realized, 400-meter-high spiraling tower was to create an entirely new architecture that would house the leadership of the Communist International and be a stage for its assemblies. In turn, it would reflect the new Russia after the revolution in 1917 with a radical new expression to replace the traditional, neo-classicist architectural vocabulary.⁵ Merging utilitarian architecture and artistic monument, the tower was to be constructed in the materials of the future, steel and glass.

Ai's reinterpretation of the tower retains those materials. But instead of glass sheets, he uses crystals, which makes the whole construction resemble a giant chandelier. Ai has used light and glass crystals in other works (e.g., *Chandelier* and *Descending Light*), but the link to Tatlin's tower imbues the brilliant light in this work with an almost ideological glow. Here is the monument that will lead the people into the glorious future of communism, but on closer inspection it uses the same kind of ornamentation we know mostly from royal castles and, later, from grand-bourgeois homes in the West. What was to have been a symbol of the triumph of communism could not be realized in practice and, in Ai's work, ends up as a beautifully illuminated delusion.

5 PUNIN, NIKOLAI: "The Monument to the Third International" (1920) in *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, eds.), 1992, Blackwell Publishers, pp. 311-315

Ai Weiwei as Social Critic

In several works in this exhibition, a criticism of contemporary China can be detected. Knowing that he has been extremely critical online of the communist regime, it is tempting to conclude that Ai makes political art in opposition to the Chinese government. But such a reading would reduce his art to mere propaganda. More fruitful is regarding the nuances in Ai's critical work as unfolding on a scale that ranges from unequivocal criticism to works and practices that seem entirely devoid of any kind of political content. We must, then, distinguish between "Ai Weiwei the artist," whose works are more or less critical in nature, depending on the work in question, and "Ai Weiwei the social critic," who happens to also be an artist. These are different critical practices and, as they sometimes overlap, it would be useful to examine how that happens.

Ai's artistic format is distinguished by cultural references, materials, forms, and installations that make up a whole, so that each individual work creates a complex expression that contains many different facets and, hence, has an ambiguous appearance. The same cannot be said about Ai's work as a social critic. He has drawn attention to himself by voicing what is (by Chinese standards) an uncommonly sharp and open criticism of conditions in Chinese society. This criticism has mainly been expressed on his blog, in his tweets, and in his documentary films. In writing, Ai has especially criticized the regime's oppression of individual rights, often in conjunction with specific incidents. One was the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province, when the Chinese authorities were blamed for buildings, especially schools, collapsing, causing the deaths

of thousands of children, because of shoddy construction due to endemic corruption, and later for trying to stifle critical voices among the victims' relatives.

In his written commentary on the Sichuan earthquake, Ai made no attempt to hide his criticism of the authorities. He even started a campaign to find out the names of all the deceased children. The project is related to *Sunflower Seeds* and *Fairytale* in Ai's insistence that a huge number – in this case, of casualties – consists of individuals with individual names. A crucial difference, however, is that the names project is not formulated as part of Ai's art practice but springs from concrete social and political indignation. It is foremost "Ai Weiwei the social critic" who is acting here, and it is "Ai Weiwei the social critic" that the Chinese authorities were beginning to keep a sharp eye on.



Ai Weiwei's photo of a surveillance camera set up by the authorities outside his house in Beijing, posted on the artist's blog in June 2009.

“Ai Weiwei the artist” is less in the authorities’ spotlight because, to put it somewhat theoretically, the difference between art and non-art is constituted in the fact that art exists in an autonomous field, in the sense that art is free and, as such, not subordinated to any utilitarian purpose beyond offering the audience certain aesthetic experiences. It is important to note here that an aesthetic experience may very well contain such emotional elements as curiosity, wonder, even revulsion, and thus to begin with has nothing to do with an artwork being perceived as pleasant to look at.⁶

Though some artworks are censored (e.g., if they are pornographic or directly and unequivocally critical of the Communist Party), the art field in China today is just as free as in the West. However, in that autonomy, art also loses its ability to intervene directly in a political, economic, or social sphere. The immediate impact of targeted propaganda, free art must do without. That art has an autonomous status does not, however, prevent an individual work of art from engaging in society. The form it takes can even make it useful beyond the realm of art. A fine example of such a work is *Supergas* (1996-) by the Danish artists group Superflex, which involves the development of biogas plant for farmers in the developing world, who get usable energy from the plants. *Supergas* is an example of a phenomenon that, viewed as art, possesses aesthetic potential by virtue of its naive “madness” in breaking with conventional thinking and envisioning new ways of doing things. Still, the farmers who actually benefit from the biogas plants probably do not attach any aesthetic qualities to them, viewing *Supergas* as a distinctly utilitarian piece of engineering.

6 SCHAEFFER, JEAN-MARIE: *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, 2000 (1992), Princeton University Press

Accordingly, an object or a phenomenon can appear both as an artwork in the art field and as a utilitarian object, for instance in an economic or social discourse.

As for Ai's works in this exhibition, they are not seen to possess this dual identity. They are works of art that take off from and treat various different relationships in an aesthetic manner, in which materials, objects, and subject matter evoke ambiguous wonder. Seeing a reproduction of *Forever* in a book would not be the same as experiencing the work by actually moving around it. Nor does a video clip of *Tree* on YouTube do the work justice. Moreover, since the works are not straight answers to straight questions, they cannot simply be taken out of the museum and seamlessly incorporated into a context of application in another domain. The utility and value of the works are tied to their value as art (Ai's documentaries are another story). Rather, Ai's work as an artist and a social critic, respectively, overlap in two other ways.

