“For Ai, the most important attribute of the artist’s existence would be reason, which had failed to illuminate anything in the China of his youth.” —Uli Sigg

“Living Art on the Edge
The comprehensive story of Ai Weiwei’s life and work

This luxurious, silk-wrapped tome takes the cake for summer’s most sumptuous gift book.” —ARTnews.com
It's become less of a challenge to track down Ai Weiwei these days. He almost perpetually resides in his studio, ever since his passport was unlawfully confiscated after his release from custody in June 2011. A man known to jet around the world a few times a year, who was finally getting in overdose what he would have deserved long ago: worldwide acclaim, interviews, invitations to exhibit, to teach, to clutter China and other parts of the world with buildings, to spend time with established dignitaries and so on.

Now this world comes to his studio. Here he plans and curates his exhibitions, designs magazine covers, twitters, and holds court with as much presence in the global media as ever before. What kind of personality keeps all this running?

Part of the answer can be extracted from the artist’s biography. In the 1950s the writings of his father, a famous poet, had landed the family in exile to China’s inhospitable Northwest. In 1975 they returned to Beijing, where the young Ai took up studies at the film academy, only to quit soon after wards, frustrated by the quixotic ideals conveyed there. In 1981 he followed his girlfriend to the United States, a journey which the twenty-three-year-old embarked on as a self-declared “postimpressionist” painter: he had been profoundly impacted after chancing upon a Van Gogh monograph and a book about impressionism—while, by contrast, he had thrown out a monograph on the concoctions of Jasper Johns. Painting provided Ai with an escape from the Chinese variant of communism, which presented itself to him as a perennial disaster.

“Painting provided an escape from the Chinese variant of communism, which presented itself to Ai as a disaster.”

Pillar through Round Table, 2004–2005.

Opposite: Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995.

Top left and right: Urn, 2004 (production views).

Right: Coca-Cola Vase, 2008.

"Celebrated as one of the world's leading conceptual artists, this book unites unseen images, interviews and unique designs into one comprehensive tale." — Arts & Collections, London
For incomprehensible reasons, his father had been labeled a dissident “rightist” and thus an enemy of the state. Like major and even very minor decisions in Chinese everyday life, the judgment defied any attempt at understanding based on reason or human sentiment.

Discovering Duchamp

A short stay in 1982 at the Parson’s School of Design in New York City gave Ai his first exposure to the concepts of Duchamp and Warhol, which he decoupled in one sitting while observing his fellow American students as they painted away wildly, focused on the what and completely bypassing the why—the very central question that would accompany Ai from then on: why should one express oneself as an artist? He subsequently made up his mind to leave painting, or, in his words, a studio full of pictures nobody wanted, and to turn from the two-dimensional, finite artwork toward the ever-expanding universe of conceptual art.

“A valuable source of informed perspectives on Ai as an artist, activist, and social media phenomenon.” —Blouinartinfo.com

For Ai, the most important attribute of the artist’s existence would henceforth be reason, which had failed to illuminate anything in the cultural revolutionary China of his youth. His discovery of Duchamp had buried the postimpressionist, and in Duchamp’s ideas about the artist’s existence as a mindset, a lifestyle, Ai found his identity.

He decided to return to China in 1993, prompted by his father’s serious illness. At first he lived in his father’s house, where he considered himself a mere guest, and, not a particularly respectable one at that, with not a thing to show for all the years spent in the US—no elegant diploma, not even a half-decent art career. So he kept a low profile, limiting his expression to the publication of three books about Western and experimental Chinese art.

His now famous Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo from 1994, the photo work Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn from 1995, even his first compositions made of deconstructed furniture from 1996 onward—he didn’t regard any of it as art. He considered them mere diversions. It wasn’t until 1999 that he again faced the challenge to produce art according to his own definition—after being nominated by Harald Szeemann to appear in the Venice Biennale of that year.

Cross-cultural ambiguity

Seen through Western eyes, the gestures of Ai’s work consistently produce ambiguity. The hardware bears mainly Chinese connotations, while we are left to somehow imagine the software. We sense a personality with a very clear idea of what art is and isn’t, and what is needed to grasp or compose a thing and then move it from one sphere into another. But what constitutes this very clear idea remains elusive, when we lack the contextual knowledge of Chinese thoughts and things. Is a cubic meter of tea (A Ton of Tea, 2006) the same on both sides of the world? Of course not: “to drink a cup of tea” is a euphemism often used by the Chinese police when summoning people to preliminary interrogations.

Another specific strength inherent in Chinese culture, and essential to Ai’s art, is the capacity to fuse contradictions into one single proposition. To put it simply: while in a Western mind, according to our Cartesian binary logic, a thing is either this or that, in a Chinese mind that same thing may very well be this and that at the same time. Take Whitehurst (1995–2000) as an example: 322 Noodle bowls, each one a beautiful piece of art and a relic, but one fourth of them completely covered or destroyed by white industrial paint.

The work fuses two contradictory paradigms of art creation: the Western paradigm of avant-garde art, which means a radical destruction of tradition, breaking with the past to create space for entirely new thinking; and the classic Chinese paradigm of respect for tradition and the refusal of art creation as an evolving continuum drawn from the wealth of Chinese culture.

Implicit risk

Ai’s Documenta piece (Fairytales, 2007) also revealed an artistic strategy that was to shape his work increasingly. His own greatest strength, the artist says, is “to put himself in an awkward situation”—that’s how a contradiction can arise which then calls for resolution or at least control. But this process of gaining control mustn’t be easily managed. His art must always also imply the possibility of a major mishap, or else Ai doesn’t feel sufficiently challenged.

The project posed innumerable logistical difficulties, such as selecting population numbers, to somehow imagine the software. We sense a personality with a very clear idea of what art is and isn’t, and what is needed to grasp or compose a thing and then move it from one sphere into another. But what constitutes this very clear idea remains elusive, when we lack the contextual knowledge of Chinese thoughts and things. Is a cubic meter of tea (A Ton of Tea, 2006) the same on both sides of the world? Of course not: “to drink a cup of tea” is a euphemism often used by the Chinese police when summoning people to preliminary interrogations.

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Ai Weiwei "Be quick—this is a limited edition of 1000 copies.

— Interviewmagazine.com

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THE FIRST COMPREHENSIVE MONOGRAPH ON AI WEIWEI'S LIFE AND WORK

- Conceived in close collaboration on site with Ai Weiwei and with access to the artist’s own archives.
- Over 700 pages featuring a number of previously unseen images, from photos taken during Ai’s time in New York to production shots of large installations in the workshop and pictures from his studio.
- Essays by Uli Sigg, Roger M. Buergel, Carlos Rojas, William A. Callahan, and James J. Lally, as well as numerous statements derived from interviews with Ai Weiwei, conducted especially for this publication.
- Full-page laser-cut designs based on traditional paper cuts by the artist.
- Each copy is wrapped in a silk cloth, which reproduces a detail from his work Straight, a reference to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008.