

AI WEIWEI

CUBES AND

TREES

THE HEONG GALLERY

In England in the last six years the work of Ai Weiwei has been exhibited at Tate Modern, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Blenheim Palace, the Royal Academy of Arts, and now the Heong Gallery at Downing College, Cambridge. Ai's acceptance by some of the most prominent cultural and educational institutions in the UK is in marked contrast to the situation in China. Five years ago, as a result of Ai's outspokenness on political and social issues, the Chinese authorities felt there was no alternative but to silence him. His eighty-one-day detainment in an unknown location in 2011 was one of the defining moments in his life, with repercussions that turned out to be the exact opposite of those intended by the anonymous officials who made the decision to punish him. Already widely admired within China by the many thousands of people who read his blog between 2006 and 2009, when it was shut down, he became an international celebrity once he disappeared from public view.¹

Exhibitions in museums and galleries have served Ai Weiwei very well. An exhibition in Cambridge, however, presents his work from a different perspective, in an environment that has nurtured philosophical, social, literary and scientific enquiry for over 800 years in surroundings of unparalleled beauty and architectural distinction. From Erasmus in the sixteenth century until today, creative minds such as John Milton, William Wilberforce, Charles Darwin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alan Turing and Stephen Hawking have made major contributions to our understanding of the world with this city as their backdrop.

Among prominent living artists, Ai is notable for the breadth of his interests, encompassing not only the production of works of art in many different media but also architecture, literature, political and social issues and, above all, human rights and freedom of speech. Born in 1957, Ai is the son of Ai Qing (1910–96), one of China's most prominent and beloved twentieth-century poets, whose ability to survive political persecution was to serve as an example to Ai when he became known as a political activist a decade or more ago. In interviews Ai has spoken of his love of poetry, although it was as a writer of prose that he first gained widespread recognition. The frequently incendiary posts on his blog, airing issues ranging from the disastrous state of contemporary architecture in China to official corruption, culminated in his impassioned commentary on the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan province in 2008, an event in which these issues were intertwined, leading to a major humanitarian disaster. Since moving to Berlin in 2015, the scope of Ai's social engagement has broadened to include the migrant and refugee crisis

currently engulfing the European Union, an involvement that attests to his singular refusal to separate his political convictions from his daily activities as an artist.

Exhibiting in such a diverse range of institutions and environments, Ai carefully tailors the content of his exhibitions. In the recently concluded *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* (2014–15), for example, he created a series of works including portraits made from plastic Lego bricks, kites and site-specific installations of porcelain flowers that refer not only to the history of the site as a federal penitentiary but also to the ‘many people in today’s world who have sacrificed their freedom for their ideology – who are forced to serve time for their beliefs’.² Ai devoted part of the exhibition to writers, musicians and political activists, explaining, ‘These people are freedom fighters, and they have lost their freedom because they are willing to fight for it’ (fig. 1).³ For the Heong Gallery at Downing College he has selected works that address other subjects, both formal and cultural, although there are certainly political implications in *Finger* (2014), the black-and-white wallpaper that covers the walls of the reception area, and in the video *On the Boat* (2016).

The exhibition occupies two main areas of the College campus and the Porters’ Lodge. The Heong Gallery houses four works from the one-metre-cube series, while eight of Ai’s *Trees* – a group of seven opposite the Chapel and a single *Tree* in First Court, the newly-created space between the Gallery and Battcock Lodge – are displayed outdoors. The visitor approaches the gallery from the reception area, which immediately sets alarm bells ringing as the *Finger* wallpaper (2014; see p. 1) uses as its basic motif an obscene gesture. Wallpaper became an unexpected but logical departure for Ai as it enabled him to integrate the political aspects of his work with his long-standing fascination with the effects achieved by the accumulation of closely related forms, most evident in the 100 million hand-painted sunflower seeds exhibited at Tate Modern in 2010. Departing from pleasing decorative designs or the Pop-influenced motifs used by Andy Warhol (1928–87) or Thomas Baryla (b. 1937) in their wallpapers, Ai turned to the extended finger gesture he began using in 1995



