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Ai Weiwei



Traveling Light



Table with Two Legs on the Wall



Stool

Making Everything: A Conversation with Ai Weiwei

by Carolee Thea

In 2007, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei brought 1,001 of his compatriots to Documenta for a city-wide performance called *Fairytale*, and *Template*, a 39-foot-tall structure made of doors and windows salvaged from houses destroyed during China's recent building boom, was a highlight of Skulptur Projekte Münster—despite its collapse in a violent storm at the beginning of the show. In early 2008, Mary Boone Gallery hosted *Illumination*, Ai's first major New York exhibition, and a few months later, another of his works, the *Bird's Nest* stadium in Beijing (created in collaboration with the Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron), was broadcast around the world during the Olympics.

The centerpiece of the New York show, *Descending Light*, was an adaptation of Ai's iconic chandelier form. In this work, the form appears to have buckled due to the violent impact of a fall, its colossal structural rings still festooned with strands of red crystals illuminated from within. With its brilliant red, emblematic of China, *Descending Light* simultaneously conveys the toppling of established order and the burning promise of the future. The exhibition also included a sculpture created from Qing dynasty stools.

Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957 and educated at the Beijing Film Academy and Parsons School of Design in New York. He returned to China in 1993 to found the China Art Archives and Warehouse in Beijing and now heads a large art and architecture studio under the name Fake Design.

Carolee Thea: The chandelier has been explored in painting and sculpture since van Eyck. Your two enormous chandeliers, *Descending Light* and *Traveling Light*, however, remind me of nothing else in art history. Because of their materials and style, they are more like the lighting fixtures sold in shops in New York City's Bowery district.

Ai Weiwei: Actually, it's interesting that you mentioned that—I lived in the East Village from 1983 to '93, and every day I would pass through the Bowery to Chinatown. I never thought I had a direct connection to chandeliers. Still, I realize that they are somehow in my head. From the barbershop or massage parlor to people's greeting halls, the last touch on a building is the chandelier. It's very funny, I don't particularly like chandeliers—they're nothing more than a lighting instrument, but they do reflect Western influence and glamour.

CT: Your father, Ai Qing, was China's most revered modern poet. A protégé of Mao, he was persecuted in the anti-rightist campaign of the late '50s and declared an enemy of the people during the Cultural Revolution. As a child, you saw him as he was forced to clean latrines in the icy remotes of Xinjiang province in the Gobi Desert.

AW: Yes, and in our desert exile, we had very little light, only a small bottle of oil that we lit. We made big shadows on the wall.

CT: Where did you construct your first chandelier?

AW: The first one I did was in Guangzhou, China. It's a big chandelier in the middle of a scaffolding, and it refers to the scaffolding you see everywhere in China. Where you see scaffolding, there are the buildings where the last touch is the chandelier—a kind of celebration. For Queensland Art Gallery in Australia, I did another chandelier, *Boomerang*, suspended above the building's watermill like a fake fountain.

CT: And then there is the Liverpool piece.

AW: In Liverpool, I wanted to do a work on a pier surrounded by residential and commercial



Boomerang



Map of China



"Forever" Bicycles



Through



Oil Spills

space. I proposed a floating fountain of light with layers of meaning. Liverpool is industrial and very rich, and I thought about Tatlin and his utopian Monument to the Third International. A crazy idea? I thought it could be interesting, and I put a floating light and fountain in the middle of the water.

CT: The scaffoldings inside your chandeliers are magnificent?there is a lot of attention to detail that intrigues me. I understand that you designed the shape of the crystals in Traveling Light. Why?

AW: It was important to develop the language in a more complete, more detailed way. The crystal has a mathematical basis for which we needed precise measurements. It's such a simple work, almost minimal, and for me, the shape of the crystals became more important than the work itself.

CT: Are you trained in physics, engineering, or architecture?

AW: I have training in almost nothing. I started my life as a child who had to survive hardships and make everything. There was nothing, just the earth and myself, and to make things was a natural reaction for surviving.

CT: In your sculptures, you often reconfigure pieces of furniture, antiques from the Qing and Ming Dynasties. What is this about?

AW: I try to give these things new meaning: what we think is valuable is only in our minds. Besides, "antiques" is a standard form that carries the value of tradition. It's dealing with an understanding of the past and its value in the present.

CT: At one time, you were writing brand names such as Coca-Cola on antique pottery. Was this also about value?

AW: I lived in the U.S. for 12 years. Contemporary art was taboo in China?no one did it because it was considered a Western corruption, degenerate thinking. Anyway, that particular work is just a joke?I wouldn't even call it a work?but anyhow it all becomes a work. I had a pot, and it needed something?it was black, sitting next to an ashtray with a Coca-Cola sign that I brought back from the U.S. And so, I just wrote on it with no meaning.

