



Royal Academy of Arts
Exhibition in Focus

RA

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Ai Weiwei

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Dr Alison Bracker

For the Learning Department
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Ai Weiwei

Main Galleries

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COVER Cat. 18 He Xie, 2011 (detail)

RA Royal
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'An artwork unable to make people feel uncomfortable or to feel different is not one worth creating. This is the difference between the artist and the fool!'

Ai Weiwei, 'Architecture and Space', blog posted 13 January 2006

Introduction

For seven months between September 2014 and April 2015, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei occupied Alcatraz, one of North America's most infamous penitentiaries, via artworks designed to provoke our perception of freedom and imprisonment. These two themes have affected and galvanised the artist throughout his life, underpinning both his work and his extensive presence on social media. Indeed, the full title of that exhibition – *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* – encapsulated the significance to Ai of freedom, incarceration and unrestricted communication – subjects that today still feature strongly in his work. First, the '@' symbol highlighted the artist's own impassioned blog and Twitter activities since 2006, despite surveillance and repeated interference by Chinese authorities. Second, the subtitle – *Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* – underscored the idea that the exhibition commented on the nature of confinement and its relationship to liberty, thereby advancing what the artist has described as his 'continual process in self-expression'. Finally, the words '*@Large*' remind us that Ai himself could not be physically present in Alcatraz – from where no prisoner has ever escaped alive – because he was and still is, at the time of this writing, detained, dispossessed of his passport, thousands of miles away in Beijing. Throughout the period of the exhibition, the absent artist therefore embodied both escapee and prisoner, a man simultaneously at large from Alcatraz penitentiary yet confined within China.

Although the Chinese authorities have constricted Ai's ability to travel, both *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* and now the remarkable *Ai Weiwei* exhibition at the Royal Academy, confirm that his creativity and drive remain unfettered. Despite being kept within the bounds of his homeland, the artist has nevertheless envisioned and produced several new works for the impressive interior spaces and the Annenberg Courtyard of Burlington House, London. The Royal Academy's survey of Ai's work begins in 1993, the year he returned to China after twelve years in the United States. Yet, despite its 22-year time frame and diverse media and formats, *Ai Weiwei's* installations, sculptures, works on paper, and videos consistently attest to, and in many cases actualise, an unwavering commitment to creative freedom.

Most importantly, they reveal how Ai consistently employs carefully chosen materials – from earthquake damaged steel rebars to rubble from his destroyed Shanghai studio; from *pu'er* tea to the wood from dismantled Qing dynasty temples – to probe the interrelationship between power, human rights, freedom of expression and cultural history in China.

**'What single thing would
improve the quality of
your life?'**

**'The freedom to express
myself.'**

Ai Weiwei to *The Guardian*,
23 November 2012

Designed by Isambard Thomas, London Printed by Tradewinds Ltd

Exile

Almost from birth, Ai Weiwei's life has fluctuated between constraint at the hands of government and the ability to exercise personal liberty. Born in Beijing in 1957 to Gao Ying, a writer, and Ai Qing, a famous poet who himself was once jailed, Ai Weiwei was aged one when he was sent with his parents into forced exile. According to Ai Weiwei, his father was 'a very good artist' who had studied painting in Paris. But shortly after returning to Shanghai in 1932, the anti-communist Nationalist government deemed Ai Qing a leftist and jailed him for his opposition to the government's leader, Chiang Kai-shek. Unable to paint while incarcerated, he began to write poetry, which visiting friends smuggled out of prison and had published. By the time of his release three years later, claims his son, Ai Qing was 'the most famous poet in the whole of China'.

Ai Qing officially joined the Communist Party of China in 1941, and became close to the revolutionary who founded The People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong (1893–1976). But despite his genuine belief in Mao's teachings, the Communist Party denounced Ai Qing as a rightist during China's anti-intellectual campaign of 1957. Accused of being anti-revolutionary, anti-Communist Party and anti-people, the government forbade him to write, and sent him and his family into exile in 1958.

The family remained in exile for twenty years, first near the North Korean border, then in Xinjiang province. Ai Qing, once the country's preeminent literary intellectual, could no longer publish his poetry. He was sentenced to hard labour, and forced to clean the village's fifteen communal toilets daily for several years during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76), a socio-political movement spearheaded by Mao and embraced by the country's youth, who sought to rid China of its traditional customs and culture in favour of Mao's own teachings. The young Ai Weiwei, living with his family in a hole in the ground covered by brushwood, learned at an early age to make furniture, bricks and clothes. Recalling his childhood, the artist has declared that the 'living conditions were extremely harsh, and education was almost non-existent.' However, growing up during the Cultural Revolution meant learning the socialist and communist writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883), Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), and Mao. Also, his father introduced him to European culture of the past, for although when he was exiled Ai Qing had to burn all of the hardcover books and museum catalogues he had collected throughout his life, he retained one book: a large French encyclopaedia. His son remembers, 'Every day he took notes from that book. He wrote Roman history [...] he talked about art, the Impressionists. He loved Rodin and Renoir, and he often talked about modern poetry,' thereby giving Ai Weiwei his only exposure to art and literature until adulthood.

