

“High Dachstein”: Ai Weiwei’s answers to the questions of the public

Is any notice also being taken of this project in China?

Almost not. My work is almost completely forbidden to be reported in any public media. Especially this project has a so-called sensitive information background, which means anything related to Sichuan earthquake could be sensitive.

What would happen in China if someone was to bring a rock from Europe and set it up on the Minya Konka, for example, the highest mountain in Sichuan?

Well I wouldn’t speak for China because there is no such thing as China, but as an individual or as a Chinese person I would love to see it.

Aside from politics: Does the population in China react in a different way to art than in Europe?

The people’s reaction to art has come from their knowledge of contemporary culture and in China contemporary culture is not fully developed because of the political situation and so the reaction must be different.

Is this rock transportation also to be seen as criticism of the to some extent absurd global transportation of goods, e.g. of Chinese garlic to Europe?

Well, we see a lot of things made in China which causes different kinds of arguments and debates, but I can imagine a nature piece from China could also cause a debate.

Why should we commemorate the victims of an earthquake in China here in Austria?

This is not the point. The point is to commemorate anybody and any human life lost at any place in this global situation.

Did you have any relationship whatsoever with Austria and Styria before this project?

I had a show in Graz. Also I had a teaching experience in Salzburg.

Are any other projects planned for the future in Styria?

Nothing is clear.

Exports are vital for the Chinese economy. The project can also be seen as an ironic statement. Are you concerned that this rock export will be assessed with a negative note in China?

Well there is this tradition of labour, because what China has exported is not high technology but rather labour intensive products which made the first profit for China. Still China

hasn't had a chance to provide better products. Labour has become much less expensive so maybe to export the rock will be a strategy, a new strategy.

Why should people ask exactly 100 questions? Why not 99 or 101?
Also okay.

How should people who climb the Dachstein in a year's time perceive this rock?
They should forget about the rock.

The issue is being discussed of the great extent to which the project is in the context of the earthquake in Sichuan. What is your answer to this?

Art is working on its own expense and the Sichuan earthquake was a huge earthquake which resulted in about a hundred thousand people who lost their lives. And the earthquake describes the dramatic condition of how this nation is built and also how the structures function or do not function. So I'm very deeply involved with the investigation of the model of a social change, a civil movement and at the same time with how an individual can anticipate and express its own feelings through the internet and how it can create a new form of expression to reach out. And when the Dachstein project came I thought it would be a great idea to pick up a rock which had rolled down from the mountain top to the ground and to relocate it to another mountain range.

How long have you and your team worked on the "High Dachstein" project?
It has been for about a year.

You use Twitter very intensively. Will the "High Dachstein" also be in Twitter?
Yes, we announced that this project is going to happen and also that there are a lot of arguments. So later I hope we can post our questions and answers on Twitter.

On the one hand Twitter, and logistically complex projects on the other such as this rock journey. Which is closer to your heart?

This one, the rock. The stone to be placed on the Dachstein Mountain - it's one of my favorite projects.

Are you angry when people do not like this project? What is your comment on people who do not care for the project?

I will not be happy if everybody likes it and I will not be angry if nobody likes it. It's not about liking it or not liking it. It's about accepting the fact that a certain amount of volume and weight are moved from one part of the earth to another for a very strange reason. That's a fact.

Would you have suggested this project in the first place if you had known that a lot of people have rejected it from the start?

I thought it was a very normal project but once I heard that there is resistance I became much more excited about the project. It always gains more meaning when people start to be against it.

What would you like to see as enduring in the "High Dachstein" project?

I see it as a test of this type of artistic action.

Did you expect that your simple idea would cause so much controversy?

Are you used to reactions of this kind?

Actually controversy is always caused by a simple idea. Because of the simplicity people are hooked and it's very amusing.

You are known as a concept artist. Concept art is defined among other points, in that it is intended to work against sensationalism, or that it has arisen from minimalism. Carrying a 4 ton rock up onto the peak of the Dachstein is anything other than a minimalist plan. Are the controversies or the discussions surrounding your installation something you foresaw, or perhaps even wished for as a part of your happening?

