

Royal Academy of Arts

Ai Weiwei

Courtyard, Staircase & 1



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Ai Weiwei

Main Galleries:

19 September – 13 December 2015

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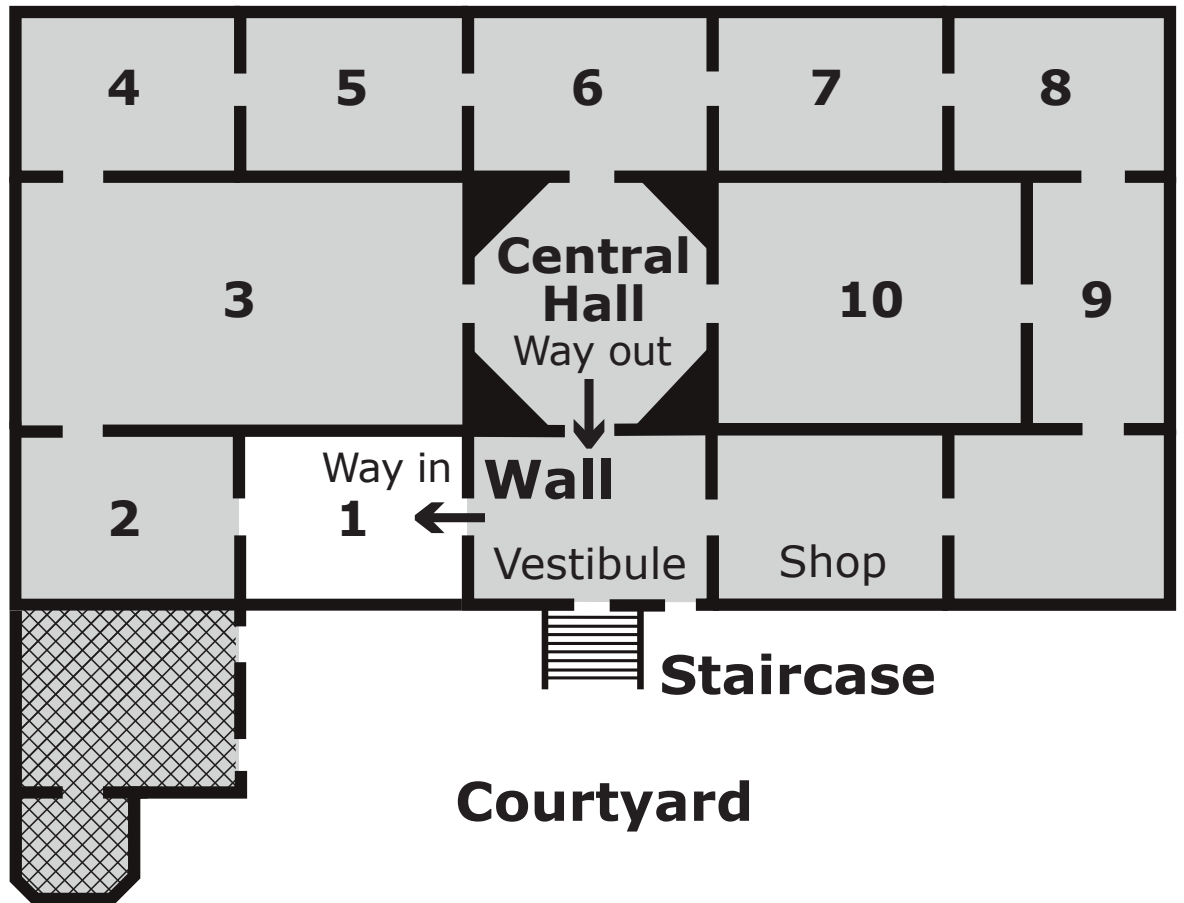
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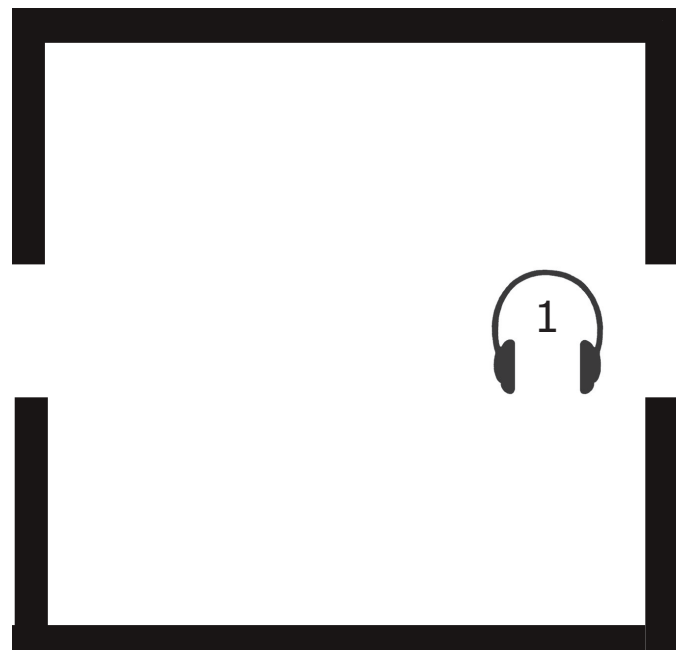
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'Bed'



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Introduction to the exhibition

Ai Weiwei is one of China's most recognisable and contentious artists, as famous for his outspoken criticism of the government of his native country as for his art.

His condemnation of state corruption and suppression of human rights and free speech has seen him beaten by government agents, hospitalised, imprisoned and denied the right to travel.

Following his arrest and secret detention in 2011 Ai's fame as a political dissident overshadowed his artistic practice.

Yet Ai remained committed to his art and has produced a body of work that not only supports his political concerns but also gives free rein to his creativity and love of experimentation.

Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai Weiwei was an infant when his father, the poet Ai Qing, became a victim of the government's suppression of free-thinking intellectuals and was sent with his family to a remote labour camp in northwest China for nearly twenty years.

The family returned to Beijing after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, an event that heralded a brief relaxation of state restriction.

In 1978 Ai entered the Beijing Film Academy, before becoming part of the avant-garde 'Stars' group of artists. State censorship soon returned, however, and Ai, like many artists of his generation, left China seeking freedom of expression abroad.

In 1981 he moved to the USA and settled in New York. He returned to Beijing in 1993 and began to create the body of work explored in this exhibition.

Ai has imbued these works with a distinct Chinese identity by using materials such as jade and porcelain and salvaging the historic fabric of Beijing.

He collaborates closely with skilled craftsmen, deepening the connection of his work with the traditions of Chinese art, and his sculpture is visually rich and multi-layered in meaning.

The works in this exhibition represent a powerful and coherent exploration of Chinese culture, history and material and, alongside Ai's relentless campaigning for human rights, have been instrumental in establishing him as an artist of international standing.

Introduction to 1

In Imperial China, the hardwood **tieli** ('Mesua ferrea') – commonly known as iron wood for its hardness and durability – was favoured for the construction of timber-framed buildings and furniture.

