It is June 8, 2008. I am finalizing this essay, exactly two months before the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The pressure is on. This is the year that China, as a nation and as a people, has been waiting for, the year in which China will reclaim its role on the international stage—right at the center of the globe. The Beijing Olympics aims to symbolize the spreading of peace and harmony in global sports, in global culture, and in the global economy. At the same time, the Olympics presents an opportunity for China to spread its ancient cultural traditions and values—having already blended them in a melting pot of a newly-discovered Chinese universal humanism—throughout the world.

Many of these new ideals and dreams can be found in the official mascot of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, known as Fuwa (“Fortune Child”)—a set of five figures that mix together the Olympic flame with characteristics of four of China’s ‘most popular animals’: the fish, the panda, the Tibetan antelope, and the swallow. The other main symbol of the 2008 Games is the Beijing Olympic Stadium; known in popular media terms as the “Birds Nest.”

The Beijing Olympic Stadium embodies a new kind of China, one that was born out of collaboration between the world-renowned Swiss architecture firm Herzog & De Meuron and Fake Studio, a design and architecture firm led by the Beijing-based conceptual artist, publisher, and architect Ai Weiwei. The blueprint of the “Birds Nest” emerged from an international competition to design the principal stadium for the 2008 Olympics. At the same time it became marked by Ai Weiwei’s vision of creating a “free and democratic open public space” and a
“playground” where people “can be influenced by ideas and forms.” (See “A Conversation with Ai Weiwei,” also in this edition.)

Some people might have thought that such ideas as these were last voiced during the 1989 student demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in Beijing and elsewhere across China. Yet, unlike the calls for democracy that were made at that time and which were marked by a struggle against China’s political leadership, Ai Weiwei’s public testimonials on the free and democratic function of the stadium touch upon an even more basic demand, one grounded in the idea of offering Chinese society a sense and a place for reconsidering its past and present realities. “If it is far away from reality, than it is fake and hypocritical,” echoes the English translation of a statement made by Ai Weiwei that was broadcasted on Al Jazeera English news channel on 12 August 2007, and was distributed on YouTube.

It is such statements as these that have made Ai Weiwei seem to be a dissident (yet one who, nonetheless, manages to live in China). This same view was also shared by Ai Weiwei in an interview with the ABC Sunday Arts program, broadcasted on 11 May 2008, ten days after exhibitions of his work were simultaneously opened at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and the Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney.

The personality of the artist as dissident has become a central part of international attention for avant-garde art from China, including in the way the Chinese avant-garde continues to be linked to visions of clashes and distinctions between the official and the unofficial realms of art production in China. Hence, the nonconformist attitude often becomes an integral part of the global trademark of Chinese avant-garde art, as it emerges after the late 1970s, an attribution that seems to raise less international appeal when it comes to the abiding interest in political dissidence in recent artistic practices from other countries in Asia, including works from Indonesia and Vietnam. Yet, these visions of nonconformist artists and noncompliant art practices in China have also obscured some of the basic social characteristics of the development of Chinese contemporary art to-date.

Starting in the 1990s, a small number of artists in China have managed to established themselves as pivotal figures in the development of a new experimental art movement, one marked by a coherent approach and critical mind-set, where the drive to produce art is replaced by a desire to generate a new social consciousness.

“Art is not important,” to reverberate the statement of the leading Chinese art critic Li Xianting in 1988. Instead, it is important to have a strong attitude, a critical mind-set, and to work towards mapping out one’s existence as a social being. This is where Ai Weiwei comes in both as one of the key figures in China’s recent artistic and cultural history and as an important voice of China’s social consciousness.

**Ai Weiwei, “Under Construction”**

A visual memory I have of Ai Weiwei is him riding in the backseat of a taxi in Beijing. The driver takes him past the northern end of Tiananmen Square towards the Gate of Heavenly Peace. But then, in front of the square, the taxi stops due to heavy afternoon traffic. In the distance, several hundreds of people watch attentively as the national flag is being lowered by a group of Chinese soldiers.