Beijing and New York

Upon Chairman Mao's death in 1976, the Ai family gained permission to return to Beijing, whereupon Ai Qing was rehabilitated and regained his honour. Two years later, Weiwei entered Beijing Film Academy, where he studied animation, and in 1979 became one of the twelve original members of The Stars, a troupe founded by two factory workers, Ma Desheng and Huang Rui. The group derived their name from the concept of *ziwo* ('myself' or 'ego'), re-introducing to Chinese art the idea of self-expression, in contrast to Mao's dictate that art should serve the masses. 'Every artist is a star,' asserted Ma Desheng. 'We called our group "The Stars" in order to emphasise our individuality. This was directed at the drab

uniformity of the Cultural Revolution.' Unable to show their work officially within the China Art Gallery, The Stars held an exhibition at the end of September 1979 on the railings outside the building, which the police promptly closed down and declared illegal (fig. 1). Two days later, on the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, they organised a march for individual human rights, demanding democracy and artistic freedom, which resulted in permission to display their art for ten days in Beijing later that year. The following summer, The Stars finally gained official recognition and held

an exhibition inside the China Art Gallery, which in two weeks attracted nearly 200,000 visitors. But, in the face of political pressure and sharp criticism, the group disbanded in 1983, by which time Ai Weiwei had already been living in the United States for two years, searching abroad for the artistic freedom that his homeland denied him.

Cat. 10 Ai attended universities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Berkeley, California, to improve his English before moving to New York during the Christmas of 1982. He entered Parsons The New School for Design, where he studied under the Irish-born artist Sean Scully (b. 1945), but left after six months. His love for Manhattan, however, took hold immediately: 'Before I landed, it's about nine o'clock in the evening, and I saw all of New York start lighting up [...] I thought, "This is the place I will die for."' Ai remained in New York for eleven years, where he took over 10,000 photographs of the city and immersed himself in contemporary art, particularly the oeuvres of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968),

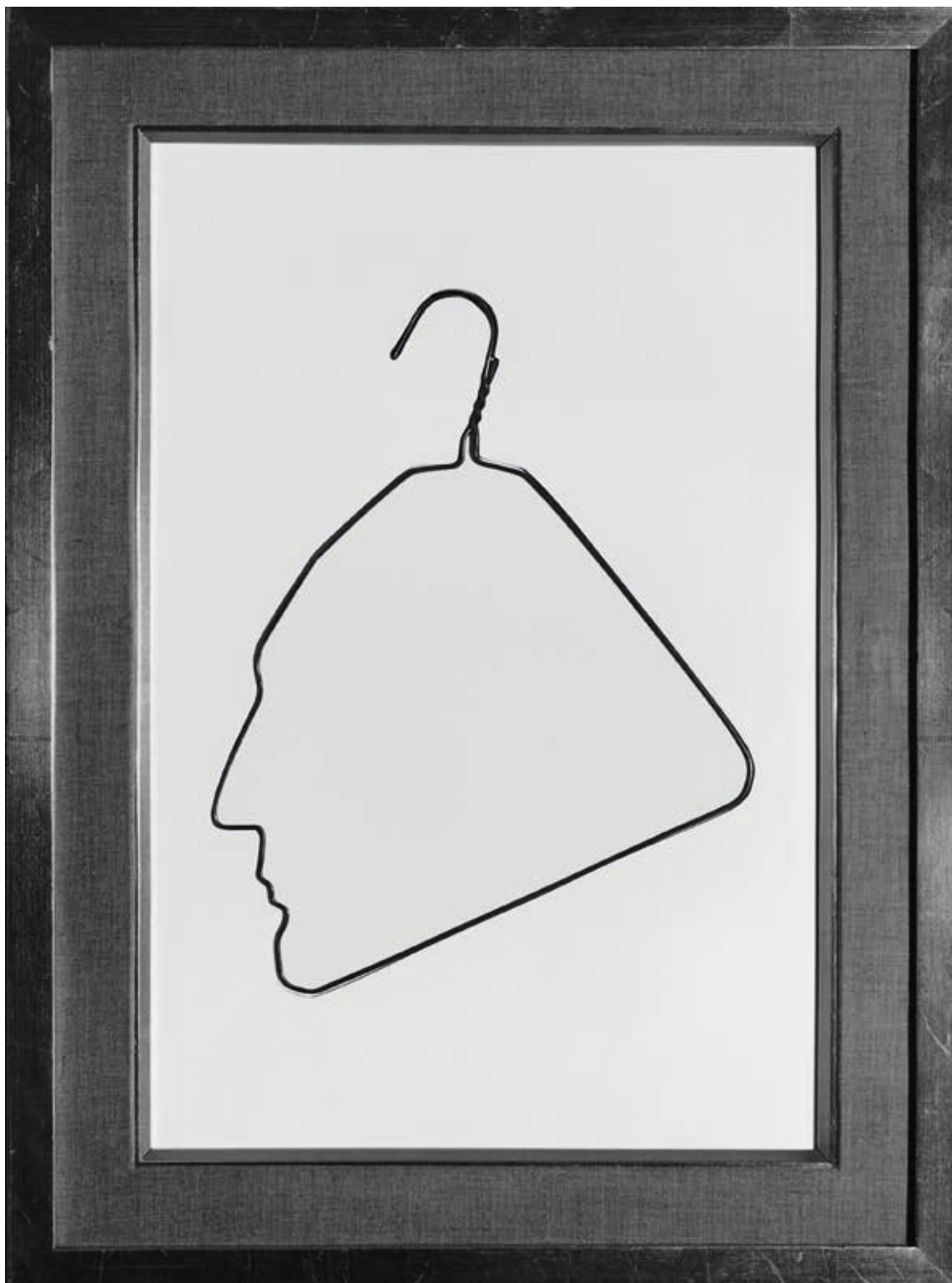
'I left [China] telling my mother that I would return only when I was more famous than Picasso!'