On his return to China in 1993 Ai began purchasing reclaimed **tieli** timbers from temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) that were being dismantled to make way for the rapid development and expansion of the principal cities.

Keen to promote traditional methods of carpentry that were fast becoming obsolete in a country driven by technological advances and mass production, Ai conceived the idea of challenging the skill of carpenters by asking them to produce three-dimensional maps of China, often but not always including the islands of Hainan and Taiwan.

These carpenters use hidden mortise-and-tenon joints to create works without recourse to nails, screws or glue.

'Bed' is part of a series that presents China as a three-dimensional map, making the country look as though it has been rolled out and laid flat like a mattress.

Ai has also created maps of China in cotton, milk-formula cans and porcelain (see Gallery 9).

'Untitled', made of cast aluminium, is his latest exploration of this subject. Fourteen of the forty-four pieces that comprise the entire work are seen here; they mirror the contours of the map of China seen in 'Bed', each presented as a unique empty roundel or frame.

List of works

Courtyard

Ai Weiwei

Tree

2009–2010, 2015

Tree sections and steel

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Marble Couch

2011

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Ai Weiwei's installation 'Tree' comprises structures made from sections of dead trees collected on the mountains of southern China.

Over several months, these disparate parts were pieced together in Ai's studio in Beijing to create the eight "complete" trees seen here.

(continued over)

These artificial constructions have been interpreted as a commentary on the way in which geographically and culturally diverse peoples have been brought together to form 'One China' in a state-sponsored policy aimed at protecting and promoting China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The marble couch placed within the grove of trees references the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) vogue for fashioning commonplace objects from luxurious materials, resulting in items that served no practical use but which emphasised the wealth of the rulers of Imperial China.

Over 1,300 Kickstarter backers funded the installation of this sculpture.

We are incredibly grateful to them all.

See all our Kickstarter supporters online at <http://roy.ac/ksthanks>

#AiWeiwei

Staircase

Surveillance Camera and Plinth

2015

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Wall outside Gallery 1

I.O.U. Wallpaper

2011–2013

Wallpaper

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Gallery 1



Bed

2004

Iron wood (**tieli** wood) from dismantled temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Untitled

2014

Aluminium, 14/44 displayed

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

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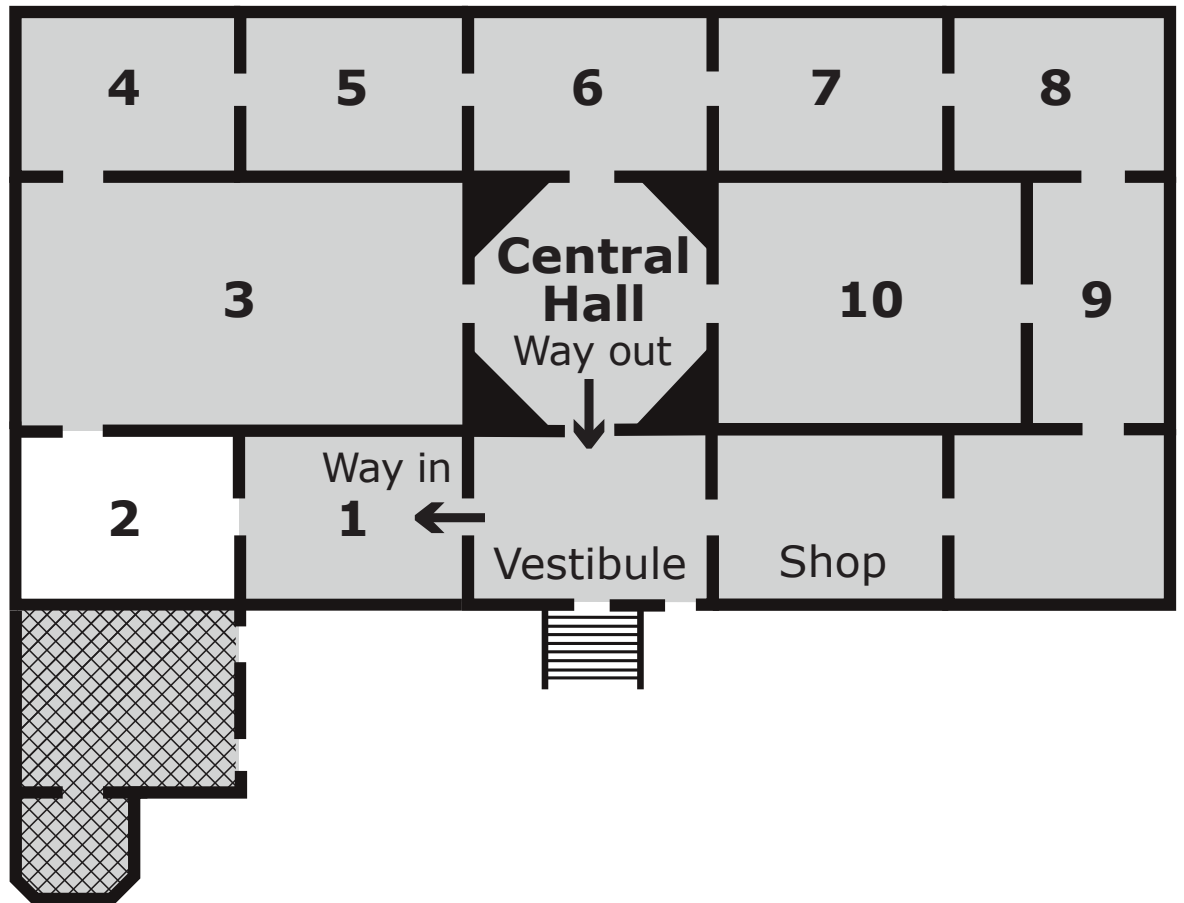
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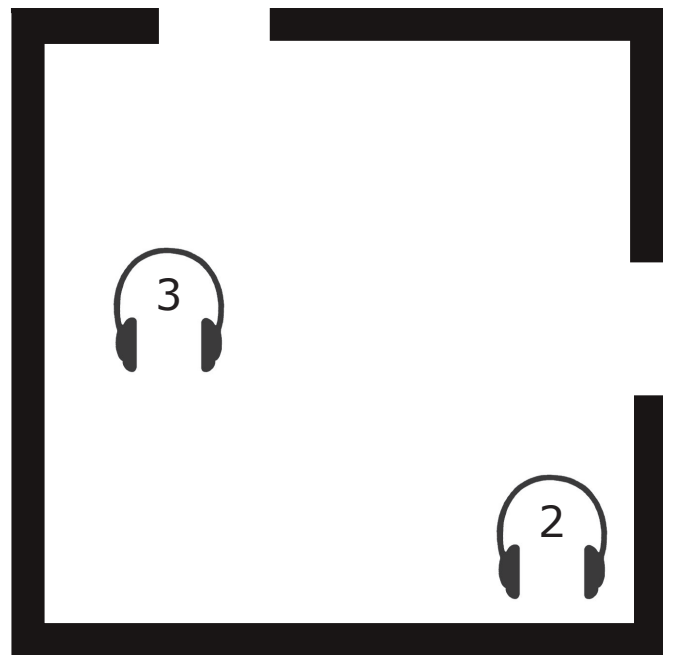
'Kippe'



'Table and Pillar'



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Introduction to 2

Among the first works Ai made on his return to China in 1993 was the Furniture series, of which 'Table with Two Legs on the Wall' is the earliest piece.

