

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT, AND THE FOUNDATION FOR AN ARTIST WHEN THEY EXPRESS THEMSELVES. A4 ORIGINATES FROM AN ORDINARY WHITE PAPER SHEET, A SURFACE UPON WHICH ANY CONCRETE CONTENT MAY APPEAR, AND WHICH HOLDS INFINITE IMAGINATIVE POTENTIAL.

DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC IN CHINA, MANY YOUNG PEOPLE, UNABLE TO VOICE WHAT THEY WANTED TO SAY, HELD UP BLANK SHEETS OF WHITE PAPER IN PROTEST. EVEN THIS GESTURE, IN A SOCIETY LIKE CHINA, WAS NOT TOLERATED. JUST LIKE ANY OTHER FORM OF PROTEST, EVEN A WHITE PAPER PIECE WAS DEEMED UNACCEPTABLE.

THERE'S A POLITICAL JOKE FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION. IN MOSCOW'S RED SQUARE, A MAN STANDS HOLDING A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER. A POLICEMAN APPROACHES HIM AND SAYS, "DON'T YOU KNOW I ALREADY KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY?" - AND PROCEEDS TO ARREST HIM.

THIS JOKE IS DEEPLY MEANINGFUL. FOR AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES, THE THREAT LIES NOT ONLY IN THE VISIBLE FORM OF PROTEST, BUT IN THE THINKING BEHIND IT AND THE VERY IDEA OF FREE EXPRESSION. THIS DESIRE FOR EXPRESSION CAN BE MORE POWERFUL THAN ANY REGIME OR MILITARY FORCE, BECAUSE IT IS PART OF THE PEOPLE'S WILL.

AS AN INSTALLATION, A4 COMPRISES TWO ELEMENTS: WHITE PAPER AND WOODEN BOOKSHELF STRUCTURES. THE OVER 200,000 SHEETS OF WHITE PAPER USED HERE WERE PRODUCED IN PORTUGAL. IN EARLY 2025, I VISITED A PORTUGUESE FACTORY THAT PROCESSES DISCARDED CLOTHING ON AN INDUSTRIAL SCALE, A RESPONSE TO THE TENS OF BILLIONS OF GARMENTS THAT ARE THROWN AWAY EACH YEAR DUE TO OVERPRODUCTION AND OVER CONSUMPTION. ONCE WORN CLOSE TO THE BODY, THESE DISCARDED GARMENTS WERE SHREDDED AND PULPED TO CREATE THE BRIGHT WHITE PAPER NESTED WITHIN THE BOOKSHELVES AND STILL CARRYING TRACES OF INDIVIDUAL LIVES AND THOUGHTS.

CUT TO A4 SIZE, THE UNIVERSALLY STANDARDISED FORMAT FOUND IN OFFICES AND HOMES WORLDWIDE, THE SHEETS TRANSFORM FROM A SINGLE UNIT INTO A VAST MULTIPLICITY. TOGETHER THEY BECOME A MASS OF POSSIBILITY. TO ME, THE A4 SHEET REPRESENTS THE MOST FITTING, POETIC, AND IMAGINATIVE PRESENCE FOR THIS BOOKSTORE IN PORTUGAL.

THE SECOND ELEMENT OF THE INSTALLATION COMPRISES THE BOOKSHELVES THEMSELVES, CONSTRUCTED FROM FIVE DIFFERENT HARDWOODS. THEIR DIVERSITY

IS INTENTIONAL AND AFFIRMATIVE. NATURE MANIFESTS ITSELF IN MANY WAYS AND THE VARIETY OF MATERIAL PAYS RESPECT TO THE DIVERSITY OF OPINIONS HUMANKIND CONJURES.

THE SALVAGED HARDWOODS USED - TEAK, BLACK CHERRY, BEECH, BLACK WALNUT, AND ROSEWOOD - EXTEND THE ANCIENT TRADITION OF CHINESE CARPENTRY AND JOINERY. I HAVE LONG WORKED WITH WOOD, OFTEN SUBVERTING THE FUNCTION OF HISTORICAL FURNITURE IN WORKS THAT REFLECT UPON MATERIAL MEMORY AND CULTURAL LOSS. HERE, THE WOODS LINK PAST AND PRESENT AND FORM THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, PIECED TOGETHER THROUGH STRUCTURE AND BALANCE. THE SHELVES STAND UPRIGHT WITHOUT NAILS OR GLUE, RELYING INSTEAD ON THE INTEGRITY OF EACH COMPONENT AND THE COOPERATION OF CAREFULLY JOINED ANGLES. AT LIVRARIA LELLO, THE BOOKSHELVES AFFIRM THEIR FUNCTION AS ARCHITECTURAL STRUCTURES AND PLATFORMS FOR SUPPRESSED VOICES.

AI WEIWEI