Yes, I realised that the only reason for the project – the so called public art – to exist is to involve public opinions and discussions. The more it can involve the more successful our work can be - that's my measurement. And it doesn't matter what kind of art it is, it's really about public involvement.

Can the project trigger any positive effect whatsoever among people who are against it?

I think any project only becomes alive when it creates great questions. The most important question is about our value judgement, about the why and why not. I think this project has this quality.

Against the background of this widespread lack of understanding on the part of many people and of the tensions and aggressions that have developed in the context of this project in wide circles of the population – I would like to make every effort to explain the central messages of this installation to the interested and open-minded circles of the population. Perhaps you can explain to me your personal interpretation of the project? I would particularly value any points on possible energetic, numinous and sacred dimensions.

I think the project itself has the physical elements in it: the dissent, the location, the opinion against it, the event related to it, the past and the future possibility. No artist can really describe a project even by very precise decision; the project has its own life which is beyond the artist's interpretation.

Is it essential that we understand this project?

Yes, it's essential that you understand it but the understanding is not essentially the same.

Some people regard this rock as an illegal immigrant. Do you understand that?

At a certain point we are all illegal under some circumstances.

When are you coming to the Dachstein to see the rock in place at its point of destination?

If I am lucky enough I'll have that chance.

Respect for nature and for life in harmony with nature is deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy. Isn't this project the complete reverse of this?

This project is a test of our understanding of our nature.

The name of your studio is "Fake". Isn't this project a big fake too, or at least a single PR gag?

In general human culture is fake towards nature conditions or believes. The whole system is based on human interests.

What does the transfer of this rock to the peak of the Dachstein symbolise for you?

It symbolises that you have to live on a certain level of height and that means that you have to work with gravity and altitude.

What is your personal relationship to the High Dachstein?

My personal relationship to the place is to imagine the stone to be placed on the top of the mountain.

It seems to us that your project has succeeded in addressing and setting this in rock for the levels of mind and spirit. Do you believe that your installation at the Thorstein-Dachstein can make an important contribution to this development direction which we intend for the region?

I think the object itself is foreign and at the same time it's exactly the same or not different from the others. So that means that art is a so called spiritual condition and this happens when circumstances change.

Why should it be permitted to destroy a natural monument for the sake of art? 4 tons are no mere small intervention, but will significantly change the appearance of the Dachstein peak!

Our nature is about to change anyways and the 4 tons will not make a significant contribution to that.

During the course of the discussion a suggestion was made for a change, such as placing the rock elsewhere for example. Have you thought over an idea of this kind yourself?

The project is dedicated to that particular point. If it moves to another place it loses its meaning.

Would it be acceptable for you if a plebiscite was to decide by vote whether your project should be implemented or not?

The public vote on anything for me is fine but it has nothing to do with the project.

Your project has attracted a great deal more attention than any of the others in the festival – as a result of your international reputation, but also as a result of the conflicts that it has caused. What do you have to say to the artists and the projects that must be implemented with much less attention? What is your attitude to their disappointment?

I get disappointed when less attention makes them disappointed. I think our project has its own life and dignity that should not be measured by public opinion or interests.

Intensive criticism was sparked in Copenhagen when the “Little Mermaid” was removed, and in Styria criticism is being raised that you are bringing a rock here. Is this an intended provocation? Or has it all simply happened by chance?

It simply happened by chance and our existence is also simply by chance.

The rock from Sichuan is completely anonymous, the Mermaid from Copenhagen is world famous. What do the two projects have to do with each other, how do they differ?

One has been very welcomed, one has been totally refused, and they both have a weight.

You have a reputation as a critic of official China, but nevertheless you still work with the regime. Why do you do so?

I don't understand what “work with the regime” means, you know. I live in China; I criticize mainly the ideology under the system. Of course I have to work with any possibility which allows me to make a change or a difference. You know I am not hired by the regime. You know in the cases that I work with the government, in projects that are related to the government, I am hired by foreign companies. You know we won the competition when we talk about the Mermaid Exchange or the bird's nest stadium for the Olympics. So it needs a little bit of an explanation, because I was never hired by the government to do the work.

If you were to bring something from Austria to China what would it be?