CT: What was your inspiration for architecture?

AW: In 1993, when I returned from the U.S., I went to live with my mother. Because I returned without an American passport, a job, a wife, or a university diploma, she was concerned that nothing had changed, and so I left and built my own studio. When others saw the studio, they said, "This guy really can build, it really has style." But really, my style is no style. The way that I build is the most efficient and economical. Of course, this is quite different from what is trendy today?strange shapes, romantic moods. For me, this may be fine in artworks but not in architecture. I never learned to be an architect, and I only knew one architect's name? Frank Lloyd Wright, because he built the Guggenheim, which, at the time, I didn't like. Now I appreciate the structure; it is true that every parking lot looks like that.

CT: You have a large studio, called Fake.

AW: Yes, my Fake studio is composed of a team that I divide between my artworks and my architectural projects. They're all students; we have no professionals, mostly interns from the U.S., Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands. We are responsible for everything, from concept to details.

CT: You're living an amazing life as one of the most famous sculptors and architects to come out of China. How does your past come into play in your thinking?

AW: It's kind of crazy. When I grew up, I always tried to hide my name because I belonged to a disgraced family, but I had a strong individual need and ideology. Then, in 1980s New York, to become successful was quite difficult for a young foreign kid from China. Now, suddenly, I have become well known, and I feel something inside that I need to express. Constantly I am questioning myself and my personal responsibilities.

CT: How did you become involved in the Beijing National Stadium competition?

AW: The invitation for the stadium competition was for Herzog & de Meuron. It was their first time in China, so they contacted a collector, the ex-ambassador from Switzerland, Uli Sigg, who introduced us.

CT: Were you surprised?

AW: Not very, because after we saw other people's designs, I thought that China was quite lucky to have us.

CT: I was in Beijing about a year and a half ago, and you could only see the stadium through holes in a surrounding fence. Now, in photographs, I see a similarity to your chandeliers in that it appears more like an infrastructure, innards or scaffolding.

AW: That was the idea, to show everything at once?to be transparent and have the freedom to welcome people inside to experience it as opposed to decoration, or fake shapes, colors, and materials. It's bold, bare, and clear, with a strong understanding of architecture. It is about 30 stories high and 300 meters across and holds just under 100,000 people?it's a crazy structure. We used one-meter metal cubes. It's like making a serious sculpture with peanuts or sesame. The structure itself is the appearance, just like a bird's nest. That's why people call it the Bird's Nest. It's not the shape?it's really the integration of the structural elements.

CT: Did the theme of China, then and now, influence your design?

AW: I didn't have a clear inspiration. I'm not a sporty person and have never been to a stadium in my life. The Olympics is not something I feel enthusiastic about, but the stadium, this belongs to the people. The city needs it, even after the Olympic games.

CT: You must be very proud.

AW: No. I'm not. For me, it's time to forget about it and do something else. Current conditions, with political and social change, always affect my work. I know the past and I'm living in the present, and it somehow directly or indirectly affects my work.

CT: I heard you speak at an Art Basel conference in Beijing in 2006, and I was very moved. When asked about the idea of a contemporary museum in China, you said, "Chinese artists are not clear about what's happening. It really is a question of soul. Nothing is clear, and China needs a long period of time to recover its humanity."

AW: Yes, but the sense of being just and fair is essential for society and that's what I feel. It's so elementary, but maybe it's because I lived in the U.S. for 12 years and also in the Gobi Desert.

CT: I think the past always haunts us. There are two Chinese artists who migrated to Paris whose works I've always loved? Chen Zhen and Huang Yong Ping?their works are on the same scale as yours.

AW: They're my same age and the same generation of artist. They grew up with the attitude of Chairman Mao's idea of changing the world, of destroying the old and rebuilding a new world. To rebuild the new world, you had to destroy the old?it's the simple logic that we had. So maybe it was a kind of sensibility. People always say my works are large, but to me they are not large. It's only because we are very small.

CT: What do you think of the position that Chinese artists hold in the art world today?

AW: There are good artists, just like artists everywhere, but there is a lot of hype, also just like everywhere. If there were no Chinese artists, there would still be so-called good art and bad art. China has a long tradition of art-making and very rich traditions. But it doesn't mean anything. Today, China is a land with chaotic conditions, a mixed ideology, mixed conditions, a lot of arguments, a lot of awareness.

CT: Isn't it still a very closed society?

AW: It was like that, but today, under globalization and in this information age, it forces itself to be in another condition. It's a good time for artists to have much larger discussions. In reality, there is not a lot of discussion. The Communist Party never bore the responsibility, and they ruined the nation in every aspect. Now the people associated with the party are getting very rich. One day they stripped all of the stateowned property and became tyrants of energy and transportation and everything. They are multi-billionaires, bigger than the Western world thinks, and that's the reality.

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