Ai Weiwei, 2006



Fig. 1
The first Stars exhibition displayed on the railings outside the China Art Gallery, Beijing, 27 September 1979

Photograph by Li Xiaobin
Collection Li Xiaobin



Cat. 10

Hanging Man, 1985

Metal clothes hanger with frame, 66 x 50 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei

'I think Duchamp is the most, if not the only, influential figure in my so-called art practice.'

Ai Weiwei to Tim Marlow, 2015

'I hate ceramics [...] but I do it. I think if you hate something too much, you have to do it. You have to use that.'

Ai Weiwei to Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2009

Jasper Johns (b. 1930) and, especially, Andy Warhol (1928–1987), whose book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* was the first he purchased in New York City. Yet it was Duchamp rather than Warhol who inspired Ai's most renowned work of his New York period, and one that signalled the artist's predilection for appropriating and redefining the connotations of seemingly ordinary objects: *Hanging Man* (photographed in 1983), a profile portrait of Marcel Duchamp created from a metal coat hanger and originally filled with real sunflower seeds, a favoured snack during the Cultural Revolution that also represented Mao Zedong's radiance at the height of his power.

Return to Beijing

In 1988, Ai held his first solo show in New York, 'Old Shoes, Safe Sex' at Art Waves/Ethan Cohen, after which he claims he stopped producing work for a while. The American poet Allen Ginsberg, whom he had befriended in New York and who was an old acquaintance of Ai's father, warned him that the art world would never accept a Chinese artist. But it was news from China that his father was ill, rather than any creative inactivity in New York, that prompted him to return to Beijing in 1993. In the years that followed, Ai produced three highly influential books that combined and disseminated the western influences he had acquired: *Black Cover Book* (1994), *White Cover Book* (1995) and *Grey Cover Book* (1997). The books included artworks, essays and interviews with western contemporary artists such as Duchamp, Warhol, Jeff Koons (b. 1955), Barbara Kruger (b. 1945) and Jenny Holzer (b. 1950). Despite lacking a formal distribution system, 3000 copies of each book sold out, indicating an active underground network of artistic interest in China and laying the foundation for a new wave of contemporary Chinese art.

Cat. 20 Significantly, the *White Cover Book* also included three photographs of what may be Ai's most provocative performance: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. On his return to Beijing, the artist became absorbed in his country's cultural heritage, especially Chinese art from the Neolithic period (10,000–2,000 BCE) to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). He visited antique markets daily, and bought and sold various artefacts that incidentally provided him with what Marcel Duchamp called 'readymades' – mass-produced utilitarian objects re-presented as art. But whereas Duchamp's readymades had little or no cultural value until he elevated them to the status of art objects, Ai's readymades included 2,000-year-old urns from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that already had intrinsic cultural value, as well as commercial value, costing the artist the equivalent of a few thousand dollars each. Thus, even before the artist turned his hand to them, the urns already conveyed Chinese heritage, financial value and dynastic power.



The three photographs that comprise *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* depict Ai Weiwei at his mother's house confronting the camera – and the viewer – straight on. In all three images, he retains the same neutral expression and stance, his gaze never wavering from ours. The first photograph shows him barely touching the tilted rare urn, as if already letting go of it. In the second image, Ai's hands are splayed, and the urn is on its downward trajectory, intact but only seconds from impact. The final photograph shows Ai in exactly the same position as in the previous image, his hands still splayed, but with a now-shattered urn at his feet.

With this one act, the artist simultaneously challenged tradition, heritage and the urn's implicit values; questioned the nature of cultural and financial worth; evoked the wreckage of historic buildings and antiques wrought by the Cultural Revolution; and transformed a precious object into a new form of artwork. Antiquities traders in China and abroad expressed horror, deeming Ai's performance an act of desecration. But for Ai, who recalled that 'General Mao used to tell us that we can only build a new world if we destroy the old one',

Cat.20
Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995

Triptych of black-and-white prints, each 199.9 × 180 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei

'You call it being destroyed. I'm not like the Taliban; their hatred destroys things. I think I change the form; it's just a different way to interpret the form.'

Ai Weiwei to Tim Marlow, 2015

dropping the urn heralded what has become his steadfast inquisition into the relationships between Chinese history and its society today, and between power and destruction.

Ai's *Coloured Vases*, 2015, (Cat. 22) are Neolithic urns that the artist intentionally defaces and transforms by irreversibly painting over them. Do you consider Ai's treatment of the urns to be an act of vandalism or a critique of the vandalism that occurred during the Cultural Revolution, as some critics have suggested? Why?

Chinese culture regards these antique urns as status symbols. Do you think Ai's interventions detract from or enhance their cultural value? How so?

In 2012, the owner of one of Ai's *Coca-Cola Vases* (similar to Cat. 23) controversially dropped it for a triptych that mimicked *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. Is there a difference between Ai's act and the collector's act? Explain your response.

Beijing and Biennales

In 1996, Weiwei lost his father, Ai Qing, 'the major influence on my life'. Certainly, both men are jointly renowned for their crusade for self-expression, advocacy of individual rights, social criticism through their work and concern for the lives of the Chinese people. For the remainder of the decade, Ai threw himself into combining 'my New York experience with the Chinese conditions, its history, and my understanding of it all'. He began making furniture; deepened his knowledge of Chinese artefacts of the previous five thousand years and the craftsmanship that produced them; and designed and built his own house and studio in Beijing, despite never having studied architecture. Moreover, he actively championed contemporary Chinese art that exposed the social and political state of the country. In 1998, he co-founded, designed and built the China Art Archives and Warehouse, which promoted and documented the development of experimental art in the country. And not only was he one of twenty Chinese artists featured in the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, but he also co-curated *F**k Off*, China's most notorious and groundbreaking exhibition of the past 25 years.