First, Ai's critical engagement sometimes rubs off on his art. This was the case with *Remembering* (2009), a giant decoration on the façade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, where the artist was showing. Ai covered the facade with Chinese-made children's backpacks in a colorful pattern that from a distance could be seen to spell out the Chinese characters for "She lived happily for seven years in this world." These words were quoted from the mother of one of the schoolchildren killed in the Sichuan earthquake.⁷ In this case, a specific social condition in which Ai had critically engaged was the direct cause of an artwork, which then is aesthetically formulated by incorporating schoolbags as a material. The difference between the text as it appears on the blog or on the façade, respectively, is that

7 Ai, p. 210 (20 March 2009)



Ai Weiwei: *Remembering*, 2009. Installed at Haus der Kunst, Munich.

colors, materials, scale, etc., contribute an amount of additional sensory information that makes the statement multifaceted and conveys a wider emotional spectrum than a purely textual message ever could. Even so, very few of Ai's works can be directly linked to specific contemporary events. As works like *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, *Rock*, and *Tree* demonstrate, this is not always the case, and so to construe these works as an unequivocal critique of the Chinese government would quite clearly be to overlook the works' aesthetic potential.

Another relationship between Ai's artistic and his critical effort goes the other way: how his artistic work to a very great degree has made his social criticism possible. Clearly, Ai had been given an exceptionally long leash in expressing himself on his blog compared to other Chinese dissidents. His blog (with occasional interruptions) existed from October 2005 to May 2009, when Ai switched to voicing his criticism on Twitter and in interviews with foreign media. That the Chinese authorities waited until 2011 to detain Ai is remarkable in itself, and a big reason for that very likely

is his position as an acclaimed superstar on the international art scene. Indeed, Ai's detention caused an international uproar, not just in the art world but also in the media at large. Ai's artistic work, critical or not, has offered him a measure of protection to pursue his political activism. Moreover, his biographical background, notably his father's status as a well-known poet, has made Ai better known in China than most other contemporary artists, which has probably also contributed to the authorities waiting longer than they otherwise would.



Interview with Ai Weiwei. Louisiana Museum, December 2010

Documentary Films

The Louisiana exhibition features three of Ai's documentaries. One documents the whole intricate process behind *Fairytale*, a work that, in part, involved Ai sending 1,001 Chinese people to Kassel for *Documenta* 12 in 2007. The film shows some of the many hopeful Chinese applicants Ai auditioned for the project via an open call on his blog. It shows how the logistics were resolved, how the Chinese participants as well as the citizens of Kassel experienced the project,



Ai Weiwei: *Fairytale*, 2007

Fairytale documents Ai Weiwei's project to fly in 1001 Chinese citizens to Germany to experience and contribute by their presence to the *Documenta* 12 exhibition in Kassel in 2007. The film is a testimony to the artist's belief that transformation and change of conditions can change society for the better. Thinking and action goes hand in hand in Ai's artistic practise.

and how 1,001 antique Chinese chairs were lovingly renovated and shipped to Germany as part of the project.

As the film makes clear, Ai's idea with the piece was the simple transplantation of Chinese people to a radically different context for a few weeks. They were not asked to perform or do anything besides staying in Kassel and having access to the *Documenta* exhibition. The work in that sense is a radical act, giving a number of real people an experience for life, but it also possesses an uncertainty of purpose that no doubt spread to the participants as well as to the rest of the audience at *Documenta*, who read about the work and maybe met some of the participants. The film conveys that uncertainty best in a short sequence of a Chinese person carefully studying a German fire hydrant on the street and evidently finding that, no matter what angle this strange object is observed from, it remains equally enchanting and mysterious.

While the film can document or represent the unique aesthetic qualities of a unique artwork, it cannot mediate that quality in a one-to-one relationship.⁸ The power of documentary film in this case is that it exists outside the actual field of art and, consequently, it possesses what art cannot directly express: purposefulness and agency. A documentary film can have a social and critical impact (though not necessarily an aesthetic impact) that is unavailable to a work of art. Unlike the artworks in the show, Ai Weiwei's documentaries could easily be posted to YouTube without losing any of their value. While the *Fairytale* documentary depicts an art project, other films of Ai's delve

8 On the difference between representing and mediating, see Lars Elleström: "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations" in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (Lars Elleström, ed.), 2010, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 11-48

into the more socio-critical aspects of his work. *One Recluse* unfurls the brutal police violence and power abuse that led to a man attacking a police station in Shanghai and killing six officers on July 1, 2008. Accordingly, it makes sense to also view Ai's films as belonging to his socio-critical work on a par with his blog and tweets.

As is the case with the overwhelming overload and accessibility of information in the digital society, the real art is not to create something (purportedly) new but to find the



Ai Weiwei: *One Recluse*, 2010

One Recluse traces the reasons and motivations behind the tragedy of Yang Jia, a young man's killing and wounding of several police officers in June 2008. It investigates a trial process filled with shady cover-ups and questionable decisions – for instance the fact that the trial in spite of being public wasn't scheduled and therefore didn't allow the public – and in this way provides a glimpse into the realities and their impact on the citizens' lives.

right things and, not least, having the ability to process and present what you find in a way that makes us see in a new way. In this sense Ai Weiwei demonstrates an artistic practice that curator and art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has termed 'postproduction', which means that artists 'interpret, reproduce, re-exhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural



Ai Weiwei: *Lao Mai Ti Hua*, 2009.
(Also known as *Disturbing the Peace*)

Lao Mai Ti Hua is a documentary of an incident during Tan Zuoren's trial in August 2009. He was charged with "inciting subversion of state power" as a result of his research and questioning into the May 2008 earthquake which due to poor building construction and corruption resulted in horrific Wenchuan students' casualties. We see for instance the artist himself in incidents at police stations where both parties are actively engaging and documenting each other. The tragedy of the casualties which the government tried to silence, later formed the basis for Ai Weiwei's work *Remembering*, 9000 backpacks on the façade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2009.

products.’ Finding and treating matter and form is precisely what Ai Weiwei masters, both in his art and in his other work. Like an artistic programmer, he rewrites the existing codes to give them new functions.

