

Ai Weiwei – Fairytale

Project for *Documenta 12*, Kassel, 2007

Once upon a time, a big book was lying among piles of others on the large wooden table of internationally acclaimed polymath artist, curator, writer, publisher and architect Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing), one of the most complex and influential personalities in the development of Chinese contemporary art for over twenty years. It was a book about space. Ai Weiwei cheerfully showed his guests a quotation by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the pioneering Russian space theorist, printed on one of the first pages:

First inevitably comes the idea, the fantasy, the fairy tale. Then scientific calculation. Ultimately, fulfillment crowns the dream.

These words condensed the whole process, conceived as an artwork itself, of the large-scale, multi-faceted project about “possibility and imagination” that Ai Weiwei will present this summer at *Documenta 12*. In reply to the three leitmotifs of the exhibition - “Is modernity our antiquity?”, “What is bare life?” and “What is to be done?”, Ai Weiwei will bring to Kassel, native town of the famed, fable writing Grim Brothers, an extremely extensive, variegated and inestimably valuable documentation of this moment in history, a concrete yet poetic evidence of the historical, socio-cultural, human landscape of today’s China. The project requires enormous financial, organizational, technical and human resources. With a 3.1 million Euro budget—sponsored by the Leister Foundation, Switzerland, the Erlenmeyer Foundation, Switzerland and Galerie Urs Meile Beijing-Lucerne—Ai Weiwei has merged his dream with reality, creating his *Fairytale*.

In terms of size and concept, *Fairytale* is the biggest and the most multilayered work ever developed by Ai Weiwei, and one of the most ambitious projects ever presented in the history of *Documenta*. Consisting of three installations, a part of the project will also include living individuals: *Fairytale – 1001 Chinese Visitors* is a living installation involving 1001 Chinese citizens who will visit the small town of Kassel (population 194,796) in a trip fully designed by Ai Weiwei and organized by the more than 30 people currently working in the FAKE team, the temporary travel agency that the artist set up for the occasion.

The 1001 Chinese travelers will be in this *Documenta* as tourists, viewers and as part of the artwork. The travelers will be divided into 5 groups, each group traveling in succession between June 12 and July 9, 2007, and were selected from the more than 3,000 people who enthusiastically reacted to the travel offer application published by Ai Weiwei on his personal blog (also a part of the project) over a three day period. Thanks to the support of the sponsors, as well as the Directors of *Documenta*, Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the German Ambassador to China, Volker Stanzel, Ai Weiwei was able to initiate an enormous process with several different aspects, including: the planning of the tourist and educational activities, the location of suitable infrastructures, the creation of proper living and sanitary conditions, the design of a specially created travel-set (luggage, clothes, computer related technology, etc.) and utensils and furniture, the recruiting of personnel (cooks, video makers, photographers, etc.), the processing of visa applications, the purchase of flight tickets, and travel insurance. Ai Weiwei’s travelers, whose ages range from 2 to 70, come from dissimilar social classes and have dissimilar occupations and lifestyles: among them, for example, are policemen, teachers, students, artists and designers, but also

farmers coming from a remote minority village in Guanxi Province, where women, not having a fixed name or identity card, were out of the public register before starting the bureaucratic procedures connected with *Fairytale*. Ai Weiwei comments:

“This process made people really realize what it means to be a man or woman as an identity and with a Nation: you have to go through the system, and the system can be simple or more complicated”.

One of the topics stressed in *Fairytale* is the person as a single individual (as opposed to a mass or collective), with his or her own unique story, background, ways of thinking and fantasies. For this reason each participant was asked to fill out a form with 99 questions and is filmed during the preparatory stage, during the trip and after returning to China by Ai Weiwei's professional documentary team. If Ai Weiwei decided to offer a journey to a place about which many applicants never even heard before, to which many would have never traveled by their own accord or because of financial restrictions, it is because, as he says, “this becomes a very foreign experience in anyone's personal life,” an experience that will help each participant to think differently. The logo designed for the project strictly follows this logic: **1001** graphically links the number to the “F” in “Fairytale,” and at the same time conceptually emphasizes “1,” and not “1001”: “That means,” Ai Weiwei states, “that in this project 1001 is not represented by one project, but by 1001 projects, as each individual will have his or her own independent experience.”

Besides *Fairytale – 1001 Chinese Visitors*, the second large-scale installation by Ai Weiwei for *Documenta 12* is *Template*, a work that will be exhibited in the courtyard of the greenhouse designed by Lacaton and Vassel also known as the “Crystal Palace,” a temporary building erected ad hoc for *Documenta 12*. The architecture of *Template* is comprised of late Ming and Qing Dynasty wooden windows and doors which formerly used to belong to destroyed houses in the Shanxi area, Northern China, where entire old towns have been pulled down. Ai Weiwei bought the last fragments of that civilization and relocated them in a completely contemporary setting: “It really is a mixed, troubled, questioning context,” explains the artist, “and a protest for its own identity.” Once counted, the pieces of which *Template* is made up surprisingly turned out to be exactly tantamount to 1001, a coincidence that Ai Weiwei finds significant. The wooden architectural elements of *Template* are joined together in five layers per side, forming an open vertical structure having an eight-pointed base. In spite of its large size (7.2 x 12 x 8.5 m), from afar the installation conveys the illusion of being something foldable, like a gigantic three-dimensional papercut. Where the external framework is massive and regular, the internal part of each wall made out of windows and doors is shaped according to the volume of a hypothetical Chinese traditional temple, giving the impression that the whole wooden construction was assembled around a building that later has been removed. While standing in the middle of *Template*, the viewer is surrounded by a space that is fictional, abstract and ethereal. Ai Weiwei explains: “To me the temple itself—you know I'm not religious—means a station where you can think about the past and the future, it's a void space. The selected area—not the material temple itself—tells you that the real physical temple is not there, but constructed through the leftovers of the past.”

In Ai Weiwei's eyes, “events like *Documenta* or *Fairytale* are like temples.” This idea serves as the point of departure for *Fairytale – 1001 Qing Dynasty Wooden Chairs*, the third installation of Ai Weiwei's *Documenta* project. The work is comprised of 1001 late Ming and Qing Dynasty wooden chairs that will be spread in groups around the different exhibition venues. Islands for discussion and communication, the groups of chairs were also conceived as “stations for reflection” not only for Ai Weiwei's 1001 Chinese tourists,

but also for the citizens of Kassel and all the visitors coming from all over the world in order to visit *Documenta*.

Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale* will stage a massive encounter between totally different cultures, each confronting the Other and the unknown, in a context that is both familiar and strange. If Ai Weiwei will introduce the Chinese to the exotic, fabled land of Kassel, he will also bring the feared Asian dragons into the context of a small European town. "Kassel is a place where people gather, live and disappear on their own paths once the visit is over," states Ai Weiwei, "I think that past and future, these two realities, which are both internal and external to each person, are all integrated in very different forms and possibilities that make each individual unique, with his or her own life, landscape, possibilities... To me it's just reality. It can be sad, it can be magical, it can be wonderful, it's a way for me to approach reality and to try and grab as much as possible. The whole West-East imagination or fear will be under the moon, across the street: they will meet. There is such a hype around China. Well, it is about 1/5 of the whole world's population. There are a lot of fantasies and concerns about this country. I think that now it's time that all these fantasies about life and art can meet."

By Nataline Colonnello

All the quotations by Ai Weiwei are excerpts of an interview with the artist held in his Beijing studio on April 3, 2007.



"Template" 2007

Wooden doors and windows from destroyed Ming and Qing Dynasty houses, wooden base

7.2 x 12 x 8.5 cm

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

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