

every
form of
art has a
political
dimension

to our readers...

We have witnessed a political agenda marked by consensus rather than conflict—a democracy more recognizable in stalemata than in action. Political subjectivity and difference has been stifled and “politics,” a set of practices and power relations that organize social order, has been relegated to the realm of mere management and administration. However, after the seemingly unchallenged triumph of neoliberalism, we find ourselves in the midst of global unrest and disillusionment. From Ferguson to Hong Kong, diffused systems of power and control that underpin the everyday have become glaringly obvious.

We prioritize “the political” over “politics.” For us “the political” (*le politique*) is inherently conflictual. It is the space where power is challenged and reordered. In this third volume of *ai*, we explore how architecture stands as a series of actions—how architecture itself acts politically. Architectural practice is a medium of dissent with the potential to occupy, resist, reject, topple, subvert, and criticize current hegemonic systems and ideologies. An alternative cannot exist

without an existing, opposing term, position, and possibility. As architects, we propose new forms and images, but also think about the tactics to achieve those ends. This volume is concerned with strategies that promote friction and provide space for the political.

Central to any type of resistance is the ability to share ideas. These ideas are embodied in the objects we produce and the discourse created by them. Regardless of the content, the political dimension is established through the act of circulation and the frictions produced by that movement. Once put out into the world by the artist or architect, produced meanings float, reverberate, collide, disturb, connect—becoming something “other” to the original intent. Ubiquitous connectivity amplifies the endless circulatory potential of ideas and consequently exaggerates the realm of the political. With this increased capacity, new audiences are produced beyond those in immediate proximity to the object. In this episode, we speak with Ai Weiwei about sharing’s political potential.

a status of life

Ai Weiwei in conversation with G. Recorded on March 13th, 2015

G: In a previous encounter with students from GSAPP you refused to refer to yourself as an architect. You instead declared yourself an activist. Your work clearly traverses between the space of the artist, activist, and architect. Could you describe how you operate and navigate between these three terms?

AW: I do not think that is correct. The question is actually how do I think about the roles of the artist, the architect, and the activist. First, I never separate those three things. There is almost no space for me to refuse being an architect. Even when I was doing architecture, I never thought of myself as solely an architect. Being an artist is a lifestyle and an attitude. Of course, you need certain skills to express yourself, and so do architects and activists. Architecture and art both require the ability of the activist. “Activist” is not just a political term or designation; it is a status of life. We should never forget that humans have always been in a constant struggle—to forget that is too naïve. If you look at the world today, there exists so much unbalance and many troublesome conditions. I think that the artist, the architect and the activist should never be separated.

G: So these roles are embodied in the everyday, they are lived and practiced?

AW: To be a good artist, or to make an important contribution to architecture, or if you really want to make sense as an activist, these three elements should always be there.

G: Architecture is the collective manifestation of society, it lasts as a physical history of the present. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek has said, quoting William Butler Yeats, “I have spread my dreams under your feet, tread softly because you tread on my dreams.” Žižek continues with a warning to architects: “when you are making your plans, tread softly because you tread on the dreams of the people who will live in and look at your buildings.”¹ Your work often deals with the physical representation of history. In particular, both the Serpentine Pavilion and “Straight” can be seen as archaeological studies, attempts to formalize an awareness of past events. Could you expand on architecture’s relationship to history?

AW: I think that all man-made objects or activities are related to who we are and where we come from. This is seen in our aesthetics or philosophies. A style, or a way of making, or even our training to make any kind of judgment, can never really be separate from our past. There are societies and human efforts that try to avoid looking at themselves, refusing to reflect on the past. It is especially true in my case because I live in a society that refuses to look back and to recognize its past. It is a responsibility for each generation to re-examine our past. The past never stays the same because it exists as a relative condition in relation to the current position. If we move our position, the past changes its shape.

G: In discussions about Jinhua Park you seem to retain a certain optimism that architecture can add social and cultural value, changing in some way the lives of those who use it. On the other hand, you have dismissed the Beijing National Stadium as a “pretend smile.”² What do you see has led to the success and failure of these two projects, despite being designed by some of the same people?