Biography

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing. In the following year, his father, Ai Qing, a well-known poet, fell out of favor during a Communist Party anti-right campaign, resulting in the relocation of the entire family, first to northernmost, then westernmost China. The family was in exile, at a certain point literally lived in a hole in the ground until 1976, when they returned to Beijing.⁹



Interview with Ai Weiwei. Louisiana Museum, December 2010

Ai started at the Beijing Film Academy and joined the experimental artists group Stars, which caused a stir in 1979 when it mounted

⁹ Ai, "Introduction" + p. 53

an exhibition in public space that involved the group's members hanging their works on the fence surrounding the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.

In 1981, Ai Weiwei moved to New York to further pursue his dream of becoming an artist. He enrolled but later dropped out at the Parsons School of Design, worked small jobs in construction, and made friends with many artists of the day. Returning to China in 1993, Ai became a central figure in Beijing's experimental art world, which he exposed and documented in three books, *Black Cover*, *White Cover*, and *Grey Cover Books*, featuring pictures, texts, and interviews with Beijing's most important experimental artists of the nineties. Although he has no formal training in architecture, Ai has designed a number of architectural works since 1999, ranging from his personal studio to homes, public buildings, and, most prominently, the Olympic Stadium in Beijing. Alongside his own work, he has served on art-award juries and curated exhibitions.

In 2005, he started blogging in no uncertain terms about art, architecture, and social conditions. In unequivocal terms, Ai on his blog has criticized the living conditions of migrant workers in China's cities, corruption, police violence, official attempts to cover up the number of schoolchildren killed in the earthquake in Sichuan province in 2008, and China's actions in Tibet. His outspoken attitude led to his detention from April 3 to June 22, 2011. Now – in the fall of 2011 – Ai is not allowed to leave Beijing.

Lotte Philipsen, b. 1971, Postdoctoral researcher at Aarhus University focusing on contemporary Chinese art. Latest publications: *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism*, Aarhus 2010; "Nordic Jaywalking in Contemporary Visual Art" in *Globalizing Art: Negotiating Place, Identity and Nation in Contemporary Nordic Art*, Aarhus 2011.

TEXT

AI WEIWEI: THE ARTIST AS HACKER

By *Lotte Philipsen*

Artistic Format

One of the Ai Weiwei's works consisted in sending 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel, Germany (*Fairytale*, 2007); he once filled London's Tate Modern with 100 million hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds (*Sunflower Seeds*, 2010); and he designed the Olympic Stadium in Beijing – to mention just a few of Ai Weiwei's artistic accomplishments. Add to that his social engagement that led to his detention in China for almost three months in 2011. On *ArtReview*'s latest list of the most powerful names in the art world, Ai Weiwei is number one.¹

Ai's work is hard to pigeonhole because he goes across traditional boundaries, both in terms of his artistic media and his role as an artist. To look at his artistic media first, Ai seems to work in a broad spectrum of seemingly familiar art forms, such as photography, sculpture, installation, and so on. But more than anything, his way of doing it conceives all these genres together

¹ <http://www.artreview100.com/2011-artreview-power-100/> (visited October 19, 2011)

in an overall conceptual practice, where the art form immediately encountered by the audience, e.g., photography, always turns out so strongly to indicate other art forms, such as craft or performance, that it would be more accurate to define Ai as a multi-media artist.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (which is not in this exhibition but was shown in the museum's 2007 *Made in China* exhibition) is by any measure a tightly composed triptych of photographs with a powerful visual simplicity that is impressive in a pictorial work, but the three photos, actually, are only a small part of the work. In its entirety, the work involves 1) Ai holding a Han dynasty urn in his hands and, as the title states, 2) dropping the urn, which 3) shatters against a tile floor. In the work, a choreographed, cinematic, and performative narrative fuses with the static photographs, giving them a distinct temporal dimension. Examining the work's formal structure, concepts taken from the world of theater, film, or literature, such as "staging," "dramaturgy," "editing," "narrative structure," and "rhythm" seem more relevant than strictly art terms, such as "perspective" and "composition."

The work's interdisciplinary, medial structure, however, on a formal level is closely connected to the semantic implications of the title. A 2,000-year-old urn must be considered a significant art-historical object of the kind we would normally treasure and handle with care. Should such an object break, it would be as the result of an unfortunate accident or uncontrollable vandalism. However, as Ai's cool gaze into the camera and his calm posture make clear to the viewer, this is a deliberate act. The simplicity of the physical act itself, underscored by the simplicity of the work's formal structure, is thus combined with a layer of meaning of almost immeasurable cultural complexity, raising a number of questions about the relevance of traditional Chinese culture in a contemporary context. This, precisely,

is how Ai goes across artistic media: a fearless, devil-may-care way of combining a concrete material with the staging of that material and the semantic cultural references that adhere to the material, making the works, as overall constructions, seem both ingenious and strikingly simple. That goes for all the works in this show: *Forever*, *Fountain of Light*, *Tree*, *Rock* and *Hanging Man in Porcelain*.