For Ai, the cabinetmakers' skilful and apparently invisible interventions, including maintaining the integrity of the surface patina, are fundamental to the success of these works, which are intended to be as true as possible to the Ming and Qing Dynasty originals, despite their bizarre reconfigurations.

Ai subverts the objects' original purpose to render them impractical yet aesthetically appealing.

'Grapes', for instance, which is made with 27 Qing Dynasty stools, defies gravity with its acrobatic composition and minimal contact with the ground. Consequently it becomes, in Ai's words, a "useless object".

Ai acknowledges 'Table and Pillar' as the most important single work to emerge from this group. Many technical challenges were overcome to create this apparently simple conjunction of an architectural column and a Qing Dynasty table.

'Kippe' is made from offcuts of the salvaged **tieli** timbers that were used to produce the larger work 'Fragments' (Gallery 6).

The offcuts are precisely stacked, like firewood, between a set of parallel bars that Ai reclaimed from his Zuoyou studio in Beijing, a former tractor factory that had belonged to the government.

Such factories were obliged to provide workers with an area for physical exercise comprising such equipment as a single bar, parallel bars, a basketball hoop and a ping-pong table.

In German the word "kippe" refers to the initial spring action used to mount the parallel bars from the ground; it can also be used to describe something that is finely balanced.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)



Kippe

2006

Iron wood (**tieli** wood) from dismantled temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and iron parallel bar

Collection of Honus Tandijono

Table with Two Legs on the Wall

1997

Table from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Hanging Man

1985

Metal clothes hanger with frame

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Table with Three Legs

2011

Table from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Grapes

2010

27 wooden stools from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Table and Pillar

2002

Table and pillar from dismantled temple of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

Tate, London. Purchased with funds provided by the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee, 2008



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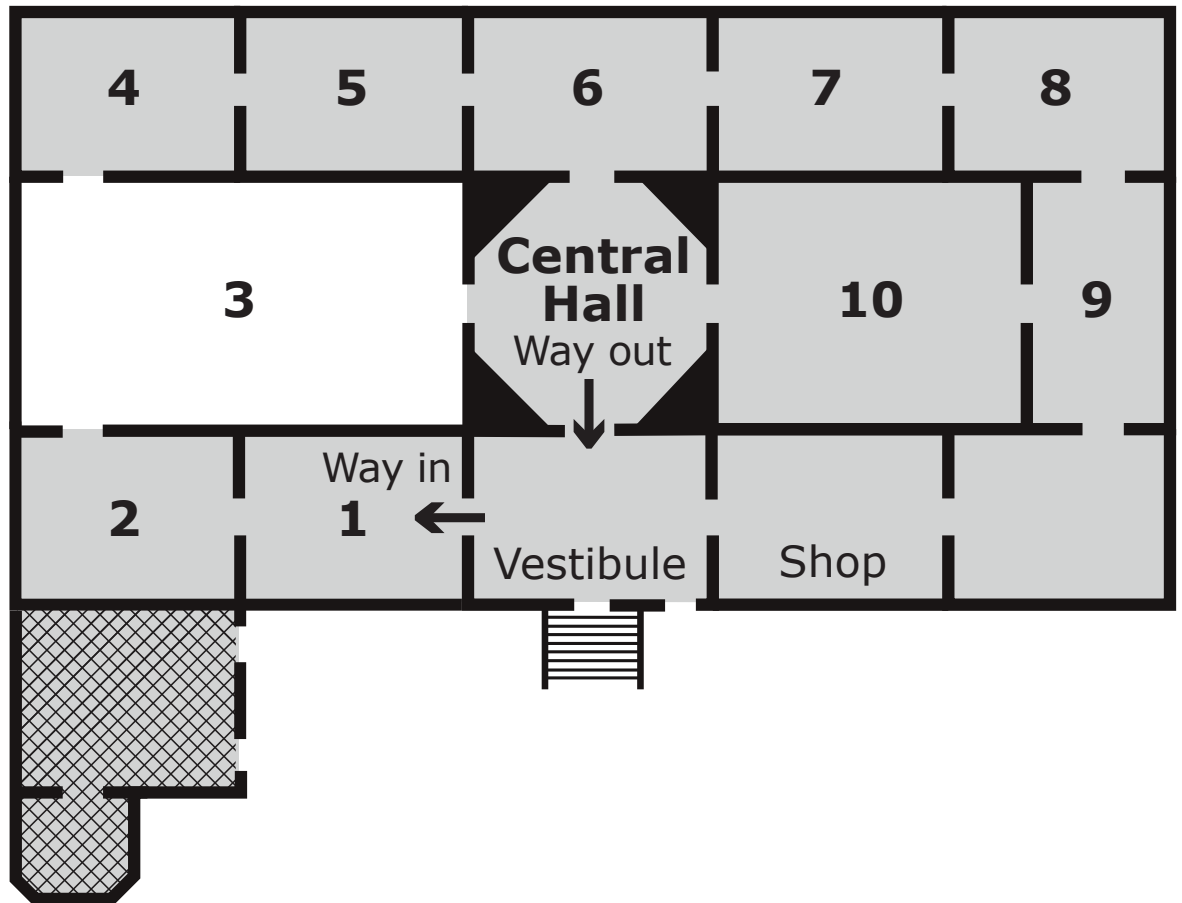
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51 'Straight'



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At 2.28 pm on 12 May 2008 a powerful earthquake caused extensive damage and significant loss of life in the Sichuan province of southwestern China. Some twenty schools collapsed, killing more than five thousand students.

Despite considerable and sustained harassment from the police, Ai and a number of others established a citizens' investigation with the aim of recording the names of all the victims of the collapsed schools, information that was not forthcoming from the authorities.

Ai based a number of works, including several films, on the earthquake and its impact on the families of the victims.

'Straight' (2008–2012) can be seen both as a memorial and an abiding reminder of the substandard and hasty construction methods used for building state schools.

In China, government buildings are notoriously badly built and their materials commonly referred to as “tofu-dreg”, i.e. porous and flimsy like the remnants from making bean curd.

The disproportionately high number of fatalities among schoolchildren was blamed on corrupt local officials who had compromised on building materials for personal gain.

Following the earthquake Ai clandestinely purchased bent and twisted rebar – the steel reinforcing bars used in the construction of concrete structures – that had been earmarked for recycling.