Air.

A great gulf of understanding frequently opens up between modern art and its potential audience. Could this also have something to do with the fact that the artists develop further step-by-step personally and artistically? While the artist is in process of moving somewhere from step 15 to step 16 an open-minded and interested observer is still only encountering a project developed at step 15 in this development phase and may perhaps even here be greatly challenged by what is seen. What bridges could be built between modern art and the people who have the opportunity to see it in order to make a greater, more sensitive and deeper understanding possible?

Art is rather to raise a question about human behaviour. It does not deliver a message to the public. It raises questions that art itself may never be able to answer. So it's about our consciousness and our reflection or our intelligence. So you cannot see art as a perfect product but rather as a continuity of an effort made in history which is about the struggle of our comprehension and the struggle of our self-consciousness.

Is the rock nature or art – or is that simply a question of timing?

The rock is not a rock when it is art, and nature can be part of art and art can be part of nature which has no clear definition.

What factor within a culture needs to change in order to make people of different cultural backgrounds see more of the chances and enrichment when meeting than borders and fear? Can the arts contribute to more peace, understanding and fulfilment among people? I think art always brings out of the consciousness what does not directly reflect the struggle for survival.

Sometimes it reflects what one needs for the struggle, but most of the time it's about our inner mental conditions. So only by consciously announcing those feelings we can define ourselves or identify ourselves.

Do you believe that the import of an Austrian rock to China would have resulted in a similar wave of protests?

I think it's completely different. I don't think that Chinese people would care and also in general I think that Eastern people have much more flexibility and acceptance of different opinions.

Does a rock that has crashed down into a valley as the result of an earthquake have a negative aura, which may be transferred to the Dachstein?

I think the rock rolling down to a valley is the result of the shake and the gravity and once it's been transported and lifted up to the mountain in Austria it becomes a rock of our intention, the stone of our intention.

This rock has already failed to hold its place on a mountain. How can we be sure that it will stay in place up on the Dachstein?

I think the will of the Austrian people will have a magic force on that.

How can a rock be a work of art when it has not been worked by an artist?

The artist has to go so far to locate that art and to move it that far to put it somewhere; there is no difference to Van Gogh's stroke.

Why must this rock remain at the peak forever?

The art is not going to remain forever, don't worry about it.

Why wasn't a smaller rock sent? That would have saved money.

In the universe it is already very small it couldn't be smaller than that. As for money, we have lots of money, I know, in different ways. It's not a property of art.

Is stone a dead material, or is it in some way alive?

It's so much alive that it cannot be erased from so many people's minds.

Have you considered in the course of this project the significance of stone in Western culture, as for example in the myth of Sisyphus?

This stone associates with all our understandings about a stone; it carries all of the past.

How can you justify the waste of energy and the CO2 that will be released as a result of this project?

I think that the people's judgment on carbon dioxide and the energy used is really because of the human crisis and that nature doesn't really care about it. It's only the human press that cares about this. When we talk about nature pollution or crisis - actually it's a human crisis - the nature doesn't care.

Do you have a favourite mountain?

Once the stone gets on the top of this mountain the mountain will become my favourite mountain.

Couldn't you carry out this project on any other mountain?

I would never think about it.

How do you deal with the fact that regionale10 has been brought into serious difficulties, because you and your project have turned so many people against the festival to which it is in fact dedicated?

It's beyond my imagination what happened and at the same time I very much think this work has its own point which is to bring up the consciousness.

Are we allowed to laugh at your project?

You can laugh as much as possible. I will accept all the laughs.

Do you believe that you are improving the world with your work?

Not really. I think I am always learning from my work and also my work often is not created by me but by the people who perceive it.

What is the significance for you of the fact that the rock is not actually recognisable?

A rock has its own weight and volume. Recognisable or not is only talking about whether it is evident visually or whether it can be memorised and identified in our memory. An unrecognisable act is still an act.

Do you intend to educate the people of Styria?

No, by no means. So far I have been learning from them.

Is art a substitute for religion?

Somehow it played a role of religion by anti-religion? But maybe I cannot see that.

Does the water at the place of origin know where it is to flow?

I can't answer for the water.