



Ai Weiwei, 'Descending Light' (2007).

MARY BOONE GALLERY

Reluctant Return for a Beijing Provocateur

By ALEX PASTERNAK
BEIJING — It can often be hard to tell if the Beijing-based artist Ai Weiwei, who returns to New York this week to open a solo show at Mary Boone Gallery, is being cheeky or dead serious. In January, after having helped Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron design the stunning stadium for this summer's Olympic games, Mr. Ai lambasted the event in a post on his Web log. "An Olympics without freedom and against the will of the people will ... be nonsense because no totalitarian regime can pretend to be a democracy," the posting read. "It is a fake harmony and happiness." And these days, Mr. Ai will not visit the stadium. He said the completed project — which he claims was modeled after both Ming-dynasty pottery and a toilet bowl — has become a piece of state propaganda. "If it's possible, I will not be dragged to it," he said.

But Mr. Ai also exudes an exceeding generosity and gregariousness when hosting a visitor, one of the thousands who flock every year to his studio compound on the outskirts of Beijing. Like his work, which ranges happily from furniture to sprawling sculptures, from performance pieces to sober brick buildings, China's leading Renaissance man thrills in shattering definitions.

"It's about working within humanity, changing our mind's perception, imagining new ways to act," he said. In January, he was recognized for lifetime achieve-

ment at the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards, which said his work "transcended the category of contemporary art in China into the very heart of Chinese society."

Mr. Ai, 50, is thickset, wears a protruding beard, and speaks with a Zen ellipsis. He spent his childhood in a labor camp in Xinjiang, the western province where his father, the poet Ai Qing, was exiled by Mao. In 1981, after dropping out of the prestigious Beijing Film Academy and flirting with the city's avant-garde, Mr Ai came to America, speaking not a word of English. He spent time in Philadelphia and Berkeley but settled in Manhattan. Mr. Ai, then 24, found the art scene difficult to penetrate. "In the '80s, it was quite impossible for young people to be successful, to enter into that world." If the authorities in Beijing were shutting down exhibits, Mr. Ai said, New York's art world was shutting artists out.

Instead, he took odd jobs such as babysitting and carpentry, hosted exile intellectuals such as Tan Dun and Chen Kaige at his East Village apartment, and took classes at Parsons. He read Andy Warhol, studied Marcel Duchamp, and befriended Allen Ginsberg. "I spent most of my time on the street, in galleries and bookstores," he said.

In 1993, Mr. Ai returned to tend to his ailing father and helped develop Beijing's East Village experimental art district, which artists had named in honor of his Manhattan exile. Two years later, Mr.

Ai gained notoriety for a performance piece in which he dropped a 1,000-year-old Han dynasty urn. Evocative of the vandalism led by Mao's Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, the work was a statement about the uses and abuses of culture in China, and an attempt to rethink common notions of value.

In recent years, his projects have grown in scale. Last year at Documenta, the celebrated contemporary art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, Mr. Ai arrived with a group of 1,000 Chinese tourists who had never before left the country. He expressed delight when an accompanying sculpture, "Template," a massive assemblage of doors salvaged from destroyed Ming and Qing dynasty houses, collapsed in a storm. "I'm interested in how one event or one gesture can create a new condition, and give you another perspective," he said.

Today, Mr. Ai detests the market obsessions and the "inner circle" art world that has spread from SoHo to Beijing's art districts. He said he will attend his New York opening only because he will be in town anyway to install the artwork. "I really don't enjoy these events," he said. "It's a scene that uses a language that only speaks to itself, or to the people in the know."

The works he has brought to New York are hushed but typical in their defiance. In "Grapes" (2007), Mr. Ai has fused together stools from the Qing dynasty, when furniture-making was a high

art, as a way to rephrase their functionality. Similarly, "Traveling Light" turns a column from a Ming dynasty temple into a totem-like lantern. "Descending Light," a massive chandelier lined with 60,000 ruby-like crystals, looks like it has fallen to the floor. In one sense, the work literally sheds light on power as it collapses on itself.

One of many ongoing motifs in his work, light carries a certain political weight. "In general people are blind. The government, and even people who are insightful and intelligent, we are all blind," he said. In the context of a society in constant flux, a country where he sees "great potential," his work "is a way to not to be so scared. To feel you are making something happen within unknown conditions."

Yet Mr. Ai acknowledges he cannot stay away from the scenes he questions. Though last year he announced he would "quit" architecture, his latest project involves the design of an entirely new town in Inner Mongolia. Commissioned by a local businessman, the lavish plan calls for 100 villas each by a different international architect, including New York's Toshiko Mori and SHoP Architects. "I'm critical but at the same time, I want to be positive, to get things done and to set up an example," he said. "In years past, I couldn't do much because society was so closed off. To do things was dangerous. To me, now, it's more important to really make something happen."