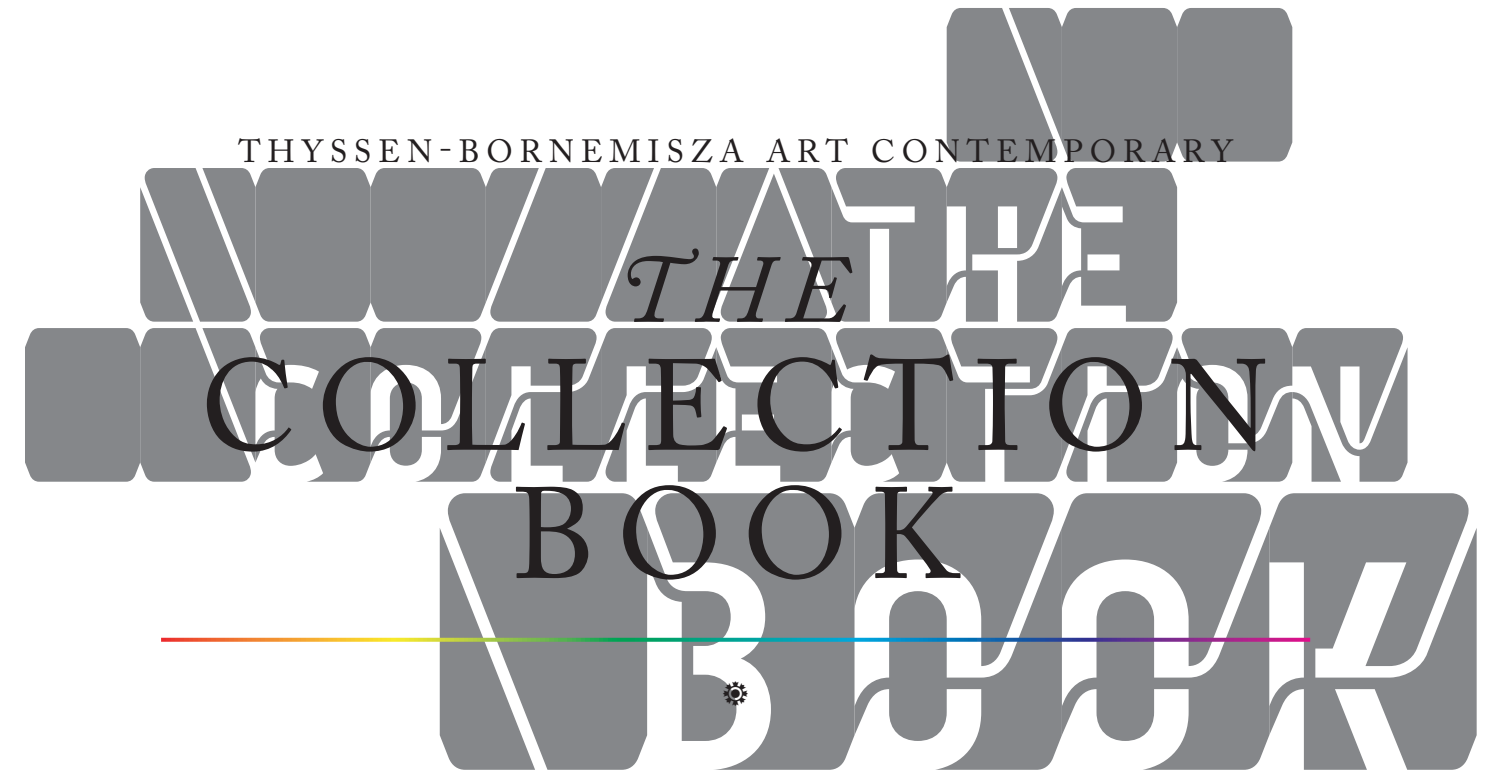