*F**k Off* (or 'Uncooperative Attitude' when written in Chinese) deliberately invoked the sentiment of its English meaning. It opened in 2000 at Shanghai's Eastlink Gallery at the same time as the Third Shanghai Biennale, presenting itself as an anti-Biennale. Ai and his co-curator Feng Boyi selected 46 artists to participate in the often-shocking exhibition, which emphasised artistic free expression and featured some performance and installation works composed of animal and human body parts. Ai's own contributions included works from his *Study of Perspective* series of 1995 to 1996 – photographs of him giving the middle finger to monuments emanating power, such as the White House and Tiananmen Square – and *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. The exhibition affirmed the singularity and oppositional nature of its artists in contrast to both government-approved Chinese art and Western art, with Ai declaring, 'We had to say something as individual artists to the outside world, and what we said was "F**k off"'. Although the exhibition's more sensational aspects provoked critical condemnation and led to its premature closing by order of the Shanghai police, many young Chinese artists today still acknowledge its impact and significance.

Furniture

Cat. 9 In addition to his photographic works, Ai introduced within *F**k Off* objects from a new furniture series that had developed from his expanding interest in Chinese history and material culture. He progressed the series between 1997 and 2002, buying pillars and beams from dismantled Qing dynasty (1644–1911) temples to use as Duchampian readymades. The work he considers to be the most important of this period, *Table and Pillar*, 2002,

'I work according to my conscience. I say what I mean.'

Ai Qing, 1983

Cat. 9

Table and Pillar, 2002

Table and pillar from dismantled temple of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), 460 × 90 × 90 cm

London, Tate. Purchased with fund provided by the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee, 2008
Image courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei

'You know an old temple was beautiful and beautifully built. We could once all believe and hope in it. But once it has been destroyed, it's nothing. It becomes another artist's material to build something completely contradictory to what it was before.'

Ai Weiwei to Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2009

appropriately takes centre stage in its Royal Academy gallery. Ai bought its component pieces – originally from a southern China temple – from a furniture dealer at a high price, as the wood was so valuable it was sold by weight. Yet its significance to the artist derives not from its monetary value, but from the insight it offered him into his country's past, as well as the technical challenge its reconstruction presented. Ai's assistants employed the same techniques in realising the work as did their Qing dynasty predecessors. After stripping back the original table, they painstakingly reassembled it using no nails or adhesives, calling attention to China's history of craftsmanship as well as to the structure and material of the work itself: a scratched wooden table into which a 4.6-metre cylindrical wooden pillar, partially painted red, is embedded, soaring vertically towards the ceiling. As Ai himself has noted, he and his assistants expended a tremendous amount of effort in creating what is now a 'useless' object divested of its original meanings and context, but which nevertheless alludes to recent

government drives towards a highly industrialised and modernised China.

Why do you think it was so important to Ai Weiwei to use Qing dynasty techniques to reconstruct the table?

Ai Weiwei's *Table and Pillar* comments on the modernisation of China. What attitude is Ai expressing with this work?

How does the use of antique materials affect one's reading of Ai's furniture? Would your response to *Table and Pillar* be different if he had used ordinary wood from an unknown source? How so?



The Cubic Metre

Unsurprisingly, the attention to materials, simplicity of design and emphasis on craftsmanship that Ai Weiwei displayed in his furniture series also manifested themselves in his architectural projects. Inspired by a book written by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) about the Vienna house he built for his sister in 1928, Ai undertook his first architectural project in 1999, his home and studio in Caochangdi, Chaoyang District, Beijing. Although his only practical construction experience was as a child in exile, building his living quarters and digging clay to make bricks, he has become an award-winning architect. His Caochangdi complex received critical acclaim, triggering further projects and propelling the artist into setting up an architectural firm, *FAKE Design*, in 2003.

Ai practised architecture alongside his art until 2008, when he famously collaborated with the architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron to design Beijing's Olympic Stadium, also known as the Bird's Nest. The artist brought his political and social sensibilities to the project, explaining, 'the essential point is that it needs to not only be a permanent part of the city, but also give people the impression of freedom and openness in terms of its function and feeling. The first thing I pursued when designing the stadium was a sense of equity and fairness.' But he soon became disenchanted with the stadium, which he felt China's ruling party used 'to advertise its glory to the world' when Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics in 2008. He ceased designing buildings that same year.

Cat. 31 Ai's architectural activities nevertheless informed the scale, composition and dramatic effect of his series of cubes, which highlight the universal architectural measurement of one metre. *Ton of Tea*, 2008, is one ton of

Cat. 31

Ton of Tea, 2008

One ton of compressed tea,
100 × 100 × 100 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei



Fig. 2

Jean-Etienne Liotard

Still-life: Tea Set, c.1770–83

Oil on canvas mounted on
board, 37.5 × 51.4 cm

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los
Angeles, inv. 84.PA.57
Photo The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los
Angeles



compressed *pu'er* tea from China's Yunnan prefecture, which has been aged using traditional methods. Its block format simulates the long-established means by which tea is preserved and transported, yet also echoes the Minimalist contemporary steel and glass cubes of the American artists Donald Judd (1928–1994) and Robert Morris (b. 1931) respectively. Like those artworks, the exaggerated scale and scent of *Ton of Tea* make the viewer aware of the work's surface and of their own body in relation to the object. But unlike them, its organic quality and evocation of the domestic sphere call attention to China's long history of exporting tea, and arguably to its global reach through manufacturing and export today.