“Do you see that crowd of people there?” Ai Weiwei says as he gazes at the square. “They are waiting for the moment when the flag comes down. Every day, in the morning and at night, regardless of the time of the year—whether it’s 5 am or 9 pm—they are there watching, but especially at night, when the sun sets and the flag is taken down. So many people just waiting for that moment.”

“Why is that?” he is asked by Rob Schröder, who is filming the architect as part of the two-part documentary film, *Hellish Peace* (*Helse Vrede*), that was broadcast on Dutch television in 2001. “Why?”

Ai Weiwei quickly responds: “Because they are stupid! At that moment they are feeling something I can not understand.”

Scenes like these best describe Ai Weiwei’s strong personality. As a founding member of the Stars Group, between 1979 and 1981 he helped organize a series of public exhibitions and manifestations that featured the new generation of artists and intellectuals who emerged with the demise of the Cultural Revolution; he sought to give voice to new individual beliefs and thinking among the great masses of the people. Seven years before the documentary with Ai Weiwei was filmed, he produced the photographic work *June 1994*, marking the fifth anniversary of the military crackdown on student demonstrations at Tiananmen. The work features his future wife, Lu Qing, lifting up her skirt and revealing her underwear in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace that is festooned by the portrait of Mao Zedong.

**June 1994, 1994**  
**Ai Weiwei**  
Gelatin silver print, 121 cm x 155 cm  
*Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing – Lucerne*
Following his return to China in 1993, after having spent 12 years living and working in New York City (where he became known as the Chinese Duchamp because of his interest in the ready-made), the appearance of this photographic work marked the start of a new appreciation for Ai Weiwei in both the Chinese and international art worlds. Even before that time, however, when he was in New York, he had already shown an interest in dealing with difficult issues facing global society. This is evidenced by his installation, Safe Sex (1986), featuring a Chinese People’s Liberation Army-issued raincoat with a condom attached to its front—a work that refers to the growing AIDS epidemic around the world.

The two exhibitions in Sydney allow a more insightful look at the impact that Ai Weiwei has had on both the national and the international stage of contemporary art. They coincide with some of the recent world-wide attention for his work, which focuses on his role in the design of the Beijing Olympic Stadium as well as his Fairy tale project for Documenta 12, for which he brought “1000+1” Chinese nationals to Kassel. An even more insightful look, however, at a broader number of his works, would offer an opportunity to see how Ai Weiwei represents a pivotal role in the development of Chinese contemporary art and why it has drawn so much critical international attention.

In this regard, one look back at his role in publishing Black Cover Book (1994), White Cover Book (1995), and Grey Cover Book (1997) together with the New-York based Chinese artists Xu Bing and Zeng Xiaojun, each of which feature essays and documentation on both international artists and artists living and working in China, including artists of the Beijing East Village, such as Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming and Zhang Huan (who had been arrested for producing and distributing pornography when the first book came out in 1994).

In 2000, Ai Weiwei, together with curator Feng Boyi, masterminded the organization of the FUCK OFF exhibition and the subsequent publication of a book by that same title which featured the creative output of an unprecedented number of Chinese artists who had been working throughout the course of the 1990s.

The FUCK OFF exhibition and publication were produced in response to the opening of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, which claimed to be the first international-oriented exhibition of contemporary art, but also featuring some new works of Chinese art. Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi wanted to show that the curatorial incentives behind the biennale were still a far cry from the recent developments in the alternative art scenes that had emerged across the country.

These works, executed in New York during the second half of the 1980s and in China in the mid-1990s, form an essential part of Ai Weiwei’s work as an artist and cultural figure as well as a catalyst for new critical thinking in China and beyond. They underscore the importance of the current exhibition of his work, titled Under Construction, on display at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and the Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney (May 1-July 27, 2008), and the accompanying book publication, written by Charles Merewether, curator of the exhibitions.
In the 2001 documentary film *Hellish Peace*, Ai Weiwei clearly reiterates his statement for the show, stating how, “We are talking about an alternative and independent attitude. We are talking about a personal power against the collective state or institutions who are trying to dismiss private thinking and private action.” These conditions were made clearly evident by *Iron* (2000), a work by Yang Zhichao that was part of the publication and depicted the artist having his identification number branded on his back. The branding was being done by Ai Weiwei, in the courtyard of his studio in Beijing.

