



# ai weiwei

## under construction



### MABEL LEE

Ai Weiwei enjoys celebrity status throughout China as the designer of the Beijing Olympic Stadium working with the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron, but this was not why he was accorded the honour of having his sizeable body of works *Under Construction* showcased at two Sydney venues recently—Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and Campbelltown Arts Centre. Rather, this event came about largely as the result of powerful links at many levels that have been forged between the Sydney artworld and individual Chinese artists since the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

As a participating artist in Charles Merewether's 2006 *Biennale of Sydney: Zones of Contact*, Ai Weiwei was artist-in-residence at the Sherman Visual Arts Residency, and in the course of events had the opportunity to meet with Gene and Brian Sherman whose gallery in Paddington has played a crucial role in establishing the Australian credentials of artists such as Guan Wei, Ah Xian and Liu Xiaoxian in the early 1990s. The Shermans greatly appreciated Ai Weiwei's artworks, his public stance on human rights, freedom of expression and responsible urban development, as well as their shared migrant experiences; they also recognised Merewether's role in producing the publication, *Ai Weiwei, Works: Beijing 1993-2003*.<sup>2</sup> A few months later, when it was decided to convert the gallery into the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Ai Weiwei was commissioned to create a new major work for the inaugural exhibition in 2008, and Merewether was invited to produce the exhibition catalogue. As part of the 2006 *Biennale of Sydney*, events had been held at the Campbelltown Arts Centre and the Centre's director, Lisa Havalah was soon brought into the project. Located in one of the fastest growing areas of new multicultural migrant settlement in Sydney, the Centre's participation was highly pertinent to the shared migrant experiences that had initially inspired the Ai Weiwei project.<sup>3</sup> The Centre's involvement significantly expanded the space and content of the exhibition.

Ai Weiwei's commission resulted in an imposing installation, titled *Through*, that filled the entire gallery space of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation. The installation was made of Qing dynasty ironwood timber artefacts—sections of pillars and beams retrieved from dismantled temples, and tables. For more than a decade Ai Weiwei had employed a team of artisans to help him create installations from Qing dynasty furniture and timber artefacts, but on a considerably smaller scale. Probably representing the pinnacle of his work with these materials, *Through* consisted of a large number of pillars and beams standing at various angles to the floor, and reaching the gallery ceiling. In the confined space, these assumed the likeness of giant stakes that either penetrated a table or were penetrated by the leg of a table. The photographs of this complex installation in the exhibition publication *Ai Weiwei: Under Construction* (2008) prepared by Charles Merewether—also curator for both exhibition spaces—were taken in Ai Weiwei's enormously spacious studio in Beijing, but displayed in the confines of the gallery space of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation there was a stark change and the impression was that of a forest of trees skewed at all angles, but devoid of branches and leaves. As viewers meandered through the installation, they were appropriated, in order to complete a changeable, living, human component of the artwork. Becoming a part of the installation the viewer was invited to contemplate on this artistic representation of humankind's present environment and his or her own place within it.

The space adjoining the downstairs courtyard was the venue for the world premiere of Ai Weiwei's two and a half-hour film *Fairytale*, documenting his mammoth project for *documenta XII* in Kassel, Germany, in 2007. The project could be described as utterly preposterous, yet it is conceptually interesting, and reflects an attitude that is present in other of his works. *Fairytale* was conceived as three interlocking project phases that extend critical engagement with the idea of China as both a physical construct and a constructed identity. One thousand and one Chinese people from all over China were chosen in a relatively random manner through an invitation published on Ai Weiwei's blog. Their participation in the project involved exploring what it means to be Chinese beyond the physical limitations of place. The selected participants travelled (expenses paid) to Kassel and the logistics of selection, arranging travel documents and constructing accommodation was part of this first phase of the project. All one thousand and one persons were asked ninety-nine questions and each was "to see him- or herself as an individual, instead of as a collective or undifferentiated part of a mass"; each was also filmed at various intervals. What Ai Weiwei sought to explore was their feelings of being foreigners—not just in relation to another place, but also in relation to China. The second phase of the project was the installation of one thousand and one late Ming and Qing dynasty chairs in the different exhibition venues in Kassel. These chairs were used to seat the 1001 participants from China, and also used to seat local and international visitors—they constituted sites for meeting and dialogue. The third phase was the installation titled *Template* (2007), made up of one thousand and one late Ming and Qing dynasty wooden window frames and doorframes mostly retrieved from demolished houses in Shanxi Province.<sup>4</sup>

The Campbelltown Arts Centre also screened *Fairytale*. A large clutter of suitcases, possibly some of those used by its one thousand and one participants created an installation in the foyer that led to room after room of Ai Weiwei's representative works spanning his twenty-year career. Featured, was *Marble Chair* (2008), the work commissioned by the Campbelltown Arts Centre. Amongst his early works were *Hanging Man* (1985), a metal coat hanger bent into a recognisable profile of Marcel Duchamp, and *Safe Sex* (1986), comprising a hooded raincoat from which a condom protruded at crotch level. When the Democracy Wall Movement in Beijing was crushed in 1979, despairing that it was impossible for art without freedom of expression, Ai Weiwei in 1981 travelled to the USA where he soon settled in New York.