Ton of Tea also invokes tea's material status as a luxury item in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, an aspect that the Swiss artist Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702–1789) accentuates in his *Still-life: Tea Set*, c.1770–83, (fig. 2).

Collecting Chinese porcelain and drinking tea were the fashion of the upper classes of Europe, particularly in the early eighteenth century, though the middle classes had also adopted tea drinking by the time Liotard painted this still life. His image conveys wealth and perhaps exoticism through the delicate Chinese porcelain, the tea leaves presumably kept within the lidded vase, and the brewed tea that remains in one of the six cups. In contrast to Ai's self-contained *Ton of Tea*, the upset teacups and saucer in *Still-life: Tea Set* hint at a narrative, suggesting that we have entered the scene at the end of an unusually boisterous tea party. Both works, however, hint at commercial value, for just as the monetary value of the tea in *Ton of Tea* is assessable today (and was once greater

than the price of the artwork itself), so too would viewers of Liotard's painting have been aware of the cost of the tea and china depicted, and flinched at seeing such expensive items treated so thoughtlessly.

Besides the use of the one-metre measurement, what architectural qualities do you perceive within *Ton of Tea*?

Blogging and Tweeting

In the autumn of 2005, Ai Weiwei added another strand to his already extensive creative output when he accepted an invitation from sina.com, a Chinese Internet company, to start a blog. His first post appeared on 19 November 2005 with the assertion, 'If to express oneself one needs a reason, let me say that to express oneself is the reason.' He began blogging in earnest in 2006, posting thousands of photos and contributing to it daily. Ai's blog attracted over 100,000 people each day until the Chinese authorities shut it down on 28 May 2009. By that time,

over a million people had visited the website, prompting the artist to claim that it had given him greater public exposure than any exhibition.

Though prevented from writing his blog, Ai remains prolific on social media, at one time spending, by his own admission, over eight hours a day on Twitter. (He recently said that he now restricts himself to three hours a day.) The artist considers social media to be part of his artistic practice, likening individual-to-individual communication via Twitter with creative self-expression, and declaring, 'As an artist, you have an obligation to let people know what is on your mind and why you are doing this.' Significantly, the 140-character limit on Twitter becomes up to 140 words in Chinese, allowing Ai to tweet elaborate messages to his mostly Chinese audience and therefore resume a blog of sorts.

The Sichuan Earthquake

Ai took to exceptionally purposeful and powerful blogging, and later tweeting, after the devastating Sichuan earthquake on 12 May 2008, which measured 8.0 on the Richter scale, left over 90,000 people dead or missing and rendered another 11 million people homeless. Upon discovering that the collapse of twenty shoddily constructed schools caused the death of many schoolchildren, Ai clamoured for the government to admit that corruption had enabled builders to ignore safety codes when erecting the schools, and to publish the names and the tally of the children who perished. His pleas were routinely met with silence. He relates, 'On my blog I kept asking the same questions: Who is dead? How many? What are the costs? Where are the bodies? Nobody ever answered.'

Dismayed yet spurred into action by the government's refusal to release information to the public, as well as by his belief that 'the worst tragedy is disrespect for life', Ai visited the earthquake site and took photographs (Cat. 11). He also created the Citizens' Investigation project in December 2008, seeking to identify the names of the schoolchildren killed in the earthquake. He used his blog to enlist the public's help by encouraging individual and community responsibility,

'I have one regret: I feel sorry that I can't write well. That's the skill I value the most. I think that, if I could write well, I'd give up my art for writing. For me, it's the most beautiful and effective way to illustrate my thinking.'

Ai Weiwei to Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2009

'On this day, beauty has perished. Have you not noticed the absence of so many laughing voices?'

Ai Weiwei, 'Silent Holiday', blog posted 1 June 2008

Cat. 13
Straight, 2008–12
Steel reinforcing bars,
1200 × 600 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei

as in this post published on 20 March 2009: 'People interested in the Citizens' Investigation, please leave your contact information [...] Your actions create your world! Two hundred civil volunteers responded to Ai's call, going door-to-door to speak to parents in the region. The artist posted on his blog whatever information they uncovered, and ultimately compiled a list of 5,192 names of children (Cat. 14). 'This investigation will be remembered for generations as the first civil rights activity in China. So, to me, that is art. It directly affects people's feelings and their living conditions, their freedom and how they look at the world,' he has declared.

Although the Chinese government eventually released a list of the dead, Ai's political engagement and investigative success came at a high price. Not only were his volunteers arrested by local police, but the authorities also permanently shut down the artist's blog, and installed the first of several security cameras opposite the front door of his Beijing home and studio. Furthermore, on 12 August 2009, police broke into his Chengdu hotel room at 3 a.m. (he had been in Chengdu to attend the trial of civil rights activist Tan Zuoren) and beat him so badly that a month later, after intense and frequent headaches, he was rushed to hospital in Munich with a cerebral haemorrhage. He recorded and disseminated evidence of both the beating and his hospitalisation online.

Cat. 13 Ai also documented the substandard quality of the collapsed schools by diligently collecting and utilising their steel rebars in *Straight*, 2008–2012, a 200-tonne installation that implicitly memorialises the students lost in the earthquake. The artist employed craftsmen to heat and then straighten each piece of quake-twisted steel, manually restoring them to their pre-disaster condition. Viewers could be forgiven for believing that nothing had ever happened to the rebars, were it not for Ai's inclusion of an apparent ground fissure in the installation's design and the artwork's noticeable resemblance to the Richter scale. Indeed, *Straight*'s power derives in large part from the interplay between its restored pre-quake surface and its underlying dedication to those who died in Sichuan.