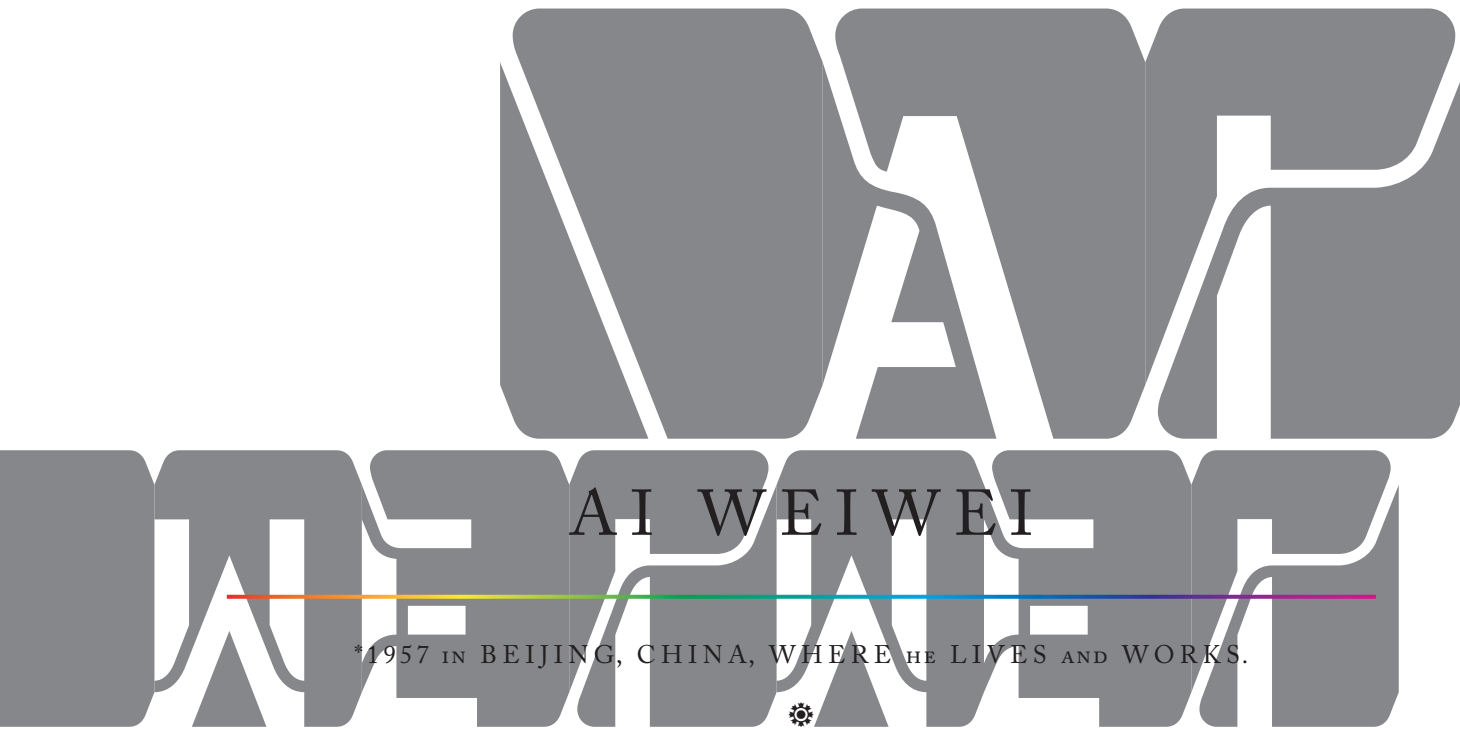