There he cut himself off from contact with China, totally immersing himself in American society and culture, reading about American and European art, and creating art from readymade objects.<sup>5</sup> *Hanging Man* and *Safe Sex* are examples of his work from that period. His father's illness prompted him to return to Beijing in 1993. China by this time was already fast-tracking its modernisation drive and reducing to rubble large sections of cities to make way for the skyscrapers that would signify modernity. Ai Weiwei found himself confronted with a glut of discarded ancient artefacts that could serve as the readymade material for his art. As an artist he had matured, and suddenly he began to stamp his credentials in the art world of China and the world.

The Campbelltown exhibition included the two works that first won him notoriety soon after he returned to Beijing. *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* (1994) is an ancient urn inscribed with the red Coca-Cola logo and *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) is a black-and-white photographic triptych. The urn in the triptych is undated, so presumably it is a replica. This work shows Ai Weiwei standing in front of a brick wall—holding the urn, letting it drop, and with the urn in fragments at his feet. In the three photographs Ai Weiwei's facial expression and posture remain unchanged. Only the hands holding the urn in the first photograph are different.

*Bench* (2004) was the largest of the exhibits at the Centre. The material used is ironwood retrieved from a dismantled Qing dynasty temple. Making use of traditional furniture craftsmanship techniques the ironwood timber was cut into long slivers and reconstituted into the shape of a bench, the end profile of which is a map of China. Viewers may ponder the artist's intent, but from a patriotic nationalist's perspective, the suggestion that China was a site for resting one's posterior should have been offensive, although it could have been too subtle and missed. Other striking exhibits demonstrate blatant irreverence to iconic structures of authority. In the black-and-white photograph *June 1994* (1994), unmistakably shot in Tiananmen Square, a woman nonchalantly lifts her see-through black skirt to the waist, revealing a white bikini and bare legs; behind her hangs Mao Zedong's portrait. The title *June 1994* is an ironic reminder of the military crackdown in the early hours of 4th June 1989. The date in June is omitted from the title, but the "4" from the year "1994" can be transposed with psychological ease. In the black-and-white *Study of Perspective* photographs of the Eiffel Tower, Tiananmen and The White House (1999), a hand that gives the rude third-finger salute to these icons, dominates the foreground. The seditious implications of such art certainly would not have been tolerated by the Chinese authorities in the recent past, and would not necessarily be tolerated by artists of lesser international standing than Ai Weiwei.

Observing Ai Weiwei at four events on 30th April this year, I saw this quietly spoken man chatting with Sydney artist Hu Ming whom he had known since the late 1970s in Beijing and with new friends, as well as journalists. I could not help being struck by the cold detachment in his eyes, and by the fact that when the barest hint of a smile appeared on his lips, it was not transmitted to any other part of his face. Those same eyes feature in photographic artworks in which he portrays himself, such as *Ai Wei Wei and Marcel Duchamp's To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost and Hour* (1985) and in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995). This cold detachment is undoubtedly a legacy of his early childhood.

Ai Weiwei's father was Ai Qing (1910-1996), one of the best-known Chinese poets of the twentieth-century. After studying European art in France, between 1929 and 1932, he returned to live in Shanghai, but within months was imprisoned by the Nationalist authorities for pro-communist activities (1932-35). On his release he became a celebrated poet for the communist cause, but after the establishment of Mao Zedong's New China in 1949, he spoke out in defence of freedom of expression and was amongst the first casualties of the "anti-rightist" purge of 1957. He and his family were sent to a small village in Xinjiang province in the northwest of China, and Ai Weiwei grew up watching his father at work cleaning the public latrines.<sup>6</sup> Ai Weiwei was a one year old when the family relocated, which meant that in the first twenty years of his life he had experienced alienation as the son of a political outcast, as well as the alienation that is commonly experienced by migrants, even if it was a case of internal migration within China.

In 1978 his father was exonerated of his so-called crimes and the family returned to Beijing. Ai Weiwei began formal art study at the Beijing Film Institute, where he felt that he was being taught art techniques, but not what was inherent in art.<sup>7</sup> Attracted to exploring various Western modernist styles, in 1979 he formed the Stars group that brought together like-minded young artists wanting a space to discuss art and to exhibit their individual explorations in art styles and forms that lay beyond the socialist-realism approved by China's cultural authorities. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) a general demand for freedom of expression had erupted amongst Chinese youth and was expressed most passionately by writers and artists. However when the authorities dismantled the Democracy Wall and repressed outpourings of grief in Tiananmen Square on the death of Zhou Enlai, Ai Weiwei seized the opportunity to travel abroad to experience the freedom of expression that he believed to be essential for the development of his ambitions in artistic creation.