He had 200 tonnes of this scrap metal transported to his studio in Beijing, where it was painstakingly straightened by hand and returned to its original pre-construction and pre-earthquake state.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Straight

2015

Film, duration 16 minutes

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Sichuan Earthquake Photographs

2008

Black-and-white and colour photographic prints

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens' Investigation

2008–2011

Black-and-white print

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Straight

2008–2012

Steel reinforcing bars

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



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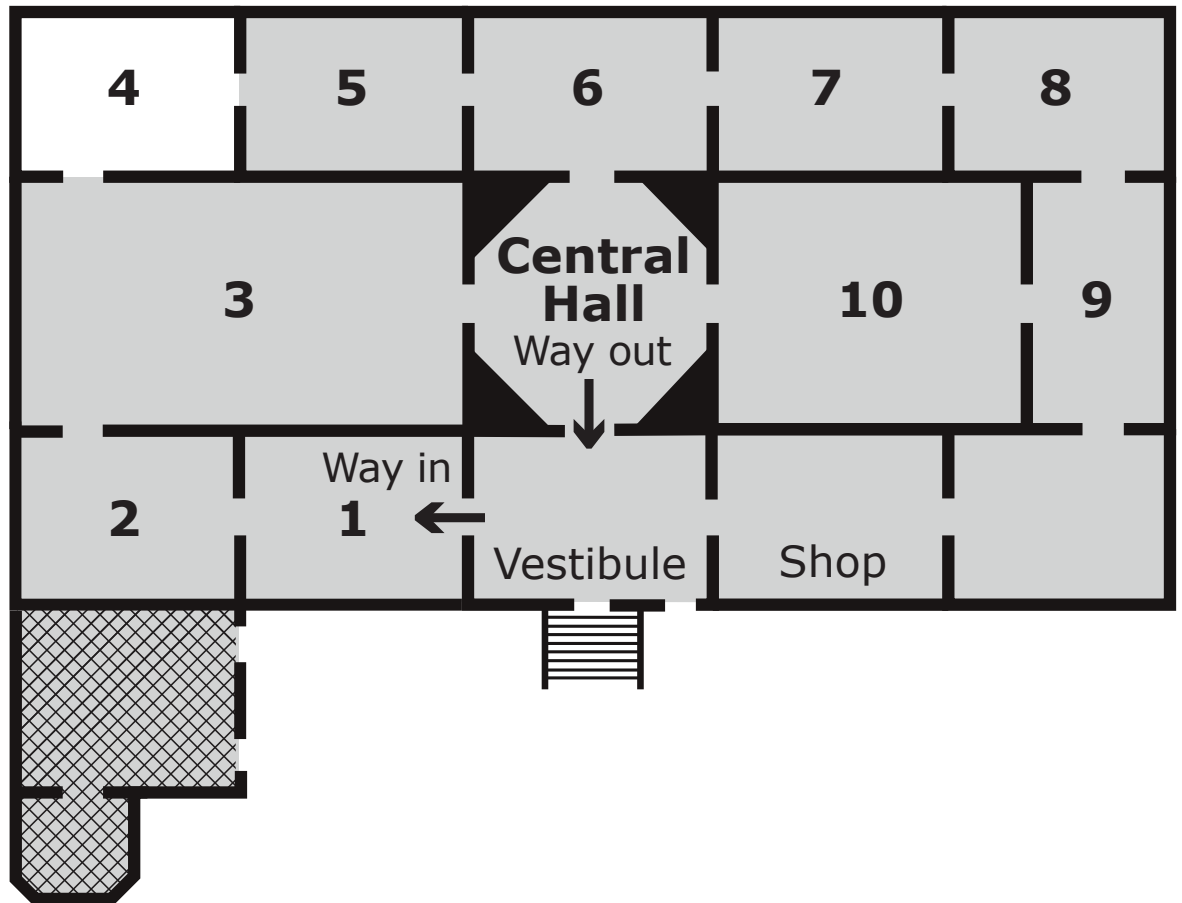
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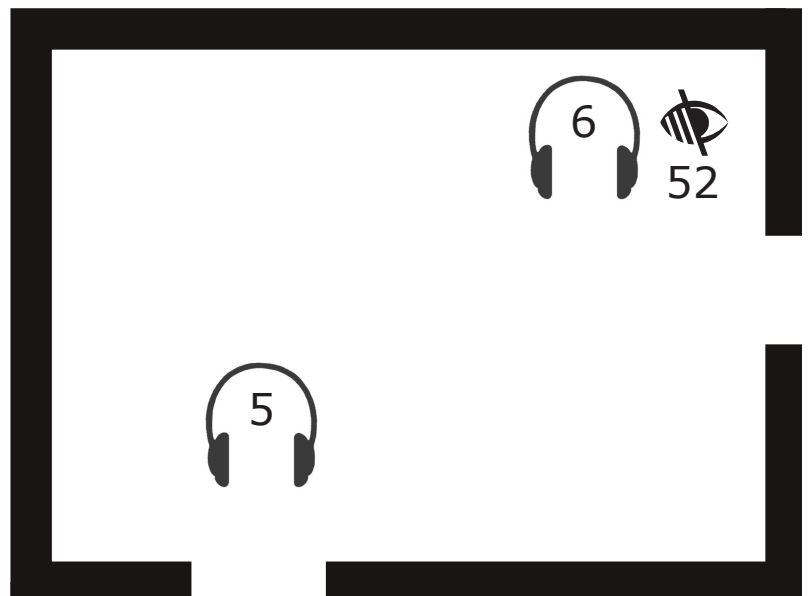
'Souvenir from Shanghai'



52 'He Xie'



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In 1999 Ai built a studio-house of his own design at Caochangdi, which was then on the outskirts of Beijing. A number of artists and commercial galleries soon followed, turning this former agricultural village into a successful art district.

In 2008 the municipal authorities in Shanghai, keen to replicate the success of Caochangdi, invited Ai to build a studio in Malu Town, Jiading district, at their cost.

As requested, Ai designed and arranged the construction of this new studio, which was completed in October 2010.

The federal authorities then countermanded the agreement and ordered the building to be demolished on the pretext that Ai had not gained the requisite planning permission.

On 7 November Ai placed an open invitation on the internet, encouraging supporters to attend a party during which they would feast on river crabs to commemorate both the completion of the new building and its imminent demolition.

The Chinese word for river crabs, **He Xie**, is a homonym for “harmonious”, a word much used in government propaganda, but which has lately become internet slang for censorship.

Although Ai was placed under house arrest and prevented from being at the party in person, some 800 guests attended.

The studio was razed to the ground on 11 January 2011.