Fig. 1 Ai Weiwei, *Trace*, 2014. Plastic Lego bricks, dimensions variable. *@ Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* at Alcatraz Island, 2014–15.



in the photographs later known as *Study of Perspective* (1995–2011; see fig. 2). From a distance the wallpaper appears to be a muted abstract design but closer inspection reveals the basic unit to be a detached arm terminating in an extended digit, arranged in different combinations that are rather tantric in appearance. Other motifs used by Ai in his wallpapers include surveillance cameras and handcuffs (*Golden Age*, 2014) and reproductions of the 'IOUs' issued by Ai to the thousands of individuals who had made cash donations to him when he was accused of tax evasion (*I.O.U. Wallpaper*, 2011–13).

The deceptively calm video *On the Boat*, shown on the screen above the fireplace (pls 1–2), is one of the first works to have emerged from Ai's commitment to documenting the plight of the many thousands of refugees escaping political turmoil in Africa and the Middle East. Ai moved to his studio in Berlin as soon as his passport was returned to him in July 2015, and since then he has devoted much thought to the desperate situation faced by those leaving their homelands. Living in the cosmopolitan city of Berlin made it impossible for him to avoid this humanitarian crisis that must have brought back memories of his own years in exile as a child and teenager, and of many parallel situations in contemporary China. Deciding to investigate the situation at first hand, he began spending time on the Greek island of Lesbos, the first stop for many of the refugees travelling to Europe through Turkey. *On the Boat* documents a particularly poignant moment when, walking along a beach, Ai saw an empty inflatable boat drifting in the ocean. By stepping into it and making a video, Ai reflects on human loss and the thousands of individuals who, lacking control over their own lives, have disappeared without trace.

Possibly one of the longest videos ever made, *Beijing 2003* (2003; pl. 3) is an exhaustive presentation of a small section of the city where Ai was born, grew to artistic maturity and was later detained. Seen in the Porters' Lodge and in the city of Cambridge, it assumes an even greater resonance than it does when seen in a more anonymous gallery space. There is a marked contrast between Cambridge,

Fig. 2 Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective*, 1995–2011, Washington D.C. in 1995. Colour photograph.

which has grown organically around collegiate and religious buildings since the Middle Ages and is largely unchanged even today, and Beijing, in which historical circumstances, centralised planning and the recent phenomenon of unrestrained real estate development have deprived it of most of its ancient monuments and residential neighbourhoods.

Since the early 1980s, when Ai moved to New York, he has taken many thousands of photographs: 10,000 or so in the New York period (1983–93) and more than 40,000 in the following decade, when he was living in Beijing.⁴ When he started using a digital camera in 2003, the number of photographs taken annually increased dramatically. Video was the next step and over the following two years he made four videos that provide an unsurpassed amount of visual information on Beijing.⁵ ‘It’s not exactly documenting’, Ai commented in an interview. ‘It has that function, but it has no documentary purpose. It’s not being used as evidence or testimony for anything, but rather to materialise our physical life, its condition in the moment’.⁶

The concept behind the video was very simple. Between 18 October and 7 November 2003, Ai and a group of students he had been invited to teach travelled on a rented bus with a camera mounted in front to record every road within the Fourth Ring Road of Beijing, beginning and ending below the Dabeiyao highway interchange. The resulting video is daunting in length but mesmerising, its monotony providing the clearest possible evidence of Ai’s feelings about Beijing, the political and cultural capital of China for which he has no affection. He has said that ‘It shows how big, how impossible, how crazy this city is, or how meaningless at the same time, because our proportion, our sense of time, and also our visual contact with the city is really limited by where we are and which direction we go’.⁷ Having settled in Caochangdi, a village in the north-east of Beijing, Ai has noted that he seldom ventures into the centre of the city, not only because of the traffic and pollution that have worsened since he made the videos, but because it lacks any of the characteristics that make a city liveable and rewarding for its inhabitants.