Some writers interpret *Straight* as a critique on how communities act as if nothing had happened following a natural disaster. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Ai Weiwei draws an analogy between communicating via social media and communicating via art. Do you think the two are comparable? Discuss the similarities and differences between the two modes of communication.

Why do you think it was important to Ai to record the name of each child who perished in the 2008 earthquake? What do individual names represent to society?

Shanghai

Approximately two months before the Sichuan earthquake, the city government of Shanghai approached Ai with an invitation to build a studio in the nearby agricultural area of Jiading as part of a new cultural district. Although he initially demurred, the artist changed his mind and designed a building with an undulating roofline and a central courtyard. But by the time the project was realised in 2010, Ai's relationship with the authorities had soured. He had published his criticism of the Beijing Olympics in such international publications as *The Guardian*; campaigned vociferously for the rights of the families of earthquake victims, as well as those affected by the tainted infant formula that caused the deaths of six children and illness in over 300,000 during the summer of 2008; and suffered a beating by the Chengdu police. The Shanghai authorities suddenly notified him in August 2010 that he had failed to apply for the proper building permits and that his studio would be demolished. They razed it on 11 January 2011, yet paid Ai more in compensation than it had cost him to build.

Cat. 19 *Souvenir from Shanghai*, 2012, attests to Ai's belief that the 'building served its purpose. It doesn't have to stay any longer after it was viewed. This is all part of the architectural process – to destroy something, to vanish [...] The moment it is built, it is already successful.' Although the authorities cleared the rubble and stored it in a warehouse so that the artist could not create an artwork from it, Ai thwarted them by collecting some of the concrete and brick from the ground, and using it – together with a Qing dynasty rosewood bed frame – to construct *Souvenir from Shanghai*. His orderly arrangement of the brick and stone rubble once again evinces the artist's respect for all of his materials, and the creative value he gives them.

Ai Weiwei further commemorated the studio's existence by tweeting an invitation to the public to join him for a feast of river crabs. A 21 October 2010 tweet announced, 'On 7 November, the Ai Weiwei Studio will have a river-crab feast for its demolition,' followed by the studio's address in Malu, Jiading District. But on 5 November, he tweeted the following message:

Cat. 19

Souvenir from Shanghai, 2012

Concrete and brick rubble from the artist's destroyed Shanghai studio, set in a wooden frame, 380 × 170 × 260 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei

The Beijing State Security and Chaoyang State Security have come to declare the decision of their superiors: Ai Weiwei, immediately until 12:00 on the 7th, is under house arrest. He may not leave his residence. Outside the door of Caochangdi 258 [Ai's studio] the police are standing guard. Please take care of the Twitter friends of the demolition of Ai Weiwei's studio in Malu Jiading, Shanghai, and the grass mud horses who have come to the river-crab feast. Accept my greatest apologies.

While Ai's house arrest prevented him from attending his own party, approximately 800 guests enjoyed stewed beef, pork and asparagus, fresh bread, white rice, and 10,000 local river crabs. Even from afar, the artist managed to have the ceremony broadcast internationally in near real-time, rendering those who attended or watched the river-crab feast witnesses to the studio's brief existence.





Cat. 18

He Xie, 2011
Porcelain crabs,
3,000 pieces,
each 5 × 25 × 10 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei



Fig. 3

Rirkrit Tiravanija
 Untitled 1992/1995
 (free/still)
 New York, Museum of
 Modern Art (MoMA)
 Refrigerator, table, chairs,
 wood, drywall, food and
 other materials, dimensions
 variable

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eli Wallach (by
 exchange). Acc. n.: 225.2011
 (IN2176.40)
 © 2015. Digital image, The Museum of
 Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

He reinforced the feast's significance, and transformed its ephemerality into something more permanent, by having artisans create highly realistic porcelain crabs for *He Xie*, 2011, an installation with a subversive edge to its title.

Cat.18 '*He Xie*' means 'river crab', but is a homonym with the Chinese word for 'harmonious', a key concept in the Communist Party of China's slogan, 'The realisation of a harmonious society'. Because of the slogan's implicit warning against dissent, the word has come to denote censorship within Chinese society, particularly on the Internet. Ai's river-crab party, its representation in porcelain and *Souvenir from Shanghai* itself therefore stand in defiance of governmental attempts to quash individual freedom of expression.

Ai's river-crab feast, especially when considering his original plan to host it, recalls the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's (b. 1961) landmark art piece *Pad Thai*, 1990, (fig. 3) in which the artist prepared and served exhibition visitors this traditional Thai dish for free. Like Ai Weiwei, Rirkrit prioritises social interaction over the need to create an everlasting monument or object. As with the feast celebrated in *He Xie*, communication and sociability between the artist and each visitor formed the essence of *Pad Thai*; the remains of the meal displayed in the gallery simply testified to its occurrence.

What do you think Ai Weiwei means when he says that destruction is part of the architectural process?

Explain why you think Ai added a Qing dynasty bed frame to *Souvenir from Shanghai*, and your interpretation of its presence.

Why do you think Ai and Rirkrit have used food to interact with the public? Were they using it to achieve similar ends?

