

AI WEIWEI "REBAR – LUCERNE"

Exhibition: 27 October 2012 – 12 January, 2013

Opening: Saturday, 27 October 2012, 4 – 7 pm

A diversity of frequently provocative concerns, both formal and substantial in nature, are addressed by Ai Weiwei and his art, creating a universe of imponderables that spawn speculation. This oeuvre ranges from explicitly incendiary works, such as the now almost trademark destruction of an irreplaceable antique vase in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) or the omnipresent middle finger in *Studies of Perspective* (1995–2003), to complex installations of furniture or porcelain pieces, buoyed by a return to the quality of traditional craftsmanship. Whatever the case, however, the artist's work is invariably calculated with great formal care, executed with meticulous precision and compellingly presented. Across a wide spectrum of disparate forms – from sculptures, elaborate installations, photographs and videos to all-embracing projects like *Fairytale* (2007) and his ongoing studies of the catastrophic earthquake in 2008 – Ai's art consistently shows an aesthetic congenial to its subject matter. On closer, considered inquiry into this oeuvre, one realises that, regardless of medium and context, the works and series coalesce into an increasingly complex whole, forming a unity that nonetheless invites manifold – and, indeed, iridescent – interpretations. Overall, the impression is of a profoundly poetic turn of mind, engaging an ambiguity that lies not only in the work itself but also derives from being rooted simultaneously in Chinese and Western thought and culture, with both sides implicated in the pitfalls of perception and predication.

Add to this the ever present and ever more pointed political dimension of Ai Weiwei's art. Born the son of the celebrated poet Ai Qing, a victim of Mao's Cultural Revolution, Ai learned at an early age what it means to be banned, persecuted and humiliated. The recently released documentary *Ai Weiwei - Never Sorry*, by American director Alison Klayman, is a compelling attempt to portray the fatally escalating contradiction between individual and state power that the artist -- flying in the face of reason -- willingly and dauntlessly confronts. But he has no delusions; he knows he is not the only one. In what way and to what extent art plays a role in this battle begs a precise answer; vital is the fact that it does play a role. The meaning of art, for Ai, does not lie in asking about art; art lies in its perception and in people's reactions, in the heightened awareness fuelled by a work. As he puts it, every art project, every exhibition is also a learning process, a lesson on how the world works.

Klayman's film gives an insight into Ai Weiwei's life, into the support he receives from family and friends and from a host of co-workers with whom he runs his sprawling studio. Not without a touch of voyeurism, we become witness to the everyday life of this fascinating, charismatic personality, whose physical and mental presence is manifested in all its facets with imposing aplomb. It is hard to tell what is more natural: he himself or the countless cats and dogs roaming about in his studio complex in playful abandon. He obviously loves the chaos, which is his own doing, and yet, tellingly, it does not prevent whatever he tackles from converging into form under his watchful eye. Rarely does one encounter anyone so calmly and naturally centred and at the same time intensely alert -- registering, overseeing and analysing everything around him, even with the omnipresent camera. A born communicator and mediator, Ai has literally been linked to the entire world since 2005, fearlessly disseminating his critical thoughts and images through his blog on the Internet – until he was stopped.

In addressing art, it makes sense to distinguish between author and work, for only in this way can one avoid drawing deceptive conclusions and resorting to sentimental platitudes. Nonetheless, one is hard put to insist on that distinction in Ai Weiwei's case, despite the objectives of the state, where persecution does not target the work but specifically the person. Perhaps the two identities can be seen as two sides of the same coin, forming a unity but never appearing simultaneously -- a notion that shows parallels with Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp is a crucial reference for Ai Weiwei not only because of his approach to art and his personal attitude

but because his premises forged a virtuoso interdependence of life and art. On one hand, this spirit makes Ai an artist who operates on many levels, and on the other, an eminently effective artist-performer, who, like the equally fascinating Joseph Beuys, treats public space politically as a "social sculpture", albeit with means that are far more profane.

The exhibition "*Rebar – Lucerne*" presents a series of works closely related to the earthquake that devastated the province of Sichuan in May 2008. The earthquake cost ten thousands of casualties, among them thousands of children buried under school buildings that collapsed like a house of cards. Their death was soon explicitly linked to substandard construction and administrative corruption. Via the Internet, Ai Weiwei organised voluntary helpers in a kind of citizens' initiative to identify the children who had died – a project calling for considerable courage, since the authorities opposed the action, intimidating, harassing and, in some cases, even arresting the volunteers. The names of the identified children were initially published on Ai's blog and subsequently on Twitter, after the blog was closed down. By 2 September 2009, 4851 names had been accumulated. These Ai shows in a video loop accompanied by immeasurably sad music. In the exhibition, the video *4851* is integrated into an installation, where it is screened on a laptop placed on a Chinese school desk.

The *Rebars* – three sets will be on view in the exhibition – each consist of three seemingly identical, disturbingly twisted pieces of reinforcement bars. One of them is the original, retrieved from the rubble of what was once Beichuan High School; the other two are duplicates. We are confronted with a subtle game of chance, in which formal elegance is subverted by memories of the horrors of the earthquake. The shoddy engineering of the original is underscored by the dispassionate irony of two hand-wrought clones and complemented by a video showing the provenance and production of the pieces.

Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957, where he lives and works.

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