Despite the authorities’ attempts to prevent Ai accessing the site during the demolition he managed to procure some of the original building materials to make ‘Souvenir from Shanghai’.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

The Crab House (He xie fang zi)

2015

Video, duration 21 minutes 45 seconds

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Shanghai Studio Model

2011

Wood

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

He Xie

2011

Porcelain, 3,000 pieces

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



Shanghai Studio (Jiading Malu)

2010–2011

Colour photographic prints

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



Souvenir from Shanghai

2012

Concrete and brick rubble from the artist's destroyed Shanghai studio, set in a wooden frame

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

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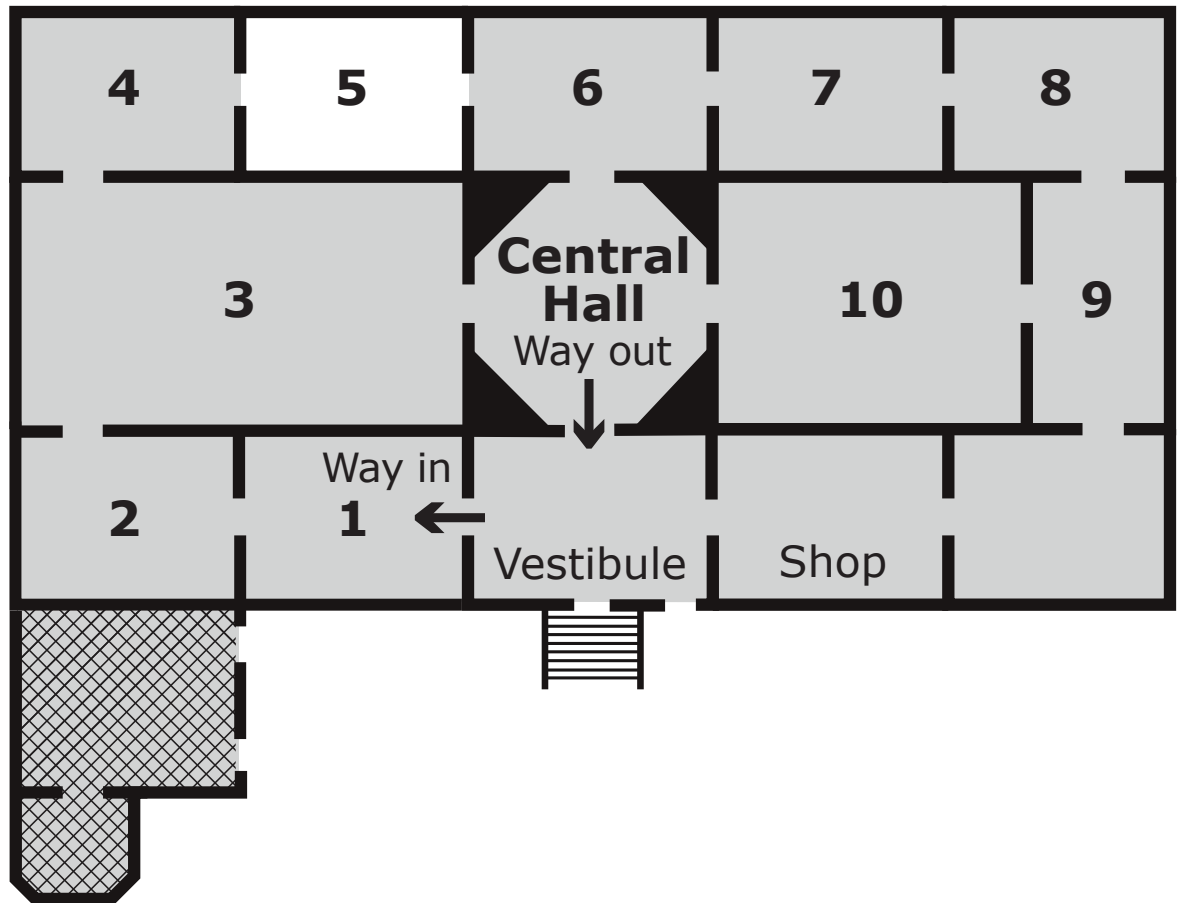
Main commentary



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'Dust to Dust'



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Since his return to China in 1993 Ai has systematically engaged with ceramics.

He purchases historic vessels, ranging from Neolithic pottery to Qing Dynasty porcelain, in markets and from antique dealers. These are grouped and classified by period and style before his interventions.

Ai is very conscious that markets are full of fakes being sold as originals, and that only experts can distinguish between them.

The creation of forgeries interests him since the same skills and traditions used to create the originals are used to create modern versions. The question of authenticity is, therefore, central to this body of work.

By extension, he is also interested in value: is a Neolithic vase dipped in paint or ground to dust more valuable as a contemporary artwork than it was as an original?

In China, which is so marked by rapid change and development, Ai exposes the tension between old and new.

Ai produced the first 'Coca Cola Vase' in his ongoing series in 1994.

The logo of the ubiquitous soft drink is emblazoned across the vase, blurring notions of history and global branding.

In 'Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn' he overtly refers to the wilful destruction of China's historic buildings and antique objects that took place in the decade following Chairman Mao's instigation of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Ai's impassive face in the photograph can also be seen as a reference to the lack of protection given by the authorities to the historic fabric of many of China's cities, sacrificed in pursuit of economic development.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn

1995

Triptych of black-and-white prints

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



Dust to Dust

2008

Thirty glass jars with powder from ground Neolithic pottery (5000–3000 BC), wooden shelving

Collection of Larry Warsh

Coca Cola Vase

2014

Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) vase with paint

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Coloured Vases

2015

Twelve Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) and four Neolithic (5000–3000 BC) vases with industrial paint

Private collections; Collection of Lisa and Danny Goldberg

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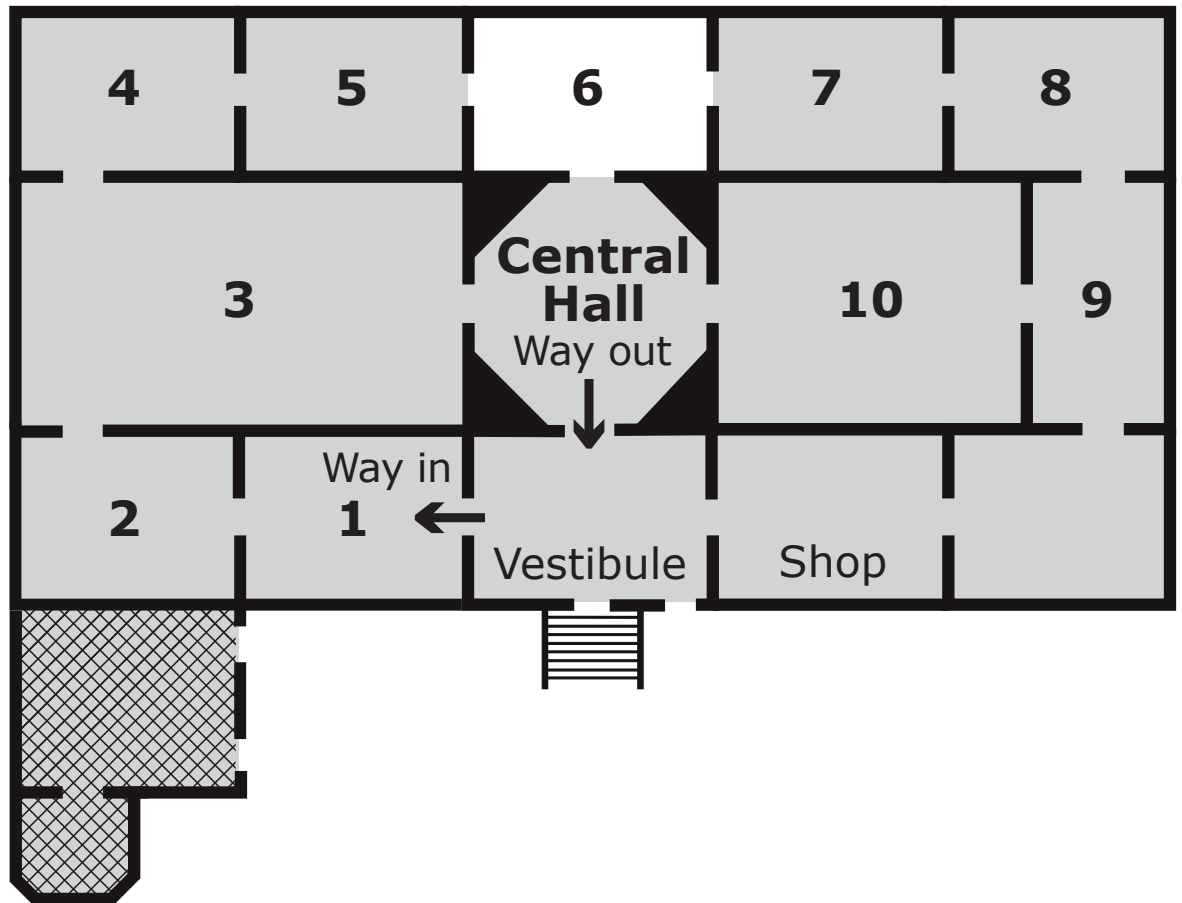
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53 'Fragments'