Cubes

The four cubes with sides of one metre that occupy the main gallery represent another aspect of Ai’s multifaceted practice, his ongoing investigation of basic geometric forms that runs parallel with his career as an architect and designer. Ai was certainly familiar with the work of the minimalists from his time in New York but, in 2003, when asked if artists such as Richard Serra, Donald Judd and Carl Andre were important to him ‘in terms of the everyday materials they used and the way their practice raised issues concerning the status and meaning of the art

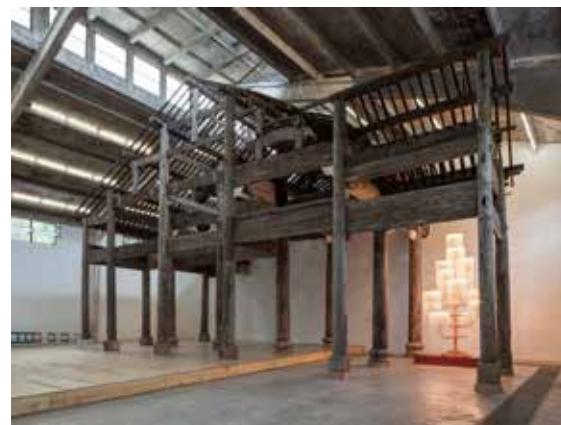


object', Ai replied somewhat enigmatically, 'they were very important to me. Their work was about naming, and how this changes our thinking. They also showed me what not to get involved in'.⁸ After returning to Beijing in 1993, Ai produced a highly diverse body of work that predominantly used pre-existing ancient materials, notably his painted vases and first pieces of modified furniture. However, it was only in 1999, with the construction of his studio-house in Caochangdi (fig. 3), his first venture into architecture, that an aesthetic that shares concerns with some aspects of minimalism (while also diverging from it) appears for the first time.

Ai Weiwei knew very little about architecture when he designed his Caochangdi studio-house and inspiration came from buildings which might appear to be at opposite ends of the architectural spectrum: the house that Ludwig Wittgenstein designed for his sister between 1926 and 1928 and the Chinese vernacular architecture that Ai saw every day.⁹ Built within one hundred days and left unadorned, this simple structure led to a brief but productive architectural career that came to an end in 2008, although Ai's passion for architecture continues to be evident in projects such as the dismantling and reassembling of a Ming dynasty ancestral hall between two galleries in Beijing in 2015 (fig. 4).¹⁰ Built at a time when the total makeover of Chinese

Fig 3. Ai Weiwei, Studio-house at Caochangdi, Beijing, 1999.

Fig. 4 Ai Weiwei, *Wang Family Ancestral Hall*, 2015. Over 1300 wooden building elements from the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), dimensions variable. Ai Weiwei at Galleria Continua and Tang Contemporary, Beijing, 2015.



cities, from low-rise and bicycle-friendly to high-rise and traffic-clogged, was still in its early stages, Ai's house offered an alternative model to Chinese architects and builders. 'Personally', he has said,

I take my inspiration from common places like villages or from the local, mostly poor people, or people who do not think about architecture [...] The simplicity, the classic proportions, the human proportions and the light are the basic material. It's easy to create a kind of space by using neighbouring volumes to give quality to the in-between areas.¹¹

Unlike the professional architects and builders who pile on pilasters, architraves and references to traditional architecture, or who attempt hybrid Chinese/Western styles, Ai has remarked that he does not want to follow a Chinese style and does not intend to include any 'obvious cultural characteristics'.¹² The simple volumetric forms and the concern for spatial relationships both within the individual buildings and between them that characterise Ai's buildings are also to be found in the important series of sculptures in which the cube becomes the bearer of meaning.

Ai's ongoing series of one-metre cubes began in 2006 with *Cubic Metre Tables* (fig. 5), a group of thirteen identical forms constructed from huali wood, the kind of wood used in the finest classical Chinese furniture. Simultaneously abstract forms and tables that could potentially be used, they differ from apparently related sculptures by Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt by being hand-made by craftsmen who followed traditional Chinese joinery techniques in which no nails were used. Without aping traditional Chinese forms and techniques, they embody millennia of Chinese ways of thinking about and utilising materials.