In that sense, it may be more meaningful to define Ai's artistic move as a form of radical remixing. Like a DJ on his computer ripping sound bites from existing material and mixing them into new tracks – a bass line from here, a guitar riff from there, a violin piece played backwards – Ai appropriates cultural references and concrete materials and recombines them in new ways.

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Porcelain

Porcelain is a recurring material in Ai's work. The current exhibition includes two porcelain works, *Hanging Man in Porcelain* and *Rock*, that embody two very different uses of the material. The scope of Ai's use of porcelain as an artistic material can be illustrated by taking a quick look at other porcelain works by the artist:

In *Blue-and-White Porcelain*, from 1996 Ai has so painstakingly copied an earlier Qing vase that it is impossible to tell the copy from the original with the bare eye. Exhibiting these identical vases side by side, Ai triggers a series of thoughts in the viewer about the relationship between original and copy (and how skilled Chinese industry is in the art of copying), between high culture and mass society, and between the cultural heritage and

the present day. Accordingly, not only the vases as concrete objects but just as much their abstract cultural-historical value is employed as signifying material. Accordingly, the work has traits in common with such works as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Forever*, as Ai consciously reinterprets the cultural meaning of different objects.

Ai does just the opposite in *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) – 100 million tiny pieces of porcelain, handmade and hand painted to accurately resemble sunflower seeds, covering the floor of the huge Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. Here, the material, porcelain, is detached from the traditional cultural forms of vases or china. In *Sunflower Seeds*, we do not immediately detect any formal reference to porcelain. As a material, it is so to speak hidden under the form of “sunflower seeds.” The dimensions of the work are almost unfathomable, both in terms of scale and production process. Moreover, the production process behind Ai’s porcelain works has cultural-historical significance, since he has them made in Jingdezhen, a city that is world renowned for its porcelain workshops.

Since the 6th century, China’s changing emperors, and now the Communist Party elite, have had their porcelain supplied from Jingdezhen, whose porcelain industry derives from the region’s rich deposits of kaolin rock, the source of an exceptionally fine, white clay.² By having his porcelain works made in Jingdezhen, Ai encodes a layer of meaning into his works that says “proud tradition of craftsmanship.” It might initially seem paradoxical to have 100 million by-all-appearances identical “sunflower seeds” handcrafted by top artisans, considering China’s knack for cheap,

2 SIEMONS, MARK: “China as Readymade: On the Ai Weiwei System” in *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry* (exhibition catalogue), 2009, Prestel, pp. 24-28

industrial mass production and copying. But it is precisely in the clash between overwhelming volume, mass, and the unique and carefully crafted individual object, which together with all the other unique individual parts comprises the mass, that *Sunflower Seeds* gains a conceptual impact that goes far beyond the work's phenomenological and installational power.

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Hanging Man in Porcelain

Ai's first one-man show, in New York, 1988, included a piece, a marvel of simplicity, consisting of a wire hanger twisted into a silhouette of Marcel Duchamp (*Hanging Man*, 1985).³

The Louisiana is showing a work, *Hanging Man in Porcelain* from 2009, that redevelops this earlier work. The French-American artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), along with Andy Warhol, is one of Ai's greatest idols. Duchamp, who came out of Dadaism, is perhaps best known for his use of readymades – everyday objects introduced into an art context – as exemplified by perhaps his best known work, *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal that Duchamp adorned with a fake signature and submitted to an art exhibition in 1917. In *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, Ai refers back to his own *Hanging Man*, but he adds another dimension to the updated Duchamp portrait by executing it in porcelain, a material that is

3 DILLON, MICHAEL: "Transport and Marketing in the Development of the Jingdezhen Porcelain Industry during the Ming and Qing Dynasties" in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*,

Vol. 35, No. 3 (1992), pp. 278-290

generally associated with delicacy and fragility. Here, though, it is also the concrete material of Duchamp's *Fountain*. Portraying Duchamp in porcelain must be considered a worthy homage to the artist.

The porcelain profile is encased in a simple wooden frame, a choice of material that is not accidental, either. The frame is made from huanghuali, an exclusive wood once used to make the finest furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties. More than a handsome wooden frame, it is made from a material that has a singular, elevated significance in Chinese culture.

Entirely in Duchamp's Dadaist spirit, the work thus appears to stage and recode the cultural meanings that we assign to concrete objects and materials: the finely painted gold trim of the porcelain, which is usually applied as an abstract decoration, here produces a trompe l'oeil effect by its resemblance to the 1985 work, *Hanging Man*. The white background, which normally serves to create a neutral space (stressing the person depicted rather than environmental attributes), can here – because it is porcelain and the painted profile refers to Duchamp – be said to allude to the white surface of a urinal, on which backdrop one can further interpret the meaning of the profile's yellow line. Articulating a meeting of meanings from the history of both Western and Chinese art and culture, *Hanging Man in Porcelain* thus challenges the traditional high- and low-cultural rooting of those meanings.

While porcelain in the context of Duchamp has a decidedly scatological, industrial character, it is generally associated with finer household goods.

