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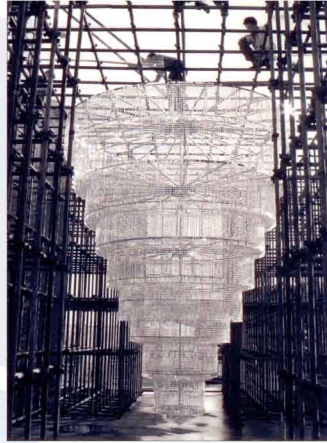
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# A Bowl of Pearls, a Ton of Tea, and an Olympic Stadium

Beijing-based artist **Ai Weiwei** tests the boundaries between the acceptable and the not-so. His Duchampian bicycles, mammoth chandeliers, and forays into architecture take aim at the speed and magnitude of change in China



**T**WO GIGANTIC TURQUOISE-COLORED BOWLS ARE positioned in the entryway of the home of Ai Weiwei, one of Beijing's best-known artists. The porcelain vessels, each more than four feet in diameter, are filled with what look like grains of white rice but are actually thousands upon thousands of precious natural pearls. They are a trompe l'oeil spin on China's classic symbol of abundance, and a visitor to Ai's element, yet raw ice.

BY BARBARA POLLACK

hardly resist grabbing a handful to test their authenticity. Meanwhile, Ai sits at his dining-room table, chucking at the visitor's astonishment. As an artist, architect, and organizer, Ai, 49, has his fingers in many pots. With his unkempt black hair and fringe of beard, he looks as much like a day laborer as a worldly artist. But this onetime renegade, who is both shrewd and audacious, has managed to achieve a certain stature in China despite the country's politicized culture. He even won the Chinese government's approval to collaborate with the Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron on the design for the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, scheduled to open in 2008.

"Ai Weiwei is one of the foremost contemporary artists in China in terms of experimentation," says Charles Merewether, director of the Biennale of Sydney. "He is one of the very few artists trying to rethink Chinese culture in a broader international context."

Ai never imagined that such success could come to an artist in China, where intellectuals were once considered enemies of the people. Born in Beijing in 1957 to a literati family, he was less than a year old when his parents were exiled to Xinjiang province in northwest China. His father, Ai Qing, the most celebrated poet of the early Communist period, was reduced to cleaning latrines during the Cultural Revolution. It was only

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## 'Don't touch,' the artist says of his 2006 piece *Ton of Tea*, composed of a ton

Archives and Warehouse (CAAW) with support from the late Hans van Dijk, a Dutch private art dealer and scholar living in Beijing. "CAAW was a place for radical artistic statements and it offered a chance to experiment curatorially," says Beatrice Leanza, CAAW director from 2002 to 2005. Ai immediately saw a place for himself as one of the few artists in China who had been exposed to Western avant-garde history, from Duchamp to Fluxus. His experience, together with his father's Communist Party association, lent Ai and his projects credibility. The government, trying to appear more liberal, was reluctant to provoke an artist whose father had suffered so publicly.

As Uli Sigg, Swiss ambassador to China in 1995 and a leading collector of Chinese contemporary art, recalls, "Ai Weiwei was entirely unique in this scene, with one leg in China and one in the United States. I met him," he says, "when he was still living in his mother's house in Beijing, barely making his

the airport highway, he designed a Modernist version of his mother's home, using 130,000 gray-stone bricks and 180 tons of cement. Featuring a central courtyard and surrounded by a stone wall, the home consists of two structures—a large one for Ai's living quarters and studio and a more modest one for his architecture firm. The compound resembles the *hutongs* found in cities throughout China. In 1997, Ai built an even larger compound nearby to house CAAW. It was financed by collector Frank Uytterhaegen, who now serves as CAAW's business director and lives next door.

It took a while longer for Ai's international reputation as an artist to take off. When he first returned from the United States, he had turned his attention to buying and selling artifacts, which were turning up daily, thanks to the massive construction projects under way around the country. There were few rules at the time limiting trade in antiques.

"I was doing a lot of antiquing," Ai recalls, "and every day I went to the antique market, but I didn't have much to do. So one day I Coca-Cola'd a pot, because it reminded me of a Coca-Cola souvenir plate I once bought in Atlantic City." This action, which involved painting the

In a dramatic 1995 Dadaist act, Ai Weiwei drops a Han dynasty urn, a desecration that offended the antiques trade both in China and abroad.