AW: My critique of the Bird’s Nest is not about the architecture, but of how the architecture has been used by the state power. The Herzog and de Meuron team and myself have worked on many projects in China. If it was not for the deadline of the Olympics, the stadium as we know it would

not exist. They would have changed it to a square stadium or one with a roof. There was a lot of criticism surrounding that project. If you want to be ambitious in architecture, to put forward a vision that is avant-garde, or one that has a new definition or meaning, it requires not only a lot of work, but also the recognition of the people and, especially at the beginning, those in power to make an agreement. It is never easy with projects at that scale. That is why so many fail. There are projects in which we put forth much more energy than the stadium and we loved very much that never became a reality and never will.

G: The conservator Adam Lowe has talked about the “careers of objects”—that once created, a physical artifact goes on to live an independent life. The National Stadium’s career seems to have deviated from, or is not operating in line with, the original intent of the project. Do you feel an obligation to the artifacts that you create to ensure that they fulfill or perform their intended purpose? Is there a way to change or shift the operations of an object back to the original intent?

AW: Architecture has two main characters that have a big impact on it: the first is the intention of the maker and the other is how it is received and used. Those two are often very separate, but one cannot replace the other.

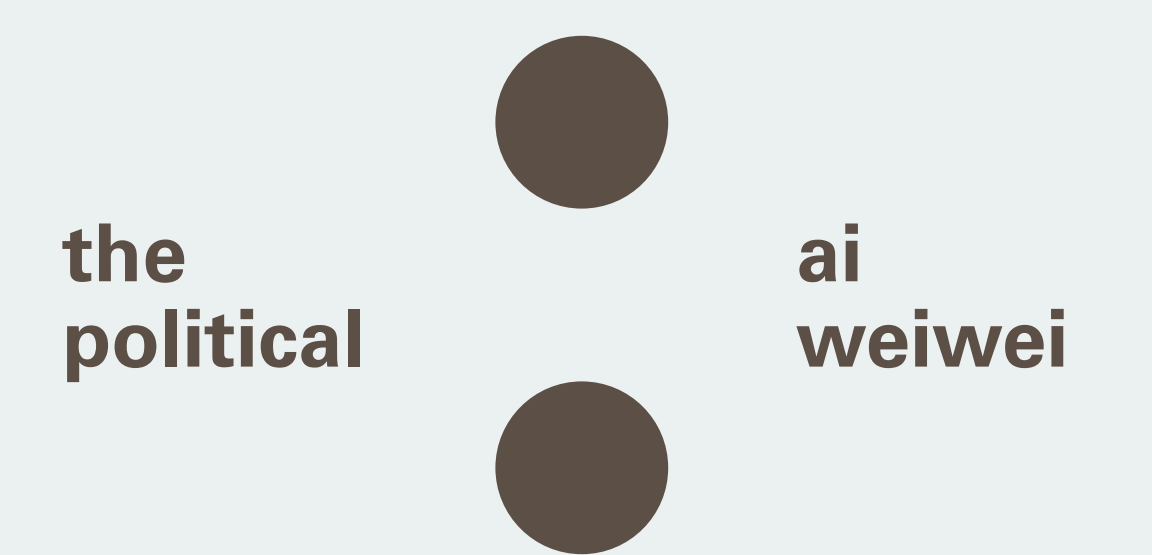
G: Chantal Mouffe has argued for the powerful role of art to help shape subjective identities, and by extension question the status of society: “One cannot make a distinction between political art and non-political art, because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense—and in that sense is political—or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it.”³ In order for an artwork to instigate a critique of society, however, it needs to be in the public eye. Does an artwork depend on an engaged audience in order to be political?

AW: I think she is correct. Any man-made object made with any kind of intention possesses a political character or dimension. Even if it is not totally done with a political intent, still culture cannot avoid the political character relating to it. Of course the word political has many levels and meanings. As long as an object is going to be used or shared by another person and interpreted by an audience, you can never avoid its political dimension. With architecture, what sponsors more than ninety percent of the work done is what you could consider outside power. The architect struggles to negotiate between that power and his or her own ideas and philosophies.

G: Your work often references concepts of Chinese identity, but is unable to be shown within China. How do you ensure that the work, its meanings, and its intent get received by the people in China, or by those that can identify with it?

AW: I don’t care about the so-called Chinese identity. It is like gravity. It is not necessary to think about gravity all the time as you are walking or running. It will always be there even if you don’t think about it. I think if you make something it will naturally show its own character.

