

Ways Beyond Art

Ai Weiwei

Exhibition May 19th to July 18th 2009

Ivorypress Art+Books is holding the first exhibition in Spain of the Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei (China, 1957). This show is evidence of the growing international interest in the career of this artist who, via photography, sculpture, architecture, installations and his blog has become an obligatory reference for other artists and particularly for contemporary Chinese art.

The exhibition, *Ways Beyond Art*, will show legendary works such as *Bubbles*, *The Wave* and *The Coca-Cola Vase*. Each piece has been produced from the kilns which Ai decided to build for firing his own work. This last, *Coca-Cola Vase*, belongs to a series which reproduces forms of Neolithic and Dynastic Chinese antique vases with the Coca-Cola logo stamped on their exterior. The work demonstrates the artist's sense of irony, which unites in the same work old Chinese culture (an element which carries enormous weight in the artistic tradition of that country) and simultaneously and provocatively questions the way in which Chinese society is confronting its recent convergence with the West. The exhibition will also contain a selection from three photographic series: *Studies of Perspective – The Eiffel Tower, The White House, Tiananmen* (published in Issue 2 of C Photo Magazine); original photographs chosen by the artist from the book, *Becoming*, which is published by IvoryPress in collaboration in Timezone 8 in a small limited edition produced by the artist; and a series of three photographs, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), that has become an emblem of contemporary Chinese photography. Projects and drawings of his installations will also be on show in the exhibition.

Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957, but he spent his childhood in a small village in the deserts of western China as a result of the imprisonment of his father, Ai Qing – one of China's finest 20th century poets – in a work-camp where he was forbidden to write for the duration of the Cultural Revolution. Ai Weiwei grew-up without books: to be considered an intellectual during that period was enormously dangerous and could be punished by prison or even death. The poetic influence of his father, as well as the poems of Rimbaud, Walt Whitman, Tagore, Baudelaire and other international poets who visited Ai Qing, can be observed in the way in which he articulates space, the expressiveness of his installations and the provocation of his positions which transform his art into a poetic essence.

After the social rehabilitation of his family, Ai returned to Peking and attended the Film Institute where he studied with Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. There he formed part of the cultural elite of the capital as one of the founders of the vanguard group, The Stars (1978–1983) which was one of the most important influences on the Chinese cultural sphere in those years.

In 1981 he moved to the United States where he remained until 1993, when his father's illness caused his return to China. In New York he met Allen Ginsberg and other poets of the Beat generation and came into contact with artists such as Hearing and Robert Frank.

On his return to China he became one of the artists most involved in helping to create the pioneering atmosphere of the East Village in Peking, together with young artists such as Zhang Huan and RongRong, and edited the three seminal books: *Black Cover Book* (1994), *White Cover Book* (1995), and *Gray Cover Book* (1997) on the work of this generation of artists.

The world of architecture entered his work in a coincidental manner when he was building himself a studio that attracted the attention of leading architects and international art critics who visited him in China at the end of the 1980s. Ai maintains that he had not read a single book on architecture until that moment with the exception of *The Wittgenstein House* – a book in which Wittgenstein describes how he built a house for his sister. Nowadays, Ai Weiwei is recognised as an important figure in Chinese architecture and was the inspiration behind the spanning of the Olympic Stadium of Peking, The Bird's Nest.

Ai Weiwei is a reference for Chinese contemporary artists. He is a man whose approval or rejection of artistic projects is free from ulterior motive; an embodiment of the artist's commitment solely to art that has also made him a patron of the projects of others. The sufferings of his family and other experiences have made Ai an unreserved commentator on politics, art, technique and the art market; this free and independent voice can also be observed in his artistic output.

The first showing of works by Ai Weiwei took place in Peking in 1979. Since then he has had exhibitions in the United States, Japan, Germany, Belgium, Korea, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, France, Britain and Canada. His pieces have also been included on various occasions in the Venice Biennial on architecture, in the first Guangzhou Triennial in China in 2002, in the 2006 Sydney Biennial: *Zones of Contact*, as well as in *Documenta Kassel 12* where a gigantic installation entitled, *Template* was destroyed by a storm. Ai decided to yield to the elements and exhibited the sculpture just as the wind had left it. The exhibition catalogue of *Ways Beyond Art* contains a detailed professional biography of Ai Weiwei.

CATALOGUE

Ivory Press has published a catalogue to accompany the exhibition:

Ways Beyond Art, Ai Weiwei

Edited by Elena Ochoa Foster and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. Contains texts by both editors and Uli Sigg.

Madrid, London. Ivorypress 2009

136 pages. Hardcover.

24x29.2cm.

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