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## FRAGMENTS OF HISTORY: WHAT IS PRESERVED, AND WHAT IS REFORMED

by MAMI KATAOKA

Ai Weiwei, primarily active as an artist and architect, has said of the relationship between the two: “Art is different from architectural practice, but on the other hand I’ve always thought of architecture and art as different theories with a single narrative.”<sup>1</sup> In his architectural work, with a keen awareness of volume and mass, he begins with a minimalist form as his starting point, brilliantly displaying sophisticated sensibilities in his choice of materials and his concerns with the tradition of handiwork employed in the crafts and skilled workmanship. This distinct sensibility and aesthetic are clearly evident in his three-dimensional art works

and installations as well. Even in his works that seem to suggest a breach with or a rejection of China’s past and traditions, his strong interest in and respect for the immaterial, intangible crafts and techniques that have been transmitted through Chinese culture over the centuries is indisputable, and while Ai Weiwei certainly positions himself in contemporary Chinese society—characterized as it is by rapid, even pell-mell modernization—he nevertheless seems to be reflecting on the question of what should be preserved and what should be “reformed.” Ai often exhibits a critical attitude toward the blind acceptance of majority rule and the social authorities; yet he seems to be motivated not by simple nay saying, but rather by a sharp awareness of his country and his culture engaged in a historic transformation: his desire is to remain conscious and attentive, earnestly cleaving to his own principles and values while the party does what it does around him.

The son of the poet Ai Qing, Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957. During the Cultural Revolution, his father was denounced and sent to a labor camp in Xinjiang, and Ai Weiwei went with him and grew up there. In 1978, he enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy. A few years later, he traveled to the United States, living in New York City for twelve years only to return to Beijing in 1993. Wandering around antique markets back home, he noted: “I became interested in how within each dynasty there was a clear definition of shape, color, and marking they wished to put on every object.”<sup>2</sup> Following this line of thought, in 1994 he created *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*. Ai commented, referring to the trademark font and calligraphic style of the word *coca-cola*, that “the actual form of [the] script, the brush stroke, seemed to follow closely the shape and form of the vase itself.”<sup>3</sup> By combining the commercial logo, a symbol of the global economy and popular culture, with an urn reflecting the culture of Han Dynasty in China, he expressed the duality of continuity and reform of Chinese history and culture.



left: *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1994  
right: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995

I For this piece, Ai Weiwei worked together with Serge Spitzer, an American artist (born 1951 in Bucharest, Romania, living and working in New York), for an installation at the exhibition *Territorial* at the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, Germany (May 20 to August 27, 2006).

## COLORED VASES

2006

10 Neolithic vases (5000–3500 B.C.), industrial paint  
Each approx. 30 x 20 cm

*AI* then began to create copies of Yongzheng-era and Qianlong-era ceramics, employing craftsmen from the famous ceramic production center in Jing De Zhen. Through the medium of ceramics, he created metaphors suggesting the overpowering of Chinese history and tradition by Western consumer culture, and he posed questions concerning the meaning of the art work’s authenticity, the autonomy of creativity, and the artistic authority, while pointing to the irony that the production of replicas contributes, in fact, to the preservation of traditional craft techniques and traditions.

In such works as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) and *Breaking of Two Blue-and-White “Dragon” Bowls* (1996), Ai destroyed, as the titles suggest, antique ceramic pieces. In *Whitewash* (1993–2000), by painting Neolithic-period (10,000 to 4,000 B.C.) urns with white paint, he preserves the form of the pieces while making it impossible to apprehend their period from their obscured surface designs and textures. Neatly arranged on the floor, the vessels are transformed from their prehistoric designs, functions, and colors into uniform industrial products, suggesting even the minimal art of Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt. In *Ghost Gu Coming Down the Mountain*<sup>1</sup> (2005), Ai arranges Yuan-dynasty (1271–1361) ceramics in a neat grid pattern on the floor. From one perspective, one sees the traditional cobalt blue glaze patterns of Chinese ceramics, while when viewed from the opposite direction one sees only white. As the viewer circumambulates the installation, the relationship between meaning and meaninglessness shifts back and forth. This work, while also broaching the issues of the authenticity of the work of art and artistic authority, suggests how values, power structures, policies, and our definitions of good and evil can take a 180-degree turn from one age to the next.