The same size as his *Cubic Metre Tables* but solid, *Ton of Tea* (2008; pl.5) is a compressed mass of Pu'er tea, a fermented and aged dark tea that is a speciality of Yunnan province in south-west China. Unlike many kinds of Chinese tea which



Fig. 5 Ai Weiwei, *Cubic Metre Tables*, 2006. Huali wood, thirteen pieces each, 100 × 100 × 100 cm.



are best consumed when they are fresh, Pu'er is valued more highly as it ages and matures. Speculation drove the price of Pu'er tea to unreasonably high levels in the middle of the last decade but, by the time Ai started buying it in large quantities and shaping it into cubes of different weight and into *Teahouses* (fig. 6) in 2009 and 2011, the price had dropped considerably. *Ton of Tea* is organic, still fermenting internally and has a strong aroma.¹³

Cube in Ebony (2009; pl. 6) has been meticulously carved with an all-over decorative motif that endows it with a precious quality far removed from the industrial aesthetic of the minimalists. Here the inspiration was a small wooden box with an elaborately carved surface which was owned by Ai's father Ai Qing and one of the few objects to have survived his long period of exile. Completely covering the six metre-square sides of the cube, the carving of Ai's work is overwhelming in its intricacy and extent. Although minimal in form, this cube is equally indebted to the decorative tendencies in Chinese joinery that reached a climax in the latter half of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Like so many of Ai's objects, it breaks all the rules while establishing a dialogue between current orthodoxies and traditional approaches to the decoration of surfaces.

The two cubes of 2014, *Treasure Box* and *Crystal Cube*, offer further variations on the relationship between form, material and volume. The former opens to reveal a complicated arrangement of horizontal and vertical divisions, while the latter is solid and transparent. *Treasure Box* (2014; pl. 8) synthesises many of Ai's interests, notably the work of French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), the collecting of antiquities and

Fig. 6 Ai Weiwei, *Tea House*, 2009. Compressed Pu'er tea, 180 × 120 × 180 cm. Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, on loan from Dieter and Si Rosenkranz.



the fine craftsmanship that survives in China even after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

Ai's interest in Duchamp became evident in his own work shortly after he arrived in New York in 1983 and is a continuing – although by now deeply internalised – presence. One of the inspirations for *Treasure Box* may well be Duchamp's *Box in a Valise* (1914–23), in which, acting as archivist, curator and fabricator, Duchamp assembled replicas of all his most famous works in an ingeniously designed container. Although not a great admirer of the arts and crafts of the Qing dynasty, Ai was also certainly aware of Chinese treasure boxes, which were particularly valued in the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1736–95). Noteworthy for the ingenuity of their design, these intricately designed and crafted containers (see fig. 7) generally had simple exteriors which, when opened, revealed multiple interlocking compartments, boxes within boxes and secret drawers. The treasure boxes belonging to the Qianlong Emperor contained miniature replicas of personal favourites from the imperial collections, but their contents could also include Western-imported curiosities such as clocks and binoculars, both highly fashionable at the time.¹⁴

Informed by this background, Ai made the surprising decision to make his own treasure box, uniting a Chinese tradition with his own one-metre-cube series. In Ai's work, the skilled craftsmen with whom he has worked for twenty years or more were presented with a different kind of challenge: not the creation of a perfectly crafted minimal form but a complicated structure with moving components, the surface of which is covered with illusionistic marquetry designs and irregular groupings of hexagonal openings through which one can glimpse interior shelves. Although Ai did not make *Treasure Box* to contain replicas of his own works, as was the case with Duchamp's *Box in a Valise*, or, like the Qianlong Emperor, to display works from his own collection of antiquities, he clearly relished the technical challenges these examples posed.