In 1981 he travelled to the USA, first studying English in Philadelphia for one year and then relocating to New York where he enrolled at the Parsons School of Design. His attendance was erratic, and instead he began painting on his own and reading. While appreciative of the freedom he had found in the USA and keenly aware that freedom was essential for his development as an artist, he "did not worship America". He rejects the notion that an artist has to have a national label, and concedes that Chinese cultural traditions probably exist in him, but that "it's like earth's gravity. It's present all the time, but who thinks of it all the time?"<sup>8</sup> By the time his father's failing health precipitated his return to China in 1993, Ai Weiwei had become disappointed with Western art, and had already decided that he did not want to stay permanently in the USA. In New York he wanted "to enter Western culture, twentieth-century aesthetics, and to reflect upon it", and his stay there was important because it changed how he looked at things. It made him realise that he was an outsider, that "neither China nor the USA was his country". This liberated him from any responsibility to follow either tradition. His realisation that he was an outsider gave him "a sense of independence",<sup>9</sup> and the maturity and confidence to embark upon the next stage of development in his art—imparting new meaning to the huge range of available readymade material that had been discarded by China's numerous urbanisation projects. He was particularly attracted to the inherent beauty of ancient pottery and timber artefacts that had been created by master craftsmen of the past.<sup>10</sup>

These ancient artefacts became the readymade materials for Ai Weiwei's artworks that are concerned only with present reality. For this reason, he had no compunctions about dropping a Han dynasty urn, or defacing another with a Coca-Cola logo. As he saw it, the urn embodied the visual appreciation, scientific knowledge and the spirit of Han times. It was a signifier of the



culture of the people of those times, not a signifier of the culture of the people of today. His use of tables and chairs in his artworks is on account of their familiarity and intimate relationships with people. By disrupting their conventional functions he compels people to make an independent judgement on what they are viewing.<sup>11</sup> It would seem that to provoke independent thinking on one's reality may very well lie at the heart of Ai Weiwei's aesthetics.

During the 1990s when many artists were having problems in finding exhibition spaces, he circumvented the censors by calling his gallery "a warehouse".<sup>12</sup> He has made numerous public criticisms of government policies—ranging from freedom of expression and human rights to urban development and the environment—but has been tolerated by the authorities. His international reputation may partly account for this tolerance, but it is more likely that his experiences of alienation during internal/external migration have honed his judgement and instinct for timing to perfection. Since the 1990s Ai Weiwei has held numerous international large-scale solo exhibitions that testify to the universal appeal of his art, but it is his designing of the Beijing Olympic Stadium and his association with the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron that confers infinite political authority as well as the financial freedom to create his large-scale art installations. On 1st May 2008, *The New York Times* carried an article by Fred Bernstein titled 'Design Notebook: In Inner Mongolia, Pushing Architecture's Outer Limits'. A local tycoon in Ordos who had made his money from coal and dairy had recently turned to real estate and "commissioned one hundred firms to design individual houses, each large enough to include amenities like servant quarters and indoor pools, as part of a billion-dollar 'cultural district' he is building there." The tycoon had originally approached Herzog and de Meuron, but they had "opted to enlist one hundred firms from around the world, bringing in their friend Ai Weiwei, the well known Chinese artist, to organise the project." The article tells of a

batch of such architects arriving in Ordos and their bewilderment when they found themselves being filmed. Had they been coopted as material for a new film project like Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale* in Kassel?

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2000 Shanghai's Eastlink Gallery, owned by artist Li Liang (who lived in Sydney during the late 1980s and early 1990s), hosted the exhibition titled *Fuck Off*. The co-curators were Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, and the exhibits were somewhat grotesque, with violent depictions of sadism, self-mutilation and the consuming of a foetus on a plate. These works took the demand for freedom of artistic expression to its limit, and made one ponder what is art?

<sup>2</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Works: Beijing 1993–2003*, Beijing: Timezone 8, 2003

<sup>3</sup> See Lisa Havilah, 'Introduction', *Ai Weiwei, Under Construction*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Charles Merewether, 'Being Chinese', *Ai Weiwei, Under Construction*

<sup>5</sup> See Johnathan Napack, 'Ai Weiwei', *Ai Weiwei, Works: Beijing 1993–2003*, and John Clark, 'Interview with Ai Weiwei', 14 April 1999, (transcript, Schaeffer Fine Arts Library, University of Sydney)

<sup>6</sup> See Charles Merewether, 'Changing Perspective' and Chin-Chin Yap, 'A Handful of Dust', *Ai Weiwei, Works: Beijing 1993–2003*

<sup>7</sup> Clark, 'Interview'

<sup>8</sup> op cit.

<sup>9</sup> op cit.

<sup>10</sup> op cit.

<sup>11</sup> op cit.

<sup>12</sup> op cit.