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with JOSEPH GRIMA, “Ai Weiwei (*Fake Design, Beijing*),” in *Instant Asia: Fast Forward through the Architecture of a Changing Continent* (Milan: SKIRA, 2008), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> AI WEIWEI in an interview with CHARLES MEREWETHER, “*Changing Perspective*,” in *Ai Weiwei, Works: Beijing 1993–2003* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2003), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



*Colored Vases*

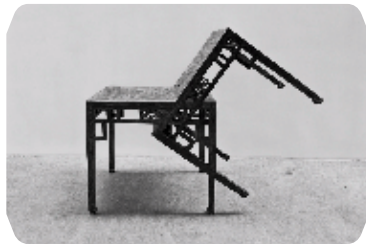


*Colored Vases* consists of ten vases that Ai has painted with ordinary household paints of various colors in a serial installation he has been creating since 2003. The dripping and running of the uniform colors of the commercially manufactured paints applied to these hand-made, biscuit-fired Neolithic (5,000–3,500 B.C.) urns places the traditional form of pottery, with dripping or running glazes, and the expressionless quality of industrially manufactured products into a new relationship of contradiction, coexistence, and accommodation.

Just as the various urns and vases Ai uses reflect the styles of their respective dynasties, traditional Chinese furniture of the Ming Dynasty—the peak of furniture production in China—the work also reflects its times, in aspects ranging from artistic style and materials to production locales and the social status of the owners. In his *Furniture* series (initiated in 1997 and still in progress), Ai reassembles traditional pieces of furniture in ways that distort their original uses, creating a kind of visual bending of history itself. What enables him to take apart and reassemble the furniture, however, is the traditional joinery (without nails) that reached its peak in Ming- and Qing-dynasty architecture and was subsequently applied to furniture making as well. Like his other works, Ai's *Furniture* series highlights the preservation of intangible traditional techniques and craftsmanship.



*Descending Light*, 2007



*Two Joined Square Tables*, 2005

## TRAVELING LIGHT

2007

Glass crystals/tieli wood, steel, electric lights  
478 x 224 x 178 cm

IN *Table and Beam* (2002) and *Table and Pillar* (2002), Ai uses pillars and beams from demolished Ming-dynasty temples and combines them with traditional Chinese furniture. The pillars can be read as a metaphor for the spiritual and belief-systems of the people of the time, and in this work Ai attempts to re-contextualize fragments of history and past spiritual beliefs in contemporary terms. "History is always the missing part of the puzzle in everything we do," comments the artist. "I think that they only have a momentary truth, and that's the fragment: those momentary pieces."<sup>4</sup> It's a statement which recognizes that both the present moment and our own lives are but fragments of history, and the task before us is finding a way to combine, reconstitute, or resurrect those separate fragments, or to imagine the whole from those fragmentary parts. In archeology, the fragments of a vase are pieces of a puzzle for reconstituting the vase in its complete form. But Ai Weiwei does not seek to recreate the original. What he creates, instead, in a new kind of game, is a contemporary puzzle.

*Traveling Light* employs the pillar of a Ming-dynasty temple as a kind of totem pole, combined with elaborate chandeliers that Ai has been producing over the years. The nearly five-meter tall pillar rises straight up from a moveable metal base. The chandelier sparkling at its top is made from five thousand crystal beads specially commissioned for the piece, hanging in two intersecting circles. The beads, in various shapes, are strung in random combinations to create a brilliant sparkling effect. Ai's work with light has evolved over the years, from *Chandelier* (2002) through *Foundation of Light* (2007) and *Descending Light* (2007), but the huge pillar and gracefully drooping, willowy skeins of beads in *Traveling Light* create, because of the piece's mobility, a centripetal appeal, visually actualizing the artist's statement: "This becomes for me like a baldachin, with all the sense of power and associations that go with it."<sup>5</sup> It is as if, while connecting a fragment of the past to the present, the chandelier illuminates the way to the future that lies ahead of us.

4 Cited in NATALINE COLONNELLO, *Fragments* (Beijing, Lucerne: Galerie Urs Meile, Timezone 8 Ltd., 2006), p. 11.

5 KAREN SMITH, *Ai Weiwei Illumination* (New York: Mary Boone Gallery, 2008), p. 85.

Translated by JEFF HUNTER.



*Traveling Light*