Coca-Cola logo across a rare Han dynasty urn, became an icon of rebellion, in that it devalued a precious object and critiqued China's product-crazed atmosphere. A year later, in 1995, Ai photographed himself dropping a valuable urn on the floor and spreading white paint over hundreds of other urns. These acts were considered desecrations in the antiques trade, both in China and abroad, despite China's burgeoning market in forgeries of such urns. But the work fit in well with the appropriations he had seen in New York by artists like Jeff Koons and Richard Prince.

Then, that same year, Ai relates, "this furniture dealer turned up and said, 'I have this nice wood from a destroyed temple; do you think you want some?' I said, 'Yes, I will take all of it.'" Within three years, Ai had accumulated hundreds of the ironwood pillars from centuries-old temples. He decided to employ trained artisans to build sculptures with them, working according to the strictures of Ming dynasty furniture, using no nails or seams. The effects can seem magical: a gigantic column appears to pierce a Ming dynasty table; a weighty beam balances on the corner of a small table without tipping it over.



own artwork, but he was one of the very few people who knew both art worlds, which was extremely rare in China at that time."

Launching a series of exhibitions at CAAW, Ai invited artists, curators, and writers to Beijing. Serving as both publisher and editor, he offered artists a place to speak about their work in a series of books, titled *Black Cover* (1994), *White Cover* (1995), and *Grey Cover* (1997).

"This was a generation that began getting interested in 'mind conditions,' rather than painting and other traditional presentations," he says, referring to the conceptual nature of those artists' works, especially the performances of Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming. Both were controversial performance artists at the time, although they are now internationally recognized. "Ma Liuming had just gotten out of jail for public nudity," Ai relates, "and he said, 'Thank you so much; this book helps me a lot, because now people will understand that what I am doing is art, not something obscene.'"

During this period, Ai literally laid the foundation, or several foundations, for his career, not as an artist but as an architect. He started in 1996 by building his own home for less than \$10,000 in 65 days. In a derelict industrial neighborhood near



after Mao's death and the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's reforms 20 years later that his father could return to Beijing, enabling Ai to begin his art education at the Beijing Film Academy.

This background certainly contributed to the artist's anti-authoritarian beliefs, but at the same time, he has always been aware of the influence artists can wield. In 1979, Ai became one of the founders of The Stars, a group that included the first artists to stage unsanctioned art shows and demonstrations in the still-restrictive, early post-Mao days.

"It is impossible to simplify my feelings about China, because this country is too many things and too complex," Ai says. "Some things never change; others change much too fast." Speaking in excellent English, having spent eleven years in New York, he explains that he left China in 1983 because he didn't believe his country would ever adopt a supportive policy toward artistic expression. "I left telling my mother that I would return only when I was more famous than Picasso."

But rather than achieving fame and fortune, he languished—working in a book factory, taking a smattering of courses at Parsons and at the Art Students League—and found himself largely overlooked by the New York art world. "I was friends with Allen Ginsburg," he remembers, "and he told me that the art world would never recognize a Chinese artist." So in 1993, Ai returned to China, where his father was dying, and he remained with his mother in their courtyard home in Beijing.

By then, only four years after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, Beijing's artists had begun experimenting with works that tested the government's liberalization policies. Members of the avant-garde art colony Beijing East Village, on the outskirts of the city, were actively rebelling against traditional art forms as well as government restrictions. Immediately upon his return—well before it was legal to open an art gallery in China—Ai founded the China Art



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ai Weiwei with one of his ironwood sculptures. Making of *Chandelier*, 2002. In the artist's studio. *World Map*, 2002, cut from stacks of fabric. *Bowl of Pearls*, 2006. A rendering of the Olympic Stadium in Beijing on which Ai is collaborating with Herzog & de Meuron.