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One of Ai's most ambitious sculptures, 'Fragments' is an amalgamation of his Furniture and Map series.

Created using architectural salvage from four temples and items of furniture from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the work at first appears to be a random construction made from unrelated objects.

As Ai says: "Everything is misfit and connected wrongly."

Yet when it is seen from above – a physical impossibility within the gallery – the timber frame is revealed as a map of China including Taiwan (represented by the conjoined stools).

The sculpture can be traversed, allowing the visitor obliviously to permeate the borders of China and cross the country freely, much as tourists do when they visit, in a way that Chinese citizens cannot.

The different geographic and ethnographic identities of the country are rendered immaterial and China is presented as a skeleton.

Despite its robust construction, this skeletal form suggests an inherent fragility that can be seen as a commentary on the concept of 'One China', the state-sponsored policy aimed at protecting and promoting China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Offcuts of the salvaged timbers used to make 'Fragments' were kept and used to create 'Kippe' (Gallery 2).

Fragments

2005



Iron wood (**tieli** wood) table, chairs, parts of beams and pillars from dismantled temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong.

By donation

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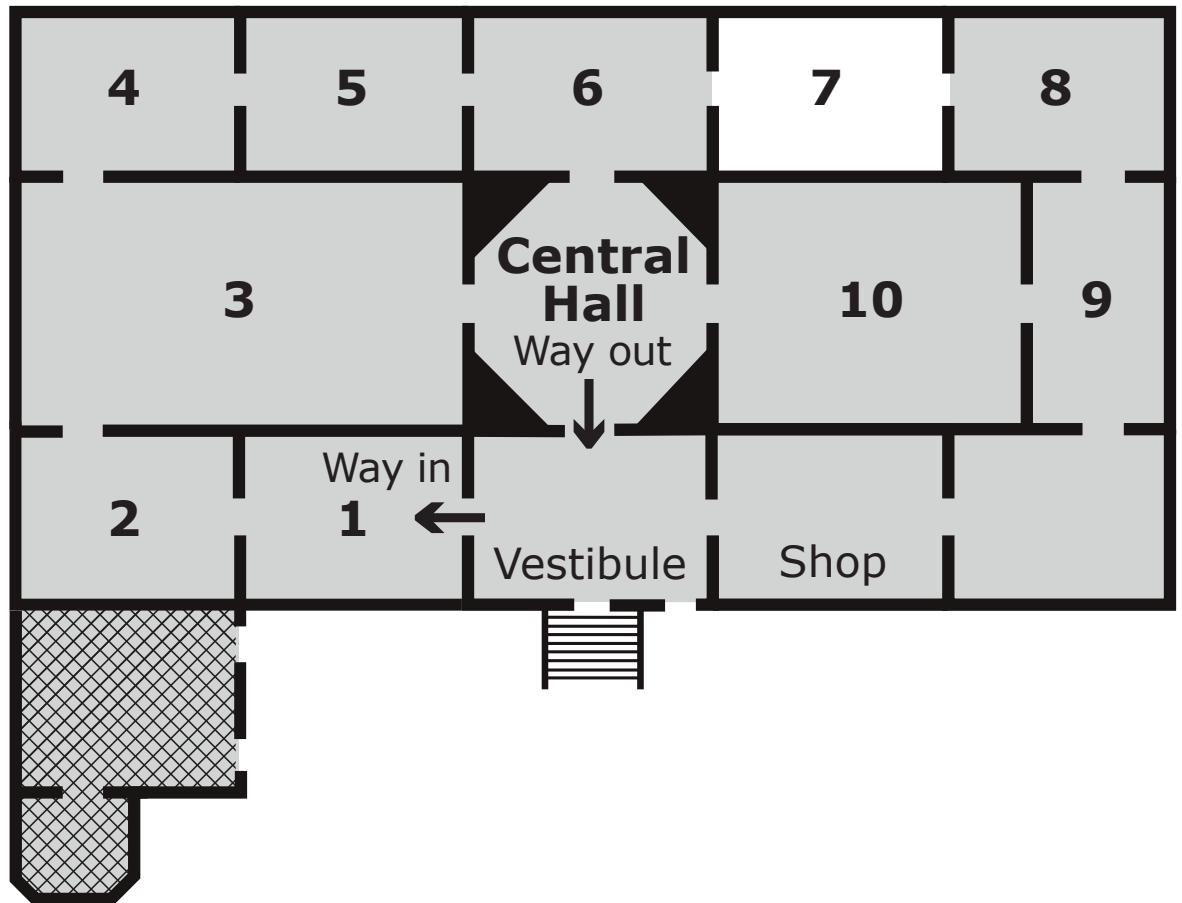
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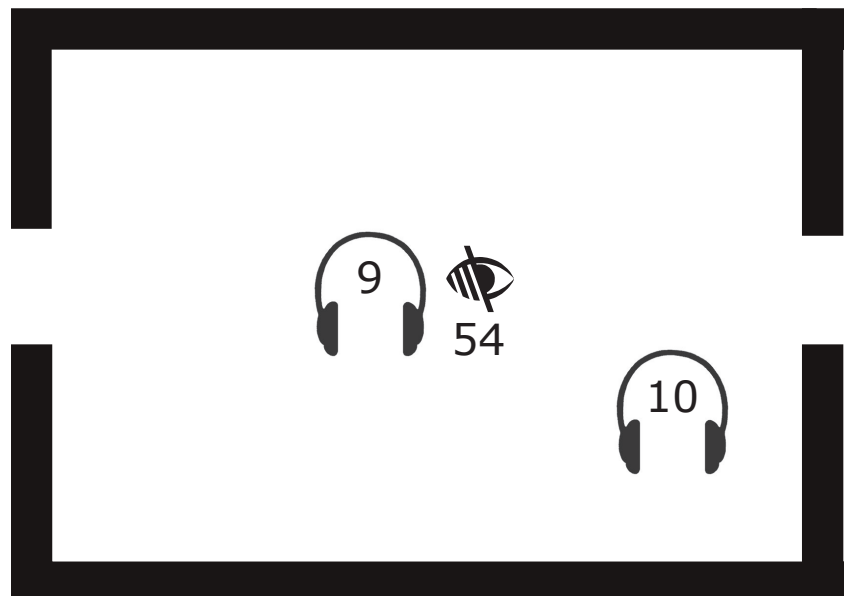
54 'Cao'



'Marble Stroller'



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In China, as in many countries, marble is symbolic of wealth and power, and the material has historic associations with both Imperial and Communist China.

