Interview with Ai Weiwei

Participants: Cui Cancan and Ai Weiwei
Date: April 11, 2015
Location: Caochangdi, Beijing

Cui Cancan: When did you first see this building?

Ai Weiwei: I first became interested in ancient architecture in about 1997. The first time I went to Jinhua, I saw some old buildings that were decidedly different from those in northern China. The light filtering through the skylights into the rooms was very special. The rooms were actually rather dark, because the exterior walls were solid, with very few external windows. However, it was entirely open inside the walls, so that anything—birds, the rain—could get in. The methods are very similar to those used in making furniture. The house has no foundation; it simply rests on the earth, which is also very unusual. It feels as if it was gently placed there. It also has weight, and after being battered by the wind and the rain, it began to change shape and become more pliable.

CCC: What about the building in this exhibition?

AWW: A few months ago, I went back to Jinhua and saw this house. It had been dismantled so it could be sold. These old buildings belong to an old cultural system that has already vanished. All that was left of that system and that house were fragments. The people who owned the house were a wealthy family, then dozens or hundreds of families lived there. As a result of social movements, the poorest people in the village came to occupy a building once owned by the richest. The current occupants don’t understand the building, because that culture is dead. If you ask the people living in it, they don’t know who owns the house, why it was built that way, how much money was spent, or the ideas behind building such a structure. If the original builder hadn’t thought he could leave it to his descendants, he wouldn’t have built this kind of house. The building is a specimen, evidence of an era.

CCC: And it was because of this that you wanted to turn the building into a work of art?

AWW: No, it has nothing to do with that. I don’t make artworks for that reason. I often try to avoid that. My interest in things is very pure; my interest in why it exists or what is unique about it is independent of anything else, including the expectation that it may become an artwork, or the intentions behind it. The more
you look at it, the better you understand its structure. The architecture of Jiangxi, Anhui, and Zhejiang are all distinct. Galleria Continua and Tang Contemporary Art wanted me to do an exhibition, and no one has explicitly said that I can’t. Why did I use this building? I’m not entirely sure. It sprang to mind at the time, so I just did it.

CCC: Could this building be seen as a ready-made?

AWW: You and I are also ready-mades. Culture, history, and this building can all be called ready-mades. I like using existing logic and extending it. It saves a lot of time, because you don’t need to start from the beginning. I have never believed that an artist is a creator. He is only an appropriator and a re-interpreter. Creation is the work of God, and we are just speaking with our voices.

CCC: For an artist, are there good or bad voices and habits?

AWW: I don’t think you can say it’s good or bad, but something might be richer or stronger, newer or more interesting for us. Some things are so old that we don’t see or hear them, as if they don’t exist.

CCC: How have you changed the building?

AWW: This structure has undergone many changes, but none at my hands. It has always been changing. When a Jiangxi house appears in Zhejiang, it has historical and cultural value, which encompasses its beauty, reason for being, and all of its properties. It was sold in this other place and bought by a Beijing artist. It was moved to a Beijing gallery—two, actually. The two galleries are close, so I have used these two spaces for a single work. This has nothing to do with the original building. There is nothing left of the information contained in this house; all that’s left is a few bones, like the wreckage of a plane.

CCC: So what's more important about this exhibition is the fact that you're doing an exhibition in two galleries?

AWW: I wanted to make a statement, that I am doing an exhibition in China.

CCC: Who is the audience for this statement?

AWW: I want to show that I haven't done an exhibition. The fact that the exhibition happens has no meaning or implications; it simply happens. After it happens, I cannot say that I’ve never done an exhibition in China. I can simply say that I did not exhibit a work in a gallery. I used two galleries to create a work, and you could only see one part of the work in each gallery.
CCC: So it doesn’t matter what you show?

AWW: Of course not.

CCC: So how do you think about it?

AWW: It doesn’t matter what I do. This is something else entirely. When I talk with you, I’m not in the bathroom, and I’m not showering; I am talking with you and this is very certain, as certain as any other existence. As such, it is just as important as anything else.

CCC: What is the relationship between this house and your previous political engagement?

AWW: People are like cats, whether white, black, or calico. Change takes place within a specific scope. Every day, a cat might lick its fur, sleep, or jump to open the door. This might simply be the temperament of this cat, but not that one. If you want to change, and move beyond this scope, then you don’t need to worry about whether you change or not, whether you do or do not have these traits.

CCC: What are you most concerned about?

AWW: I’m currently concerned with living, and having an awareness of life. A few days from now, I could die. I’m not exactly sure what happens after I die, so I don’t worry about it. Oh, sometimes I focus on my weight. I like sweets, and when I eat them my doctor reminds me I shouldn’t, so I have to concern myself with that.