Rock

One of the porcelain works in the exhibition, *Rock* (2009-2010), is a series of “rocks” in white porcelain with blue trim. Unlike a work like *Sunflower Seeds*, in which the porcelain was shaped and painted to look exactly like sunflower seeds, no one would ever doubt that these rocks are made of porcelain. Their shape, white surface, and blue decorations look like culturally manufactured elements in stark contrast to our usual understanding of rocks as a natural raw material. We pretend they are rocks. In that sense, the work can be said to indicate the principles of the classic Chinese garden, which is artistically designed to make the interplay of water, trees, rocks, and pavilions look “natural.” Nature and landscape as two radically different things – one consisting of biological and geological processes, the other of cultural processes – are staged here, apparently with top billing going to the latter. Even so, there is a concrete kinship between porcelain and rocks, since porcelain is made from clay from rocks containing kaolinite. Ai, so to speak, has the porcelain mimic its original, geological source. A similar device is employed in another work in the exhibition, *Tree*.

Tree

Tree (2009-10) consists of chunks of wood from dead trees from southern China that have been assembled to resemble whole trees. In *Tree*, Ai Weiwei performs an artistic move that can best be described by referring to Aristotle's distinction between "matter" (or raw material) on one hand and "form" (or object of meaning) on the other. A form is always composed of matter – for instance, the form, "knife," is composed of the matter, "iron." The form takes precedence over the matter, because the form has actuality, while the matter has potentiality: the knife is realized, while iron in itself has no purpose to us, although it does have the potentiality to be constituted into forms.

Tree articulates the relation between wood as matter and tree as form by experimentally collapsing the two dimensions into one. What was once the form, tree, somewhere in southern China, has, now that the tree is dead, been dissolved into the matter, wood, whereupon Ai once again seeks to make the matter a tree, complete with a trunk, crown, and branches. However, because these pale and dried-out pieces of wood are all different and the joints clearly show, we never get the illusion of standing in front of a natural tree. So, even though the matter, wood, is real enough, the form remains artificial, and the work prompts reflection on the relationship between the two dimensions. What is made to appear as a living, meaningful form is in reality a dead construct. The joints between the different pieces of wood, as so often is the case in Ai's art, are fitted with the same classic Chinese craftsmanship that was once used to build temples, which adds a distinct cultural layer to the

matter, wood, but the forced compaction of the overall form might suggest a critique of the broader societal structure in China.

Ai has used wood in a number of works, as he, so to speak, hacks classic Chinese furniture by cutting it up and rewriting its code, so that it loses its original identity and instead looks alienated and fundamentally redefined.

Ai demonstrates a similar hacker practice in another work in this exhibition, *Forever*.

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Forever

Forever (2003) is a large installation consisting of 42 bicycles welded together. The allusion to China as a distinct nation of bicyclists is right at hand, linking in to the understanding of China as a distinct mass society. The bicycles in *Forever* are identical and connected in one big overall structure in a way so that the individual bicycle could not be separated from the whole without destroying the whole. In its composition, the construction merges a complex, helter-skelter tangle of bicycle parts with a simple and light expression. In that sense, the work could be said to anticipate Ai's best known architectural work, the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, popularly known as the "Bird's Nest."

One way to look at *Forever* is as a piece of conceptual design, that is, as existing in the field between design and art, now that the bicycles have been robbed of their usual design functionality. Ai has, so to speak, hacked the bicycles by intervening in and destroying (literally cutting the bicycles into pieces) their original

design that coded them as a functional means of transportation and writing a new code out of the material in the form of the installation *Forever*, where what was once bicycles has now become “bicycles,” in quotes. They have, in other words, been transformed from functional to conceptual design. Bearing in mind Ai Weiwei’s admiration for Marcel Duchamp it seems appropriate to refer to one of Duchamp’s works, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), which consists of a bicycle’s front fork with its wheel mounted on a stool.

Apart from the work’s design dimension, it is obvious to view *Forever* as Ai’s interpretation of Chinese society, in which the system of communist government, unlike representative democracies, to a radical degree assigns power and importance to the common whole, while dismantling the individual’s opportunities for acting independently. Depending on one’s political viewpoint, this priority on community could, in theory, be a beautiful thought, but judging from *Forever*, the practical potential of community has been replaced by an empty postulate. Instead of projecting an image of forceful progress, the interlinking of the many bicycles appears meaningless, literally without common direction, as the bicycles head in all directions, some even upside down. The whole construction seems to go in circles without getting anywhere. In his socio-critical work, Ai has often indicated the negative consequences of China’s neglect of individual rights, as expressed in these words posted on July 15, 2006:

“I’ve never seen ‘the People.’ What is the People? [...] Just like gravity, the People will always exist, but they will never reveal themselves ... we see the house collapse, and the apple falls from the tree, but no one has ever seen gravity.

Someone who helps another is a nice person, someone who helps a few people is a good person, but someone who helps the People – something that never even existed – is a fool.”⁴

Though the background for the above quote does not directly tie into *Forever*, Ai’s criticism of the abstract “People” and its wrongful precedence over individual persons is an obvious parallel to the work’s implicit dialectic between bicycles as functional individual objects and as monumental art(ificial) installation.

While a kinship can be traced between the formal aesthetic devices in *Tree* and *Forever*, as both works consist of familiar objects whose “natural” functions have been reprogrammed, *Forever*, its content indicating a more social theme, has something in common with *Fountain of Light*.

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Fountain of Light

Fountain of Light (2007) is monumental in several ways. For one, it is seven meters in height, and for that reason it is being exhibited outdoors, in the museum gardens. For another, the piece is a paraphrase of an iconic Soviet monument, the *Monument to the Third International*, designed by Vladimir Tatlin in 1919-20. The vision behind this never-realized, 400-meter-high spiraling

⁴ AI WEIWEI: *Ai Weiwei’s blog. Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants 2006-2009, 2011*, MIT Press, pp. 75-76

tower was to create an entirely new architecture that would house the leadership of the Communist International and be a stage for its assemblies. In turn, it would reflect the new Russia after the revolution in 1917 with a radical new expression to replace the traditional, neo-classicist architectural vocabulary.⁵ Merging utilitarian architecture and artistic monument, the tower was to be constructed in the materials of the future, steel and glass.

