



AI WEIWEI - SUNFLOWER SEEDS

May 22 to July 17, 2011 | Open 24 hours a day

Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp

Place d'armes | Quai de l'indépendance CH-1096 Cully

After much initial uncertainty, the modified version of Ai Weiwei's installation "Sunflower Seeds" – featuring a different type of seed to that of the installation at Tate Modern – has arrived in good time at the Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp and the exhibition can take place exactly as the artist had planned. The exhibition is dedicated to his fearless campaign for human rights and freedom of expression. We all hope and pray that the Chinese government will see reason and set Weiwei free.

The artist Ai Weiwei has in recent years succeeded in doing what is perhaps unique in the world of art: he creates artworks that are explicitly understandable as political statements but without at the same time misusing them as means of illustration. Despite his uncommon courage, his unwavering determination and his clear objectives, Weiwei's oeuvre is incredibly beautiful, poetical and human. His "Sunflower Seeds" mark the zenith of his artistic achievement so far.

Ai Weiwei is – like Joseph Beuys – one of the few artists to be resolutely concerned with bringing about a change in society's way of thinking and behaving through their artistic ideas and actions – and with the aid of the latest marketing strategies and the commercial instruments of the art market. It is all the more astonishing, therefore, that his installation "Sunflower Seeds" (basically a direct allusion to Mao's demagogic cult of personality) should captivate us by its sheer beauty and poetry. Indeed, it is an installation that through its simplicity and visual appeal not only establishes a direct rapport with the viewer but also generates a dynamic that tips things the opposite way: the responsible persons at the Tate Modern were suddenly – and quite literally – afraid of the dust stirred up by the trampling of visitors' feet – afraid of the "health risks" that might arise when the sunflower seeds are rubbed together, when visitors interact too directly with the work.

Sunflower seeds served in Mao's countless political portraits as a symbol of "warmth and human compassion", of his godlike power to render the world fertile, and it is precisely this traditional, life-giving Chinese symbol that in Weiwei's installation has become an invisible menace, both by reason of its stone-hard form and through its all too immediate approachability. What is meant here is not just Communism and the Dictatorship of the People's Democracy but rather all aspects that are bound up with the idea of the masses. The installation "Sunflower Seeds" consists of a hundred million seeds hand-crafted in porcelain and hand-painted by 1,600 skilled workers in keeping with ancient Chinese tradition. While this form of mass production afforded the workers involved great pleasure and for a time enabled them to earn their living, the result, once installed in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, suddenly represented an invisible menace.

But how shall we interpret this huge installation once it has metamorphosed into a very tiny one – once it is on show at the Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp, the smallest museum in the world, an institution of almost private character? This reversal of proportions does not in fact change anything at all. Indeed, every individual gesture, no matter how small, can bring forth forces of unimagined magnitude.

Until now it was almost only writers and filmmakers that carried their artistic commitment all the way through to its ultimate political consequences. Ai Weiwei is one of the first visual artists to give us the courage to admit that art is not just about basking in social "fame and glory" under the auspices of the Establishment but about bearing full responsibility – and this goes for all of us – whenever socio-political and socio-cultural wrongs and failings cannot go unchallenged.

Stefan Banz