## of loose tea compressed into a five-foot cube. 'You break it, you drink it'

A major factor in raising the international profile of contemporary Chinese art, Ai believes, was Sigg's arrival in China in 1995. Ai describes him as "this little Swiss man, so stubborn and so interested to see every work." Sigg brought the curator Harald Szeemann to artists' studios in Beijing and Shanghai, and Szeemann ended up including more than 25 Chinese artists, among them Ai, in the "Aperto" section at the 1999 Venice Biennale. Serge Spitzer, a Belgian-born American artist who also participated, recognized an affinity between Ai's use of Chinese vases and his own installation made from Murano glass; both involved readymades, and both played on the vulnerability of fragile objects in a public space. The two artists went on to collaborate on a work in Ai's retrospective at Frankfurt's Museum für Moderne Kunst this past summer.

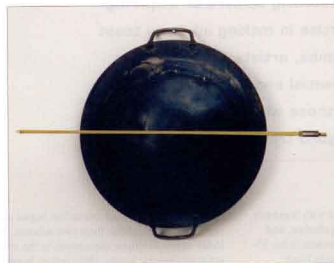
By 2000, Ai had begun to overtly question the role of art in a restrictive society. He and Feng Boyi curated an exhibition titled "Fuck Off" to coincide with the 2000 Shanghai Biennial. Ai's submission was a series of photographs titled "Perspective." Each featured a close-up of his hand giving the finger to a cultural icon—the Washington Monument, the Forbidden City, Of the show's 50-some artists, many had had run-ins with the authorities, including Sun Yuan, who worked with fetuses and cadavers, and Zhu Ming, who performed in the nude. To the surprise of many, the government allowed the show to remain open, but closed it when foreign visitors left the city after the inaugural ceremonies of the Shanghai Biennial. "Ai was given more leeway, perhaps because of his father's history," says Sigg, "but it was still incredibly brave to do." Soon after, gallerist Urs Meile began to work with Ai, displaying his and other artists' conceptual pieces in his Lucerne gallery and arranging shows in European museums, while Sigg established the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards, for which Ai is a judge.

The map of China is a recurrent image in Ai's work. He has made China-shaped tables out of ironwood and carved out a China-shaped hole in the center of a beam. And at this year's Biennale of Sydney, he exhibited a map of the world with the continents cut out of three-foot-high piles of fabric as a commentary on China's knockoff industry and its international reverberations.

Besides their social implications, Ai's works also possess a distinctive wit. His *Chandelier* (2002), a two-story-high crystal

fixture, humorously links such cultural dichotomies as luxury and glitz with industry and development. And his *Ton of Tea* (2006) is a skewed interpretation of the phrase "All the tea in China," composed of one ton of loose tea, compressed into a five-foot cube for more than six months. "Don't touch," Ai says, aware of the temptation, just as with the pearls. "You break it, you drink it." Meile brought *Ton of Tea* to Basel this spring, where it sold for \$90,000, far less than the cost of the tea itself.

Ai is currently enjoying a strong market for his sculptures. His *Map of China* (2003), which was made from ironwood beams cut into the shape of the country, sold for a record \$240,000 at Sotheby's inaugural Chinese contemporary art sale in New York last April. The artist's famous "Forever" Bicycle (2003), a 21-foot-high circle of 20 seamlessly linked bicycles, recently sold for an undisclosed amount to the Ella Fontanals Cisneros Collection in Miami, according to Robert



LEFT: *Wok with Violin Bow*, 1986. RIGHT: *Ton of Tea*, 2006, a five-foot cube made of compressed tea leaves, which sold for \$90,000.



Miller Gallery, which represents the artist in New York. Meile reports that Ai's work sells for between \$10,000 and \$300,000.

Today, not only is Ai's art celebrated in Beijing, so is his bare-bones style of architecture. He recently designed the Beijing branch of Galerie Urs Meile, the exhibition space at the art compound founded by New York dealer Jack Tilton, and a new gallery for Meg Maggio, formerly director of Beijing's Courtyard Gallery, all in the gray-brick *hutong* style. Ai's firm is involved in projects as diverse as an artist's condominium retreat in Kunming, in southern China, and the Beijing stadium, which looks like a circle of bamboo arches rising in the center of the city, across from the Beijing Opera House. "I think it will shock the world," he says. "I think China is very innocent and very naive; they knew they needed a stadium, but I don't think even they knew that they were about to get this astounding object."

Reflecting on the changes that he has witnessed and the current atmosphere of relative freedom for Chinese artists, Ai jokes, "It's like the movie *Honeymoon*, the parents are gone." Then he adds, "But they were there before, and maybe they will come back."