Ai's reinterpretation of the tower retains those materials. But instead of glass sheets, he uses crystals, which makes the whole construction resemble a giant chandelier. Ai has used light and glass crystals in other works (e.g., *Chandelier* and *Descending Light*), but the link to Tatlin's tower imbues the brilliant light in this work with an almost ideological glow. Here is the monument that will lead the people into the glorious future of communism, but on closer inspection it uses the same kind of ornamentation we know mostly from royal castles and, later, from grand-bourgeois homes in the West. What was to have been a symbol of the triumph of communism could not be realized in practice and, in Ai's work, ends up as a beautifully illuminated delusion.

5 PUNIN, NIKOLAI: "The Monument to the Third International" (1920) in *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, eds.), 1992, Blackwell Publishers, pp. 311-315

Ai Weiwei as Social Critic

In several works in this exhibition, a criticism of contemporary China can be detected. Knowing that he has been extremely critical online of the communist regime, it is tempting to conclude that Ai makes political art in opposition to the Chinese government. But such a reading would reduce his art to mere propaganda. More fruitful is regarding the nuances in Ai's critical work as unfolding on a scale that ranges from unequivocal criticism to works and practices that seem entirely devoid of any kind of political content. We must, then, distinguish between "Ai Weiwei the artist," whose works are more or less critical in nature, depending on the work in question, and "Ai Weiwei the social critic," who happens to also be an artist. These are different critical practices and, as they sometimes overlap, it would be useful to examine how that happens.

Ai's artistic format is distinguished by cultural references, materials, forms, and installations that make up a whole, so that each individual work creates a complex expression that contains many different facets and, hence, has an ambiguous appearance. The same cannot be said about Ai's work as a social critic. He has drawn attention to himself by voicing what is (by Chinese standards) an uncommonly sharp and open criticism of conditions in Chinese society. This criticism has mainly been expressed on his blog, in his tweets, and in his documentary films. In writing, Ai has especially criticized the regime's oppression of individual rights, often in conjunction with specific incidents. One was the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province, when the Chinese authorities were blamed for buildings, especially schools, collapsing, causing the deaths

of thousands of children, because of shoddy construction due to endemic corruption, and later for trying to stifle critical voices among the victims' relatives.

In his written commentary on the Sichuan earthquake, Ai made no attempt to hide his criticism of the authorities. He even started a campaign to find out the names of all the deceased children. The project is related to *Sunflower Seeds* and *Fairytale* in Ai's insistence that a huge number – in this case, of casualties – consists of individuals with individual names. A crucial difference, however, is that the names project is not formulated as part of Ai's art practice but springs from concrete social and political indignation. It is foremost "Ai Weiwei the social critic" who is acting here, and it is "Ai Weiwei the social critic" that the Chinese authorities were beginning to keep a sharp eye on.

"Ai Weiwei the artist" is less in the authorities' spotlight because, to put it somewhat theoretically, the difference between art and non-art is constituted in the fact that art exists in an autonomous field, in the sense that art is free and, as such, not subordinated to any utilitarian purpose beyond offering the audience certain aesthetic experiences. It is important to note here that an aesthetic experience may very well contain such emotional elements as curiosity, wonder, even revulsion, and thus to begin with has nothing to do with an artwork being perceived as pleasant to look at.⁶

Though some artworks are censored (e.g., if they are pornographic or directly and unequivocally critical of the Communist Party), the art field in China today is just as free as in

6 SCHAEFFER, JEAN-MARIE: *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, 2000 (1992), Princeton University Press

the West. However, in that autonomy, art also loses its ability to intervene directly in a political, economic, or social sphere. The immediate impact of targeted propaganda, free art must do without. That art has an autonomous status does not, however, prevent an individual work of art from engaging in society. The form it takes can even make it useful beyond the realm of art. A fine example of such a work is *Supergas* (1996-) by the Danish artists group Superflex, which involves the development of biogas plant for farmers in the developing world, who get usable energy from the plants. *Supergas* is an example of a phenomenon that, viewed as art, possesses aesthetic potential by virtue of its naive “madness” in breaking with conventional thinking and envisioning new ways of doing things. Still, the farmers who actually benefit from the biogas plants probably do not attach any aesthetic qualities to them, viewing *Supergas* as a distinctly utilitarian piece of engineering. Accordingly, an object or a phenomenon can appear both as an artwork in the art field and as a utilitarian object, for instance in an economic or social discourse.

As for Ai's works in this exhibition, they are not seen to possess this dual identity. They are works of art that take off from and treat various different relationships in an aesthetic manner, in which materials, objects, and subject matter evoke ambiguous wonder. Seeing a reproduction of *Forever* in a book would not be the same as experiencing the work by actually moving around it. Nor does a video clip of *Tree* on YouTube do the work justice. Moreover, since the works are not straight answers to straight questions, they cannot simply be taken out of the museum and seamlessly incorporated into a context of application in another domain. The utility and value of the works are tied to their value as art (Ai's documentaries are another story). Rather,

Ai's work as an artist and a social critic, respectively, overlap in two other ways.

