

Ai Weiwei: According to What?

Ai Weiwei: According to What?, Art Gallery of Ontario,
Toronto, Ontario August 17 – October 17, 2013

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Ai Weiwei came to town. Or, more accurately, Ai Weiwei's art came to town, the artist himself is still under house arrest back home in China, owing to his activities as a dissident and critic of the government (which almost cost him his life several years ago when he was badly injured in an apparent police beating). Crowds were good at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) for *According to What?*, the only Canadian stop on this, the first major North American tour of his work, which also included an outdoor component installed in the wading pool at Nathan Philips Square right in front of Toronto City Hall.

Weiwei's art—and of particular concern here, his sculptural work—forces an up-front engagement with issues that are always boiling up around the larger, historical place of aesthetic things: that is, how can critically important contextual meaning

hang-on to, and continue to inform and shape, an aesthetic artefact as time passes and new cultural, social, political and aesthetic contexts arise around it? How can a sculptural object retain its originative meaning and place as contextualization continually shifts, completely changes, or even just erodes away? How can meaning cling and hold fast under such pressures?

Such questions began before even entering the set of AGO spaces given over to Weiwei's work. *Snake Ceiling* (2009) sculpturally introduces and sinuously points the way into the gallery areas (and was actually put in place long before the rest of the exhibition actually opened). Hanging suspended, as it does, from the fresh, institutional ceiling of the Frank Gehry redesign of the AGO, it's so very easy to look at this piece purely aesthetically, as a sculptural artefact well removed from larger contexts that may have given it any inceptional meaning. We're very good at doing such things, especially with

difficult and troubling subject matter, and institutional contexts like that of a major public art gallery lend themselves well to re-contextualizations of such a sort.

But Weiwei's work has absolutely everything to do with its originative context, as distantly displaced from its social, cultural and political inception as it may be here in downtown Toronto: *Snake Ceiling* insistently pulls us back from the neutrality of pure aesthetic regard and into the realm of meaning and consequence, even deep and abiding anguish. This sinuous beast curling back and forth along a hallway ceiling comprises hundreds of children's backpacks of one make and set of colours, but of various sizes, stitched together. And this mammoth sculptural creature, suspended over our head like some zoological sword of Damocles, ready to fall upon us given the right of set circumstances, denotes, indicates, reflects and carries a full weight of meaning that extends far beyond its aesthetic aura. It goes all the way back to May 12, 2008 and

all the way over to the Chinese province of Sichuan where an earthquake brought down poorly built schools upon the heads of the children that occupied them, killing over 5,000 of them, leaving their scattered backpacks as the evidentiary traces of their once having been, and authorities apparently scrambling to minimize the real extent of the death and destruction, and their own complicity in it. *Snake Ceiling*, then, insistently slithers its way into the political, unwelcomed by Chinese authorities, who wish to rid themselves of knowledge and responsibility—not to mention the artist who thinks it critically important that they do otherwise. Looking up, we may evade seeing such politics, but it is impossible not to see a remembrance of loss. Every backpack up there is filled with it.

Much of Weiwei's more recent work is about the casualties of politics, something we can too easily miss or purposely slip by so as to absorb ourselves in the far less troubling and



Ai WEIWEI, *Wenchuan Steel Rebar*, 2008-20012. Steel rebar, 6 x 12 m. Photo: courtesy the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.



Ai WEIWEI, *Wenchuan Steel Rebar* (installation view). Photo: courtesy the Art Gallery of Ontario.

→→
Ai WEIWEI, *Moon Chest*, 2008. 7 chests of huaili wood. 320 x 160 x 80 cm. Photo: courtesy the Art Gallery of Ontario.

upsetting realm of the aesthetic. But context must be invoked to do the work its full justice, and nowhere is this more evident than with *Wenchuan Steel Rebar* (2008-2012). Like pretty much all of WeiWei's work, it's not a formally complex piece: just forty tons of various lengths of rusty steel rebar—the stuff used to reinforce and strengthen concrete—laid out in a long, neat rectangular pile on a gallery floor. It's

quiet and really rather unshowy, just thousands of long steel rods lying across the floor all aligned in one direction. Walking along one side of the AGO-assembled version of the work, the sculpture's profile shows the rising and falling of layers of rebar as if some artefactual evocation of a line graph charting, say, the rising and falling prices of something, the lines of steel receding into the distance behind it.

But of course it's not: the resemblance is purely accidental, though in fact, cost is exactly what *Wenchuan Steel Rebar* actually interpretively addresses. Walking to the far side of the work, its true telling centre is acutely evident: down the centre of the piece, from one end to the other, runs a jagged disconnection of displacement, disruption and upheaval, a trenchant gap cleaving apart sections of rebar. Here is where context lives, where meaning, reference and unspeakable loss and anguish reside—in the gap, in a sculpturally representative tear in the fabric of things, standing in place of the unspeakably horrific tear the 2008 Sichuan province earthquake inflicted upon that small part of the planet, upon the hundreds of thousands of those who lived there, upon the thousands of children who died when the rebar-reinforced concrete of their schools failed.

Wenchuan Steel Rebar isn't merely *about* such horrific things. It's *of* it; this is the very stuff, the salvaged and straightened material taken right from the very sites of so much death and destruction, so much grief and mourning. Rebar is never supposed to see the light of day, but rather to lay hidden, strong and supportive, buried away within an enveloping concrete shell. Like the earthquake that tore apart Sichuan, WeiWei has made it manifest, exposing it and having it carry a political weight that Chinese authorities would really rather it not. Lying here as it does on an institutional floor in a country of vastly different social and political persuasions, it's a weight that is, alas, easily stepped around and

even ignored. But the idea of a terrible tear in the fabric of the world cannot be.

Not all of the work in *According to What?* is quite so heavily freighted. *Forever* (2003) sculpturally comprises forty-two bicycle frames cleverly rewrought as a singular circular form, titularly referencing the name of the leading Chinese bicycle manufacturer and meaningfully alluding to the increased disappearance of the vehicle as China transforms into a major world power in which ownership of an automobile has taken increased precedence. And there's *Map of China* (2008) and *China Log* (2005), the former a sculpture wrought from innumerable pieces of iron wood taken from dismantled temples and subjected to intensive traditional wood joinery so as to create a map of China when seen from above and an unusual, highly irregular and abstract object from all around the sides; the latter a long horizontal work made from similarly salvaged and joined temple wood through which a map of China appears in negative as the empty hollow that runs the interior length of the piece. Such works, as good as they are, are easily distanced from political dissidence, easily read in ways that elude more troublesome thinking and experiencing and can even persuasively be interpreted as overtly and proudly nationalistic, quite the opposite of what WeiWei intends.

Inevitably, of course, art history will have its scholarly way. Over time, the robust and pointedly social and political intensity of WeiWei's best work will itself eventually be drained away until all that's left is the purely aesthetic shell. Collectable and important, to be sure, but it will be rendered safe and of no threat of upsetting any proverbial applegart—political, social, what have you. What WeiWei once sculpturally said, what he pointed to and at, what he brought kicking and screaming to the light of day will be rendered the stuff of footnotes, academic and scholarly asides. Interesting tidbits, yes, but yesterday's news, yesterday's battles.

So maybe we should consider it fully now, while it's still troublesome and difficult—before it's too late. ←←

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Ai WEIWEI, *Snake Ceiling*, 2009. Backpacks. 40 x 900 cm. Photo: courtesy the Art Gallery of Ontario.