CCC: You’ve said that this house has changed a lot, but what has caused the building to change?

AWW: The inheritors of this house said it clearly in a few sentences. They talked about why they had this house and what it had been through. When it belonged to a single family, it served as the ancestral hall for the Wang family. The hall was used for ancestor worship or major business deals, equivalent to the Great Hall of the People, where they hold the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Similarly, it also has a square and a public forum. After all land was made communal, this system of ownership ceased to exist and a new system was put in place. A single power interpreted the needs of all people, eliminating the most primal trait of individual existence. Human emotions and some human characteristics disappeared with it. We could say that this ecology no longer exists; like land that has been sifted to the point that nothing will grow, it has become desert. Its identity has already been destroyed, becoming an unsupported ruin.
CCC: Today, Chinese wooden architecture is already in decline, because of its technical and practical value.

AWW: When the system of private ownership disappeared, people stopped using this type of architecture. The building represented a family’s wealth and status, and it was bolstered by familial stability and order. This order was created over the course of several thousand years. Rational or not, it is an integrated system that we call civilization. Civilization is not something that an individual can create; civilization is communicated through a complete ethical system and a continuously refined language. Even if that system had not been destroyed, the forests would have disappeared, and each pillar would have taken 50 to 100 years to grow. These building methods are not suited to our current population densities and urbanization levels.

CCC: Over the course of more than two thousand years, ancient Chinese architecture has been very stable, from the platform to the relationships between the pillars and crossbeams. Has this remained unchanged?

AWW: There was no need to change. Because of local conditions and materials availability, the house changed with material and economic considerations. Its ethical system was consistent; it’s like Chinese furniture, but the materials are different. It existed within a complete system, and it was controlled by that system.

CCC: Was this ethical system advanced and practical?

AWW: It was once very practical, but whether it’s still practical today remains to be seen. For the last few hundred years, this system made China backward. You might call it decline, because it did not provide human existence with a better explanation that would help people live happily.

CCC: If this old building is neither advanced nor practical, then what relationship does it have with exhibition viewers, modern society, or modern people? How will it communicate?

AWW: The work does not directly correspond. It has its own context, with visible and hidden parts. It can’t be that direct. We cannot explain it through a direct relationship, like screwing in a screw. I can’t make those kinds of works. If I explain it clearly, it will only appear false.

CCC: What’s the difference between this exhibition and exhibitions of artifacts in museums?

AWW: I can’t say they’re different, because I don’t know what their intentions
are. Most exhibitions of artifacts want to present the cultural information carried by a specific type of object, which serves as a kind of historical evidence. I’m not interested in this; I am using one system to complete something for another system. I care about the states I present in this exhibition, and the state is this artwork. The work is not an old house, because the house does not exist in the exhibition. The work contains two houses; in fact, this city is built on this house. The space and time created by the work is a stealthy substitute; it passes through things, but it does not destroy them.

CCC: Are you giving the building a new context?

AWW: It’s not that I’m giving it a new context; it is a new context because it exists. The work is not the house itself; it was created through the combination of events and time. If not for these times and events, I would not be interested in this house. I intend to bring it into another state.

CCC: And this state includes the fact that you wanted to do an exhibition in China?

AWW: Of course. It encompasses my identity, viewpoints, experiences, and knowledge, and the fact that I am both an artist and not an artist.

CCC: Do you think this exhibition can be done in China?

AWW: The house was there before I thought about this exhibition, but I cannot say whether it will be finally presented in this place. Similarly, I have no idea if the earth will still exist tomorrow; it’s already been around for a long time, and we suppose that it will continue to exist. I don’t know if this exhibition can be done; I simply suppose that, if there are already so many exhibitions, I should be able to do mine as well. I only need to know this much.

CCC: Is this exhibition in China related to the two exhibitions that you pulled out of last year?

AWW: It’s unrelated.

CCC: Not even a little bit?

AWW: It’s not directly related. If this one is shut down, isn’t that related?

CCC: You’re using ancient Chinese architecture in this work. How do you see the relationship between your work and that of Cai Guoqiang and Xu Bing, who have drawn on traditional Chinese sources?
AWW: First, I don’t really understand their work, and second, summarizing art in this way is rather crude. Artworks have many layers, and their complexities are difficult to explain simply.

CCC: How is this work different from your previous works?

AWW: I have made hundreds of works, and each is different. Some took the form of strung kites, straightened rebar, or fired sunflower seeds. Regardless of the methods or intents, all of these works are different. It is different because I don’t like replicating existing methods. That’s just lazy.

CCC: I’m out of questions...

AWW: So we’ll stop there? Good. Congratulations to Cui Cancan, China’s best young curator.