Fig. 7 Square treasure box with multiple treasures, Qing dynasty, Qianlong era (1736–95). The Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.

The visual and structural complexity of *Treasure Box* contrasts with the transparent mass of *Crystal Cube* (2014; pl. 7). Ai first used crystal as a material in *Chandelier* (2002; fig. 8), the work he submitted to the 2002 Guangzhou Triennial. In this work, thousands of small, faceted, crystalline forms assembled in the shape of a giant chandelier offered a pointed commentary on the excesses of contemporary, *nouveau riche* interior decoration. In contrast, Ai's series of crystal cubes present the material in solid blocks of unprecedented scale. Technically this is extremely challenging, with the liquid crystal being heated to 1300°C in a special mold. The cube then undergoes an extensive cooling period, during which time it can fall only a couple of degrees a day. Occasionally, it is necessary to reheat the outside of the cube in order to ensure that it does not cool down at a different rate from the inside.¹⁵ Ai and his assistants endured a long process of trial and error before a successful prototype was achieved.

Each version of *Crystal Cube* differs from the others. Some retain semi-opaque imprints of the frame that once held the molten glass during the cooling process, while others are virtually free of any surface markings or interior contrasts. The most remarkable feature of the crystal cubes is the way in which they create visual illusions and spatial distortions that change dramatically as they are viewed from different angles. Weighing approximately two-and-a-half tons, the solid cubes defy all expectations, seemingly half of the depth the viewer knows them to be when seen from certain angles and fracturing the continuity of objects seen through the crystal.



Fig. 8 Ai Weiwei, *Chandelier*, 2002. Glass crystals, lights, metal, scaffolding, 530 x 400 cm. Guangzhou Triennial, 2002.

Trees

In the late 1990s, Ai began using furniture, beams, pillars, doors and windows from dismantled buildings of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties that he valued for their historical and cultural associations. This wealth of material, utilised in many different ways, was part of the ongoing dialogue between past and present that still informs much of his *œuvre*. A major development in his use of wood occurred in the middle of the last decade when, on his frequent visits to Jingdezhen, the most important centre of porcelain production in China (he was developing his own considerable body of work in this medium), he discovered markets where parts of dead trees, roots, trunks and branches were available for sale. Often massive and hundreds of years old, these impressive natural specimens awakened Ai's acquisitive instinct and he acquired as many as he could.



Largely unmodified although frequently inverted, one hundred parts of trees were exhibited as *Rooted Upon* (2010; fig. 9) in Ai's important exhibition *So Sorry* at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, in 2009–10.¹⁶ Installed in one of the largest galleries, they were placed on *Soft Ground* (2009), a wool carpet replicating the appearance of 969 stone tiles on the floor of the gallery. The trees were an unexpected departure in his work, their massive, writhing forms having a strong expressionist feeling when positioned in a German context. The 'Forests' of Max Ernst come to mind.

As is the case with so many aspects of Ai's multifaceted *œuvre*, however, there are antecedents for this. His uninhibited appropriation of organic forms for use in a cultural context resonates with the traditional Chinese appreciation of scholars' rocks and old, gnarled trees and roots. In an exhibition devoted to furniture and objects created from such irregularly shaped pieces of wood at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, in 2004–06, the curators observed that Buddhists and Daoists had been drawn to these organic forms and understood them to convey man's essential

Fig. 9 Ai Weiwei, *Rooted Upon*, 2009. 100 pieces of tree trunks, 3600 × 1300 cm.



continuity with the natural world and the beauty of processes uninfluenced by man's control.¹⁷ Deprived of any vestige of nature worship, however, Ai's use of sections of trees in *Rooted Upon* and their subsequent use in the ongoing *Tree* series is consistent with his relationship to the material aspects of Chinese civilization – its architecture, furniture, carvings in stone, pottery and porcelain – evident in many of his works since the 1990s. They are all 'readymades', materials that he reinvigorates through means that include destruction, as in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), overpainting, as with the many iterations of *Coloured Vases* (2006–), and deconstructing andreassembling, as in the modified furniture works, *Fragments* (2005; fig. 10) and now *Tree*.