First, Ai's critical engagement sometimes rubs off on his art. This was the case with *Remembering* (2009), a giant decoration on the façade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, where the artist was showing. Ai covered the facade with Chinese-made children's backpacks in a colorful pattern that from a distance could be seen to spell out the Chinese characters for "She lived happily for seven years in this world." These words were quoted from the mother of one of the schoolchildren killed in the Sichuan earthquake.⁷ In this case, a specific social condition in which Ai had critically engaged was the direct cause of an artwork, which then is aesthetically formulated by incorporating schoolbags as a material. The difference between the text as it appears on the blog or on the façade, respectively, is that colors, materials, scale, etc., contribute an amount of additional sensory information that makes the statement multifaceted and conveys a wider emotional spectrum than a purely textual message ever could. Even so, very few of Ai's works can be directly linked to specific contemporary events. As works like *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, *Rock*, and *Tree* demonstrate, this is not always the case, and so to construe these works as an unequivocal critique of the Chinese government would quite clearly be to overlook the works' aesthetic potential.

Another relationship between Ai's artistic and his critical effort goes the other way: how his artistic work to a very great degree has made his social criticism possible. Clearly, Ai had been given an exceptionally long leash in expressing himself on his blog compared to other Chinese dissidents. His blog (with occasional

7 Ai, p. 210 (20 March 2009)

interruptions) existed from October 2005 to May 2009, when Ai switched to voicing his criticism on Twitter and in interviews with foreign media. That the Chinese authorities waited until 2011 to detain Ai is remarkable in itself, and a big reason for that very likely is his position as an acclaimed superstar on the international art scene. Indeed, Ai's detention caused an international uproar, not just in the art world but also in the media at large. Ai's artistic work, critical or not, has offered him a measure of protection to pursue his political activism. Moreover, his biographical background, notably his father's status as a well-known poet, has made Ai better known in China than most other contemporary artists, which has probably also contributed to the authorities waiting longer than they otherwise would.

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Documentary Films

The Louisiana exhibition features three of Ai's documentaries. One documents the whole intricate process behind *Fairytale*, a work that, in part, involved Ai sending 1,001 Chinese people to Kassel for *Documenta 12* in 2007. The film shows some of the many hopeful Chinese applicants Ai auditioned for the project via an open call on his blog. It shows how the logistics were resolved, how the Chinese participants as well as the citizens of Kassel experienced the project, and how 1,001 antique Chinese chairs were lovingly renovated and shipped to Germany as part of the project.

As the film makes clear, Ai's idea with the piece was the simple transplantation of Chinese people to a radically different context for

a few weeks. They were not asked to perform or do anything besides staying in Kassel and having access to the *Documenta* exhibition. The work in that sense is a radical act, giving a number of real people an experience for life, but it also possesses an uncertainty of purpose that no doubt spread to the participants as well as to the rest of the audience at *Documenta*, who read about the work and maybe met some of the participants. The film conveys that uncertainty best in a short sequence of a Chinese person carefully studying a German fire hydrant on the street and evidently finding that, no matter what angle this strange object is observed from, it remains equally enchanting and mysterious.

While the film can document or represent the unique aesthetic qualities of a unique artwork, it cannot mediate that quality in a one-to-one relationship.⁸ The power of documentary film in this case is that it exists outside the actual field of art and, consequently, it possesses what art cannot directly express: purposefulness and agency. A documentary film can have a social and critical impact (though not necessarily an aesthetic impact) that is unavailable to a work of art. Unlike the artworks in the show, Ai Weiwei's documentaries could easily be posted to YouTube without losing any of their value. While the *Fairytale* documentary depicts an art project, other films of Ai's delve into the more socio-critical aspects of his work. *One Recluse* unfurls the brutal police violence and power abuse that led to a man attacking a police station in Shanghai and killing six officers on July 1, 2008. Accordingly, it makes sense to also view Ai's films as belonging to his socio-critical work on a par with his blog and tweets.

8 On the difference between representing and mediating, see Lars Elleström: "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations" in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (Lars Elleström, ed.), 2010, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 11-48

As is the case with the overwhelming overload and accessibility of information in the digital society, the real art is not to create something (purportedly) new but to find the right things and, not least, having the ability to process and present what you find in a way that makes us see in a new way. In this sense Ai Weiwei demonstrates an artistic practice that curator and art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has termed ‘postproduction’, which means that artists ‘interpret, reproduce, re-exhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural products.’ Finding and treating matter and form is precisely what Ai Weiwei masters, both in his art and in his other work. Like an artistic programmer, he rewrites the existing codes to give them new functions.

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Biography

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing. In the following year, his father, Ai Qing, a well-known poet, fell out of favor during a Communist Party anti-right campaign, resulting in the relocation of the entire family, first to northernmost, then westernmost China. The family was in exile, at a certain point literally lived in a hole in the ground until 1976, when they returned to Beijing.⁹

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9 Ai, “Introduction” + p. 53

hanging their works on the fence surrounding the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.

In 1981, Ai Weiwei moved to New York to further pursue his dream of becoming an artist. He enrolled but later dropped out at the Parsons School of Design, worked small jobs in construction, and made friends with many artists of the day. Returning to China in 1993, Ai became a central figure in Beijing's experimental art world, which he exposed and documented in three books, *Black Cover*, *White Cover*, and *Grey Cover Books*, featuring pictures, texts, and interviews with Beijing's most important experimental artists of the nineties. Although he has no formal training in architecture, Ai has designed a number of architectural works since 1999, ranging from his personal studio to homes, public buildings, and, most prominently, the Olympic Stadium in Beijing. Alongside his own work, he has served on art-award juries and curated exhibitions.