**'It's like you're sealed
 into an iron can with no
 sense of connection
 from the outside world
 or your previous life.'**

Ai Weiwei to Christopher
 Bollen, *Interview Magazine*,
 2013

Cat.28

Surveillance Camera, 2010
 Marble, 39.2 × 39.8 ×
 19 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
 Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
 © Ai Weiwei

Arrest

According to many art world observers, Ai Weiwei's problems with the Chinese authorities began when his art and political activities explicitly merged. His public efforts to help the families of earthquake victims first cost him his blog, and then his privacy after officials installed surveillance cameras directly opposite his front door. Ai has since decorated the cameras with traditional red Chinese lanterns; he has also created copies in marble, a medium that has long denoted power and import. Notably, it is also the material from which Chairman Mao's mausoleum was erected and, indeed, the marble Ai used came from the same quarry.

Cat.28 *Surveillance Camera*, 2010, depicts the same type of hand-held video camera that has observed him and his visitors day and night since 2009. The artwork evokes what for many would be a paranoia-inducing existence, but it also indicates how Ai has mischievously turned the tables on his surveillance by monitoring those who monitor him. On 9 December 2010, for example, he



tweeted to his followers, 'The surveillance vans without plates are stopping at their original positions outside the door again; two young people are playing with their cell phones inside.' And on 3 April 2012, 'WeiweiCam', his self-surveillance system, went live online, though it was shut down within 48 hours. He has since informed Adrian Locke, the curator of the Royal Academy exhibition, that there are now 15 to 20 surveillance cameras around his compound.

The multiple cameras testify to the Chinese government's apparently undiminished wariness of Ai Weiwei. Exactly one year before he launched WeiweiCam, police arrested the artist on a trumped-up tax evasion charge just before he boarded a flight to Taipei via Hong Kong. On the day of his arrest, Ai informed the authorities, 'Eighty-some years ago my father was accused of the same crime you accuse me of today, of "subversion of the State". So in China, even after 80 years we are still fighting for the same thing: freedom of expression.' While he was detained, the police would not allow him to identify himself as an artist. They insisted that he was an 'art worker', thereby supplanting an independent artist with a communal worker who toils for the State.

The police detained the artist in a secret location for 81 days, throughout which two guards stood silently watching him from only 80 cm away at all times, even in the shower. At the same time, Chinese Internet portals began to censor the name Ai Weiwei, inspiring his followers to use euphemisms – including a photo of a sunflower seed – when they wanted to refer to him. After his release, Ai related that his detention was so traumatic that he lost weight, bringing his diabetes under control for the first time.

Cat. 43 In response to his incarceration, Ai conceived *S.A.C.R.E.D.*: six dioramas with viewing holes that scrupulously recreate his detailed memories of the prison cell. The six letters in the title denote Supper, Accusers, Cleansing, Ritual, Entropy and Doubt, which refer respectively to eating, interrogation, showering, walking, sleep and using the lavatory. The intimacy of these activities imbues the dioramas with a sense of the paranoia and distress inherent in Ai's experience. Yet for the artist, their scaled-down size ameliorates the full terror evoked by the situation, rendering the dioramas more theatrical than real.

Why do you think Ai created *Surveillance Camera* in marble?

Do you think your experience of *S.A.C.R.E.D.* would be different if the dioramas were life-sized? Would their impact be heightened or lessened? Explain.