**History Forgotten**

Ai Weiwei’s influence extends far beyond that of others; he is not just another acclaimed Chinese artist. His collaboration with Herzog & De Meuron on the Beijing Olympic Stadium and his comments on the public democratic function that the stadium should have (especially after the Olympics are held), prove that he plays an important historical role in the development of Chinese society and in establishing a new social consciousness that will enable China to connect itself further to the international world.

The problems facing not just Chinese citizens today, but many societies around the globe, is their inherent and often blind reliance on nationalist symbols. The dependency of societies on the national state or, for that matter, on national symbols and nationalistic cultural traditions (i.e. heritage), prevents societies from looking ahead towards building their own futures and realizing their own dreams. These thoughts formulate the basis of the complex process that lies beneath the project of bringing “1000+1” to Kassel. The *Fairytale*-project for Documenta 12 clearly cuts beneath the carapace of national and international cultural traditions, of local and global cultural exchange. It moves towards a need to bring contemporary societies together again, and to share a common space and a common dream of becoming human again.

At the same time, these people become symbolized in a new set of forms and shapes; both historically, and related to their everyday current existence. These are represented by their embodiment in 1000+1 antique chairs, and in 1001+1 beds, suitcases, airline tickets, etc; as well as in the 1000+1 doors and window frames that made up the installation Template for Documenta 12. The destruction (or rather reconstruction) of this installation outside Museum Fridericianum during a freak storm on June 20, 2007, could not have come at a better moment, since it took away another level of man-produced symbolism, that of the superbly designed
The importance of *Fairytale* instead lies in its enduring process, in the transformation that it brought about for all of the people involved; both in terms of the formation and transfer of a group of 1000+1 individuals, as well as in the formulation of all aspects involved in its process; including the three-hour long video of the event that was produced from thousand of hours of footage and is shown in the exhibitions at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and the Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney.

With an artistic practice that is capable of transcending itself into building a social consciousness (which should be seen more as courses of action), Ai Weiwei deserves international acclaim for his role in building a new responsiveness to contemporary culture. However, in order to do so, past values need to be reassessed; historical traditions need to be renewed; ancient objects need to be reconstituted into new forms and new shapes; and traditional symbols need to be reconsidered in contemporary contexts. Here, one can also make references to works by other key Asian artists, who have been breaking down social conventions and societal reliance on cultural symbolism, such as in the case of the Indonesian artist Arahmaini.

The way contemporary art becomes capable of transcending into a new cultural and social consciousness through renewal and modernization of past and historical symbols can also be seen in the installation *Through* (2007-08), which is made up of antique tables and pillars from dismantled temples dating from the Qing Dynasty. (This was commissioned by Gene and Brian Sherman to inaugurate the transformation of Sherman Galleries into the opening of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, as of 2008.)

Clearly, the mission statement of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation on how the development of contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific is in need of a foundation that strives to enhance the promotion and educative role of contemporary art in a not-for-profit environment, has been an essential component in organizing the recent exhibitions of work by Ai Weiwei in Sydney, a city not known for playing a primary role in the international art world.

The Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, with its focus on the development of contemporary art from the Asia-Pacific, will hopefully serve as a model for other foundations to materialize in the region. The Foundation is based on the idea of providing patronage for the arts and organizing projects and activities that assist in developing a better understanding (both locally and internationally) about the value of contemporary art and culture—beyond its noticeable appraisal by the market.

As to the historical role that Ai Weiwei will play, both in China and in the world, perhaps it is best to reiterate his statement that he would rather be “forgotten,” or at least be the person “that people remember when they have forgotten something.” (See “A Conversation with Ai Weiwei,” also in this edition.)

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