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Works



Ai Weiwei: *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, 2009



Ai Weiwei: *Rock*, 2009 - 2010



Ai Weiwei: *Tree*, 2009 - 2010



Ai Weiwei: *Forever*, 2003



Ai Weiwei: *Fountain of Light*, 2007

Documentary Films



Ai Weiwei: *Fairytale*, 2007

Fairytale documents Ai Weiwei's project to fly in 1001 Chinese citizens to Germany to experience and contribute by their presence to the *Documenta* 12 exhibition in Kassel in 2007. The film is a testimony to the artist's belief that transformation and change of conditions can change society for the better. Thinking and action goes hand in hand in Ai's artistic practise.



Ai Weiwei: *One Recluse*, 2010

One Recluse traces the reasons and motivations behind the tragedy of Yang Jia, a young man's killing and wounding of several police officers in June 2008. It investigates a trial process filled with shady cover-ups and questionable decisions – for instance the fact that the trial in spite of being public wasn't scheduled and therefore didn't allow the public – and in this way provides a glimpse into the realities and their impact on the citizens' lives.



Ai Weiwei: *Lao Mai Ti Hua*, 2009.
(Also known as *Disturbing the Peace*)

Lao Mai Ti Hua is a documentary of an incident during Tan Zuoren's trial in August 2009. He was charged with "inciting subversion of state power" as a result of his research and questioning into the May 2008 earthquake which due to poor building construction and corruption resulted in horrific Wenchuan students' casualties. We see for instance the artist himself in incidents at police stations where both parties are actively engaging and documenting each other. The tragedy of the casualties which the government tried to silence, later formed the basis for Ai Weiwei's work *Remembering*, 9000 backpacks on the façade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2009.

**The complete interview with Ai Weiwei.
Louisiana Museum, December 2010**

By Christian Lund

For complete interview please go to: <http://youtu.be/xR6BcfmgVh0>

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Credits

Works included in the exhibition are in blue.

Cover: Ai Weiwei. Photo: Mads Nissen.
© Mads Nissen

Ai Weiwei: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. 3 b/w prints. Each: 121 x 148 cm. Edition of 8. Photo: Ai Weiwei. © Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei: *Blue-and-White Porcelain*, 1996. 508 x 356 cm. Replica in style of Qing Dynasty, Qianlong period (1736-95) porcelain. FAKE Design, Beijing Photo: Ai Weiwei. © Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei: *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010. Porcelain. Installation at Tate 12 October 2010 – 2 May 2011: The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei Photo: Tate Photography. © Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei: *Hanging Man*, 1985. Clothes Hanger. Photo: Ai Weiwei.
© Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei: *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, 2009. Porcelain in huang huali wood frame. 50 x 43.5 x 3.5cm. Photo: Ai Weiwei

Marcel Duchamp

Fontaine / Fountain, 1917/16. Ceramic. Vera & Arturo Schwarz Collection of Dada and Surrealist Art. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel Photo: ©

Scanpix / The Bridgeman Art Library.
© Marcel Duchamp

Ai Weiwei: *Rock*, 2009-2011. Porcelain. 117.8 cm x 75 cm x 33.7 cm. Photo: neugerriemschneider

Ai Weiwei: *Tree*, 2009-2010. Dead tree trunks from southern China. Dimensions variable. Photo: neugerriemschneider

Ai Weiwei: *Table With Two Legs on the Wall*, 1997. Table, Quing Dynasty (1644-1911) 90.5 x 118 x 122 cm. Photo: Ai Weiwei. © Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei: *Forever*, 2003. 42 bicycles. 275 cm x 450 cm. Courtesy of Tiroche and de Leon Collection. Photo: Ai Weiwei. Video: Kim Hansen. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Ai Weiwei and Herzog & de Meuron: Bird's Nest. National Stadium. The Main Stadium for the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing, China; Competition 2002, realization 2004-2008. Photo: Corbis Polfoto. © Ai Weiwei and Herzog & de Meuron

Ai Weiwei: *Fountain of Light*, 2007. Steel and glass crystals on a wooden base. 700 x 529 x 400 cm. Courtesy Faurschou Foundation. Photo: Ai Weiwei

Counter-surveillance: Ai Weiwei's photo of a surveillance camera set up by the authorities outside his house in Beijing, posted on the artist's blog in June 2009.

Courtesy Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei: *Remembering*, 2009. Back-packs and metal structure. Approx. 920 x 10605 cm. Installation at Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2009. Photo: Jens Weber, Munich. © Ai Weiwei

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FILM

Fairytale, 2007. English, 152 min. Music: Zuoxiao Zuzhou. Credits: Urs Meile Gallery Beijing-Lucerne Erlenmeyer Stiftung, Switzerland. Leister Foundation, Switzerland. Ai Weiwei's Studio: the "Fairytale" team

Lao Ma Ti Hua (also known as Disturbing the Peace), 2009. Video. 1 hour, 19 minutes. Cameraman: Zhao Zhao. Editor: Wang Xiaoqian. Material editor: Zhang Jun. Music: Zuoxiao Zuzhou. English Translation: Chris. Lawyer: Liu Xiaoyuan, Pu Zhiqiang. Acknowledgements: Zhao Zhao, Liu Yanping, Liu Yaohua, Xu Ye, Yan Lifang, Zhang Jinsong, Zhao Ying, Li Zhaohao, Zeng Qingsheng, Zang Yi, Wu Dongqu, Ran Yunfei, Li Xin, Zhang Like, Zuoxiao Zuzhou

One Recluse, 2010
Video 3 hours

Interview with Ai Weiwei recorded December 2010 at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Interview by Christian Lund. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Produced by Marie Friis Forchhammer and Martin Kogi

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MODERN ART