Some years ago Ai purchased an interest in the Dashiwo Quarry in Fangshan, where white marble has been quarried for hundreds of years.

Marble from Dashiwo was used in the construction of the Forbidden City between 1406 and 1420 and, more recently, in the creation of Chairman Mao's mausoleum in Tiananmen Square following his death in 1976.

Ai has everyday objects sculpted manually in marble, pushing the limits of this brittle material's tolerance as well as the skill of his stonemasons.

In choosing to use a material associated with China's imperial past and the immortalisation of Mao Zedong, Ai has turned these household objects into monuments on a domestic scale that commemorate moments in his life as well as reflecting on Chinese society.

The surveillance camera is a copy of the twenty placed around his studio-house to monitor his every movement. The gas mask is a stark reminder of the thousands of vulnerable people who suffer serious respiratory illnesses or die every year from the polluted atmosphere of Beijing.

'Cao' has many interpretations: for instance, the word means grass, as well as being a widely used substitute for a swear word on the internet.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Video Recorder

2010

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Surveillance Camera

2010

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Mask

2013

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Marble Stroller



2014

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Cao



54



2014

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

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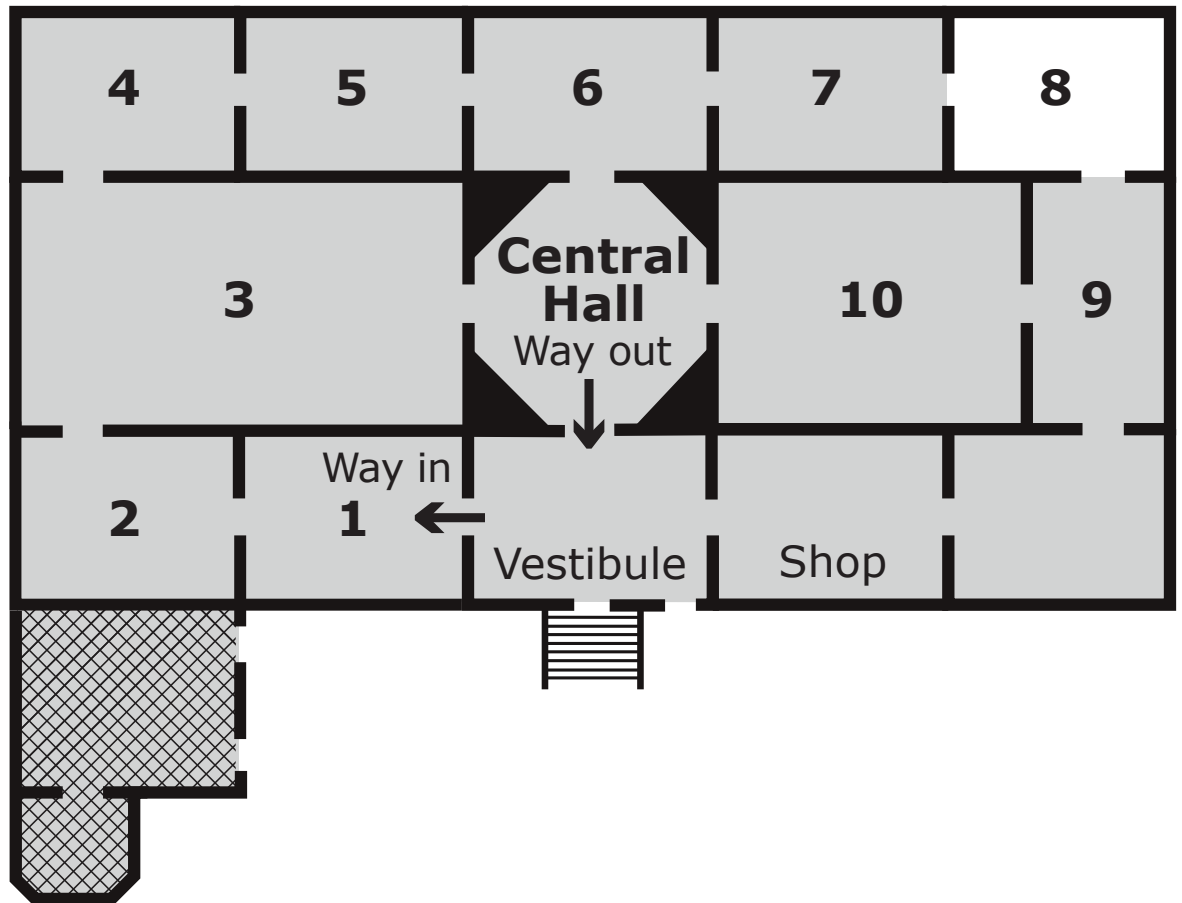
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56 'Treasure Box'



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In these works Ai has combined his interest in form and volume with his respect for materials and traditional Chinese craftsmanship to create a series of cubes with sides of one metre.

Cubic metres are universally used to measure quantity, for example when ordering concrete or timber.

The measure is temporary or transient since the material loses its cubic form as soon as it is turned into something else during construction of a building.

Ai, however, makes the cubic metre permanent by choosing different materials in which he creates objects of the same size but with very different properties.

These cubes can also be seen as an expression of Ai's interest in minimalism, a feature of his architecture. His choice of material and surface texture gives them a distinctive Chinese identity.

'Cube in Ebony' references a small box that Ai's father gave him. Its scale and surface texture are amplified to such an extent that the object becomes impractical.

Yet it still requires the same skill of the craftsman, and the quantity of material used in its manufacture makes it an object of unimaginable opulence.

'Treasure Box' is a monumental version of a traditional Chinese puzzle box with a series of hidden parts that have to be manipulated in order to open the box successfully.