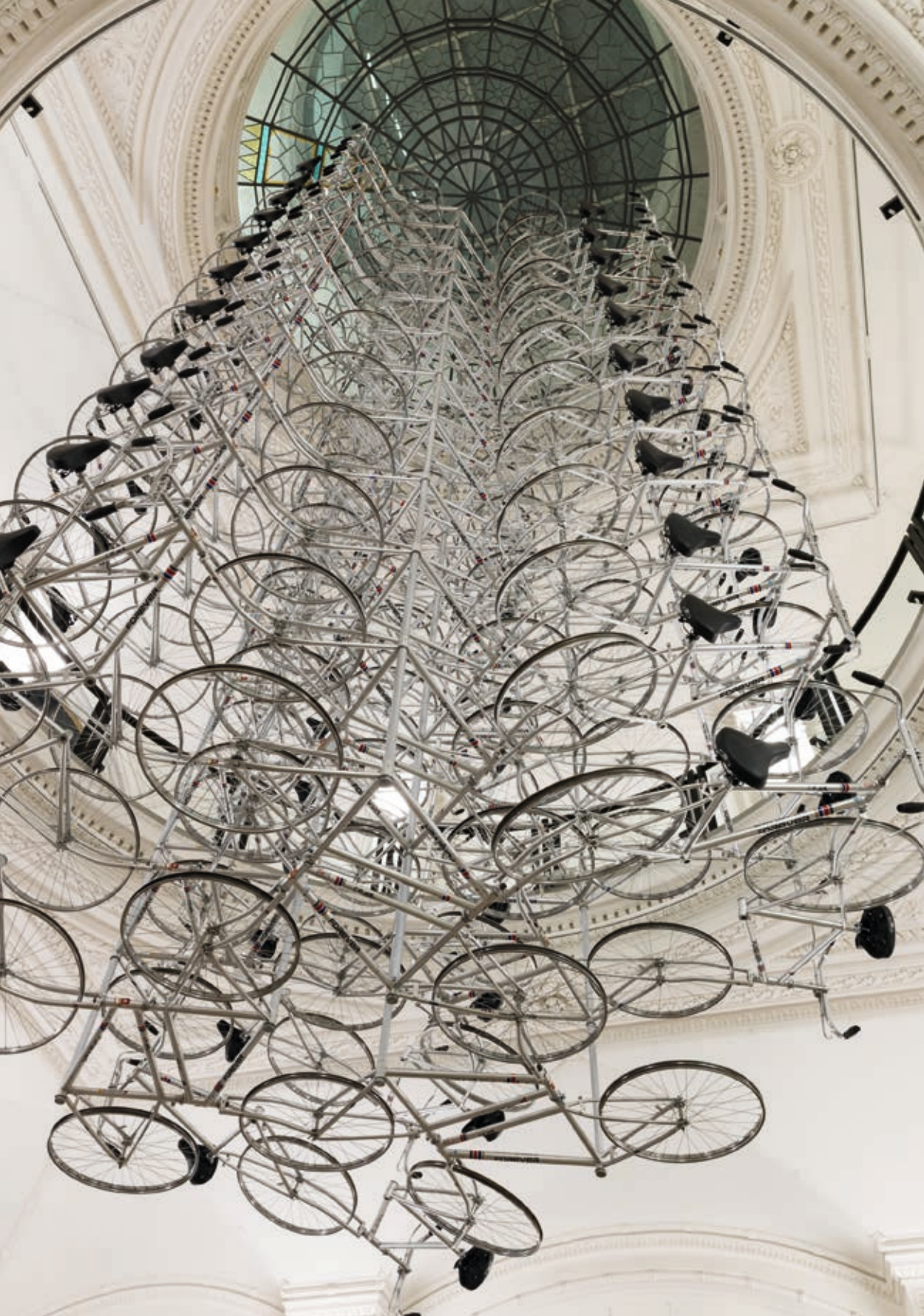
Cat. 43

S.A.C.R.E.D., 2011–13
Installation view in Chiesa di Sant' Antonin, Venice, 2013

Six-part work composed of six dioramas – Supper, Accusers, Cleansing, Ritual, Entropy, Doubt – in fibreglass, iron, oxidised metal, wood, polystyrene, sticky tape, each 377 × 198 × 153 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio and Lisson Gallery
Image courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei





Cat. 46

Very Yao, 2009–14
(representative image)
Forever Bicycles,
installation view, Martin-
Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2014
Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
© Ai Weiwei

Forever

Cat. 46 Ai has in fact likened his situation to theatre, telling officials that they are responsible for what he has become: 'They've built this large stage for me to play [on]!' He remains under house arrest, creating or re-conceiving works that continue to question individual freedom in China today, such as *Bicycle Chandelier*, 2015, a further evolution of *Very Yao* (pictured). Once a floor-based installation, Ai has re-fashioned it for the Royal Academy, where for the first time it appears as a chandelier made from *Forever* bicycles, the country's most popular brand since 1940. His appropriation of the bike calls attention to its one-time status as China's chief form of travel, owned by Chinese citizens across the land. Today, however, the bike has ebbed in popularity as a result of the country's rapid modernisation, improved public transport and air pollution. Significantly, it has also become unaffordable to many. Ai has pointed out that owning a bike in China has become a luxury, a fact he emphasises by converting the installation into another symbol of extravagance, the chandelier.

The artist, who grew up in exile without lights or even candles, further accentuates the status of this work by suspending and illuminating white crystals that cascade down from the rims of the bicycle wheels. He has taken Duchamp's concept of the modest readymade and not only enlarged it to a grand scale, but also transfigured it. No longer utilitarian items promising their owners a means of transportation and thus freedom, the *Forever* bicycles now hang eternally motionless.

What do you think Ai Weiwei's sculpture *Bicycle Chandelier* says about the economic situation of Chinese citizens today?

Ai Weiwei is intensely aware of the qualities and character of the spaces in which he exhibits his work. How does the architecture of the Central Hall enhance your response to *Bicycle Chandelier*?

Conclusion

Throughout his career, and across all of his creative formats, Ai Weiwei's work has actualised his personal quest for freedom of speech and individual rights. Like his father before him, he works according to his conscience and values communication above all, declaring, 'If my art is my life, without the Internet there is no life. I think the Internet is the most precious thing for any individual who wants to express himself, who wants to share feelings or meanings or concepts with other people.' Confined to his homeland until his passport is returned to him, he has asserted that the most difficult aspect of his inability to attend his own exhibitions is that he cannot communicate with, answer questions for, or hear criticism from museum visitors – 'I'm always doing my work half-way.' On a

personal level, he remains unable to see his six-year-old son, who lives in Berlin, where Ai has a studio he has seen only once before being detained. Ai keeps his son in Berlin, rather than in China, so that he can grow up in a free society, asserting 'What scares me should not scare him.'

However, in the months immediately preceding his exhibition at the Royal Academy, where he has been an honorary member since May 2011, it would seem that Ai's relationship to China's art world could be on the cusp of change. Invisible to the Beijing art scene since his arrest in 2011, and indeed to the Chinese media, in which his name remains unspoken and unwritten, he has had four solo shows open in the city since June 2015. While plain-clothes police attended each show, the exhibitions nevertheless received active government approval. Even *The Global Times*, a State-sanctioned newspaper, praised the shows, although it advised Ai to moderate the relationship between art and politics in his work. The artist, who stands by his belief that 'you have to use your own experience to tell a story', is unlikely to do so, claiming that it is not possible to separate art and politics in China. Most importantly, he contends that it is through his art that his advocacy for human rights will persist: 'The art always wins. Anything can happen to me, but the art will stay.'

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Postscript

On 22 July 2015 the Royal Academy was delighted to learn that Ai Weiwei finally regained his passport from the Chinese authorities. We very much look forward to welcoming him here at the Academy in person.

Cat. 19
Souvenir from Shanghai,
2012
(detail)