G: Your current exhibition “@Large: Ai Weiwei” in the former federal prison Alcatraz, draws attention to international prisoners of conscience. Its clear that the exhibition site is carefully coordinated in relationship to a dialogue that might develop between the space and the objects; in everything from the determined way in which the artworks can be viewed to the historical significance of the buildings themselves. How do different exhibition sites inform the work you will show there? Has it



changed since you have recently been unable to visit any of your exhibitions?

AW: I think that space is not only physical but also mental. Space exists outside of us as a physical being but can be understood and analyzed by our minds. I don’t think that many artists focus on the wall their painting will be hanging on. I was most interested in making sure there was Wi-Fi access on Alcatraz Island so visitors could take images and share them with their friends. This is a very different understanding of space. That is also a very different understanding of self-expression. I think that different artists show what concerns them and that gives them an identity. An exhibition like at Alcatraz is not designed for museum-goers but for tourists and those interested in the topics the exhibition touches on. This is a very interesting condition, but it can also be very frustrating. You are trying to cope with a condition that many have never been under; I’ve never been on the island. Even though I was arrested for a short period of time, eighty-one days, it is hard for me to think about how these so-called criminals were being held together because I was kept in solitude. You always have to ask what is your interest in a project and what is the topic you want to talk about.

At Alcatraz we are talking about freedom of speech. We are talking about political prisoners that have lost their freedom because of their thoughts and their viewpoints. How do you get the people who visit the exhibition to share some feelings or sensitivities relating to those people who are in prison and have lost their freedom because they want others to be free? There is one project there called “Yours Truly” that involves the visitors writing and sending postcards to the prisoners. The postcards feature the flowers and birds of thirty nations that have jailed these prisoners of conscience. The addresses of these people are printed on the post cards. Of course, some of them can receive the postcards and some cannot. Already over fifty-thousand have been sent out. That means that people are sitting there carefully writing with passion, with courage, and with hope. This is very beautiful. I couldn’t think of a more powerful way to do a work related to this kind of desperate reality.

G: It is very powerful that the goal is to reach the mass audience, those who perhaps are not trained in the world of art or aware of the atrocities of global politics; through these installations you are creating a new public for these events mediated by the work itself. Social media has become a very powerful tool for you. We joke around in New York that we wake up every morning to twelve posts from the overnight Ai Weiwei show on Instagram. What potential do you see in this tool? How do you engage with it as a digital project with the potential to be almost everywhere?

AW: I came to the Internet without much prior knowledge; I could not even type or use a computer. I quickly fell in love with it. For me, it became a habit like eating candy. It is in my body to express myself through very small acts—just type a few words and send it out, take a photo and send it out. I think this communication is so beautiful. Humanity has struggled its whole history just for that. It’s a miracle! It actually happened! A young person in Iraq, or in Egypt, or in China, or the United States, can easily send out what is on their mind and what is happening in front of them. What are they worried about? What makes them happy? That was impossible. This technology, this possibility, will finally change our understanding of the world. It changes the language of self-expression and it changes our political scope. We can get out information much more quickly and we can immediately relate to another person.

This could have never happened in the time of Shakespeare or even in the time of Warhol. Warhol worked his whole life trying to create something similar to today. I feel sorry for him for being too early.

G: Which other artist/architect/activists working in China does the rest of the world need to be aware of?

AW: I think that you cannot tell someone to pay attention to someone. I think if it has any meaning and potential it will show itself. Great art has a way of introducing itself. The recognition comes from the message, not from anything else. You have to trust people’s judgment. You have to trust the masses. People always think that there is a trick, or there is some kind of strategy. There may be tricks and strategies but I hate those. I think people do not need to be recognized to still have an important and meaningful life. If you have been recognized that means you bear more responsibility. You have to be there when called upon and you need to contribute.

Front image: Original artwork by Jeff Pak, 2015

1. Slavoj Žižek. “Arquitectura y Placer.” Fundación Arquitectura y Sociedad. Pamplona, Spain. June 9th, 2010.

2. “Chinese architect slams Olympic ‘pretend smile.’” CNN. August 13, 2007. <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/08/13/china.olympics.reut/?iref=mpstoryview>

3. Chantal Mouffe with Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph, and Thomas Keenan. “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension.” *Grey Room 02*. Winter, 2001