At first glance and seen from a distance, Ai's *Trees* (2009–10; pls 9–17) appear to be actual specimens of dead trees that have survived intact, but close inspection reveals many incongruities. Each tree consists of multiple parts, ranging in number from approximately twenty to over a hundred, but in the process of assembly no attempt is made to replicate the way in which trees actually grow. Some elements such as roots might be inverted and sections from different kinds of tree, evident from growth patterns, are joined together. Further evidence that the trees are fabricated is provided by the projecting ends of metal rods that are inserted for structural reasons. Ai has suggested the effect of an almost reparative reassembly which is not quite complete:

The trees are dead wood from the mountain ranges in Jiangxi. Those branches were struck by lightning or they simply got too old and had been left abandoned for decades. So I thought it would be nice to put it back together as one tree, but from different locations and belonging to different types of trees. We assembled them together to have all the details of a normal tree. At the same time, you're not comfortable, there's a strangeness there, an unfamiliar-ness. And it's just like trying to imagine what the tree was like.¹⁸

Fig. 10 Ai Weiwei, *Fragments*, 2005. Iron wood (tieli), chairs, parts of beams and pillars from dismantled temples of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 500 × 850 × 700 cm. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong.

Ai's trees have led a peripatetic existence since 2010, appearing singly and in groups in cities including Seoul, Berlin and London, both indoors and outdoors. On occasion they have been exhibited with Ai's white porcelain rocks, evoking memories of traditional Chinese gardens, while in the Annenberg Courtyard of Burlington House during Ai's exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2015 a marble armchair (based on Ai Qing's) offered an incongruous note. The most complex tree, consisting of 99 parts, was cast in iron and perhaps the most extravagant (fig. 11) was exhibited in Beijing in 2015.

From Burlington House the trees have moved to Downing College, and so they are transposed from an urban enclosure centred on a monument to Sir Joshua Reynolds to William Wilkins' grandly conceived neo-classical campus. Arranged in a circle between the College Chapel and an avenue lined with horse chestnut and lime trees, they seem to be both resilient and exposed, alien presences in a setting characterised by the classical repose of the architecture and a constantly changing natural environment. The 'unfamiliar-ness' of *Tree* that Ai Weiwei refers to is even more pronounced in this splendid setting.

Cubes and Trees

Ai Weiwei's *Cubes and Trees* bring into focus the relationship between two apparently unrelated aspects of his multi-faceted œuvre: the exploration of geometric forms that reflect his idiosyncratic relationship to minimalism and his use of forms from the natural world. Just as the cubes offer a complete transformation of the dominant characteristics of minimalism, the trees use natural forms in a way that subverts the fundamental principles of organic growth. In whatever medium he works, this up-ending of preconceived ideas is paramount, making this exhibition a perfect fit for the newly established Heong Gallery at Downing College, Cambridge.

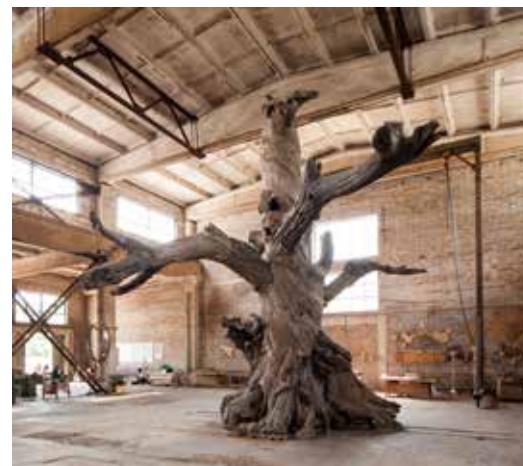


Fig. 11 Ai Weiwei, *Tree*, 2015. Tree sections and steel, 735 x 707 x 690 cm.

1. See Ai Weiwei and Lee Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews and Digital Rants* (Cambridge 2011).
2. Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Interview with Ai Weiwei', in David Spalding (ed.), *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, exh. cat. Alcatraz, Golden Gate National Park, San Francisco (24 September 2014–26 April 2015), p.148.
3. Ibid.
4. Ai Weiwei, Stephanie Tung and John Tancock, *Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983–1993* (Beijing 2010). A volume devoted to the photographs taken by Ai Weiwei in Beijing between 1993 and 2003, also by Ai, Tung and Tancock, is under preparation.
5. *Beijing* (2003), 150 hours; *Chang'an Boulevard* (2004), 10 hours, 13 minutes; *Beijing: The Second Ring* (2005), 1 hour, 6 minutes; *Beijing: The Third Ring* (2005), 1 hour, 50 minutes.
6. Adrian Blackwell, 'Ai Weiwei: Fragments, Voids, Sections, Rings. Interview with Ai Weiwei by Adrian Blackwell' (21 June 2006), Archinect online: <http://uk.archinect.com/features/article/47035/ai-weiwei-fragments-voids-sections-and-rings?ukredirect> (accessed May 2016).
7. Ibid.
8. 'Changing Perspective. Ai Weiwei with Charles Merewether', in *Ai Weiwei Works: Beijing 1993–2003* (Beijing 2003), p.26.
9. While still in the United States, Ai purchased a copy of *The Architecture of Ludwig Wittgenstein* by Bernhard Leitner originally published in 1973. 'I had one influence in architecture, if I can call him an influence. At that time I was in Wisconsin [...] and I went to a bookstore and I found a book called *The Wittgenstein House*. You know, the philosopher. He built a house for his sister, in Vienna. And so, because I like his writing, I was fascinated by the book, and the building was absolutely great. From the larger concept to the details – like door handles and heating elements – it was all designed by him, and he was so precise, and he controlled the architecture so clearly. I heard that, after he'd built it, he wanted to raise the building by a few centimetres, believing that the proportions were all slightly wrong. That to me is very interesting. That's what I think architecture is about'. Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei Speaks With Hans Ulrich Obrist* (London 2011), pp.53–54.
10. *Ai Weiwei*, Galleria Continua and Tang Contemporary Art Center, Beijing (6 June–6 December 2015).
11. Ai Weiwei, *Fake Design in the Village* (Berlin, 2007), pp.6–7.
12. Op. cit. (note 1), p.65.
13. *Tea House* (2009), built from hundreds of twenty-centimetre-square bricks of Pu'er tea, is on loan to the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. *Tea House* (2011), consisting of three units pressed from a single block, was exhibited in *Ai Weiwei: According to What?*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC (7 October 2012–24 February 2013).
14. See Wen C. Fong and James C.Y. Watt (eds), *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, exh. cat. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and other locations (19 March 1996–6 April 1997).
15. Information provided by Ai Weiwei studio, 15th June 2015.
16. *So Sorry* was Ai's first major exhibition with a strong political focus. Evident in his blog since 2006, his political engagement increased dramatically after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan province. Ai produced a large body of work in response to the findings of the 'citizens' investigation' into the causes of the devastation he organised in 2009–10. *Remembering*, consisting of 9,000 backpacks inspired by memories of children's belongings scattered by the force of the earthquake, was installed on the façade of the Haus der Kunst for the duration of his exhibition. *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (12 October 2009–17 January 2010).
17. *Carved by Nature: Untamed Traditions in Chinese Decorative Art*, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem (27 July 2004–13 August 2006).
18. Hans Werner Holzwarth (ed.), *Ai Weiwei* (Cologne 2014), p.448.

Ai Weiwei
Cubes and Trees

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Fig. 7 The Collection of The National Palace
Museum, Taipei, Taiwan
1–6, 8 Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
7 Private Collection
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pp.1, 68 *Finger* (2014). Wallpaper print
p.2 Cat with Heong Gallery model in Ai Weiwei's Beijing Studio, 2015
p.62 Ai Weiwei at Downing College, June 2016