The large scale of Ai's version, with its exquisite marquetry, makes it impossible for one person to open it. When unlocked it reveals a wealth of compartments, each finished to the highest standard.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Crystal Cube

2014

Crystal

M. Neil Wong Hou-Lianq

Ton of Tea

2008

One ton of compressed tea

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Cube in Ebony

2009

Rosewood

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Treasure Box

2014

Huali wood

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



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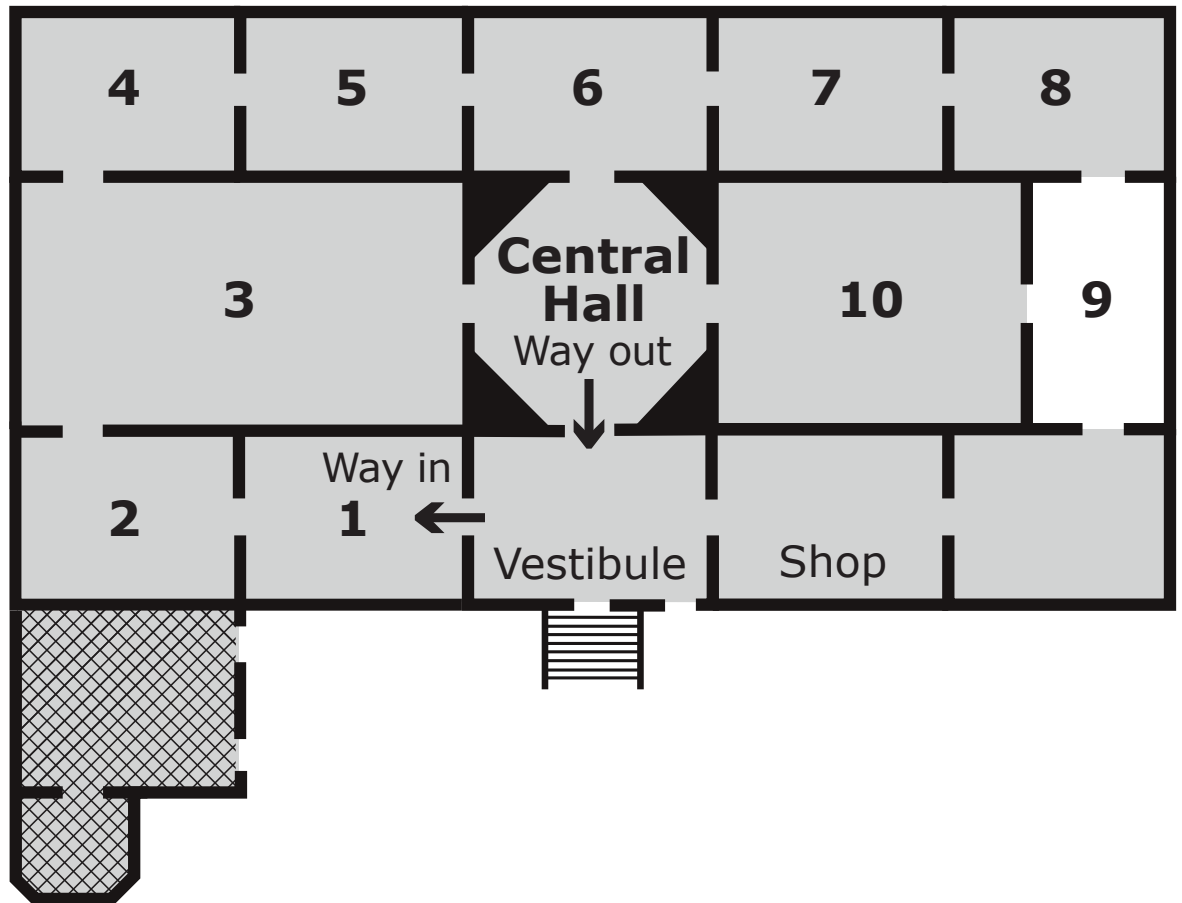
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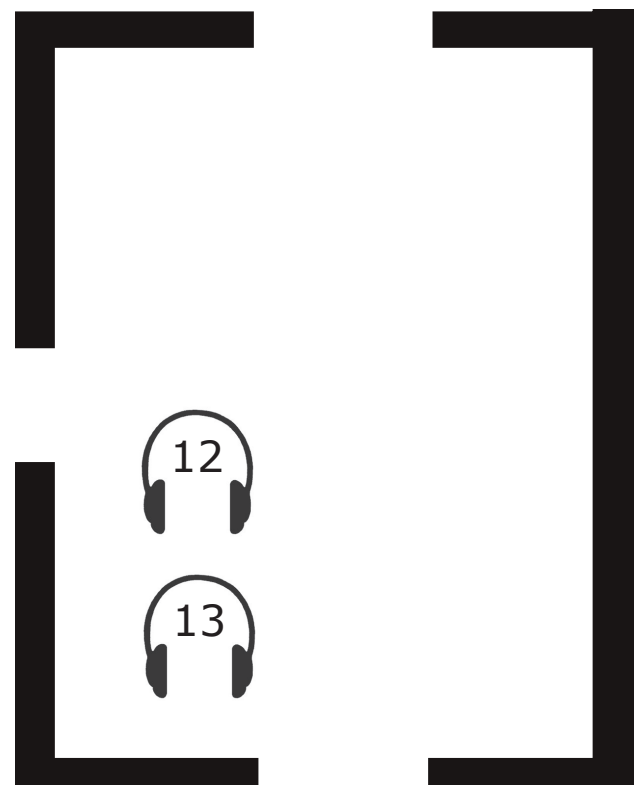
'Remains'



'Handcuffs'



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Ai has produced a group of exquisite showcases mimicking those in which desirable objects of high value are typically displayed.

Here, however, he has subverted their anticipated contents.

Despite the richness of their materials and their superb levels of craftsmanship, the works in these showcases refer to human-rights abuses, lack of freedom of speech and state censorship as well as more playful objects such as sex toys and cosmetic containers.

A pair of handcuffs carved from a single piece of jade references Ai's secret detention in 2011.

In the Chinese edition of 'The Art Book' Ai is replaced by the Italian Renaissance sculptor Agostino di Duccio, in response to state censorship.

A set of bones recovered clandestinely from a former work camp in north-western China – a region where many intellectuals were interred and lost their lives during the brutal regime of Chairman Mao – is meticulously re-created in porcelain.

A number of individual porcelain pieces, each decorated with the slogan “Free Speech”, collectively form a map of China. They are based on traditional pendants of various materials that bore a family’s name and served as markers of status and good-luck charms for the wearer.

The wallpaper, featuring a raised middle finger arranged in a decorative geometric pattern, references two previous works by Ai:

‘Marble Arm’ (2007), a disembodied arm and extended finger carved in white marble, and ‘Study of Perspective’ (1995–), a series of photographs Ai has taken of himself raising his middle finger – an internationally recognised gesture of contempt – at buildings and monuments such as the White House and Tiananmen Square.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Finger

2014

Black-and-white wallpaper

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Cosmetics

2014

Jade

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

The Art Book

2014

Two hardback books edited by Phaidon Press

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Sex Toy

2014

Jade

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Sex Toy

2014

Jade

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Handcuffs

2011

Jade

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



Remains

2015

Porcelain

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



Free Speech Puzzle

2014

Hand-painted porcelain in Qing Dynasty imperial style

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

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Royal Academy of Arts

Ai Weiwei

10



Do not remove from gallery

Ai Weiwei

Main Galleries:

19 September – 13 December 2015

Supported by

DAVID MORRIS
THE LONDON JEWELLER

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

Multimedia tour



Main commentary



Descriptive
commentary

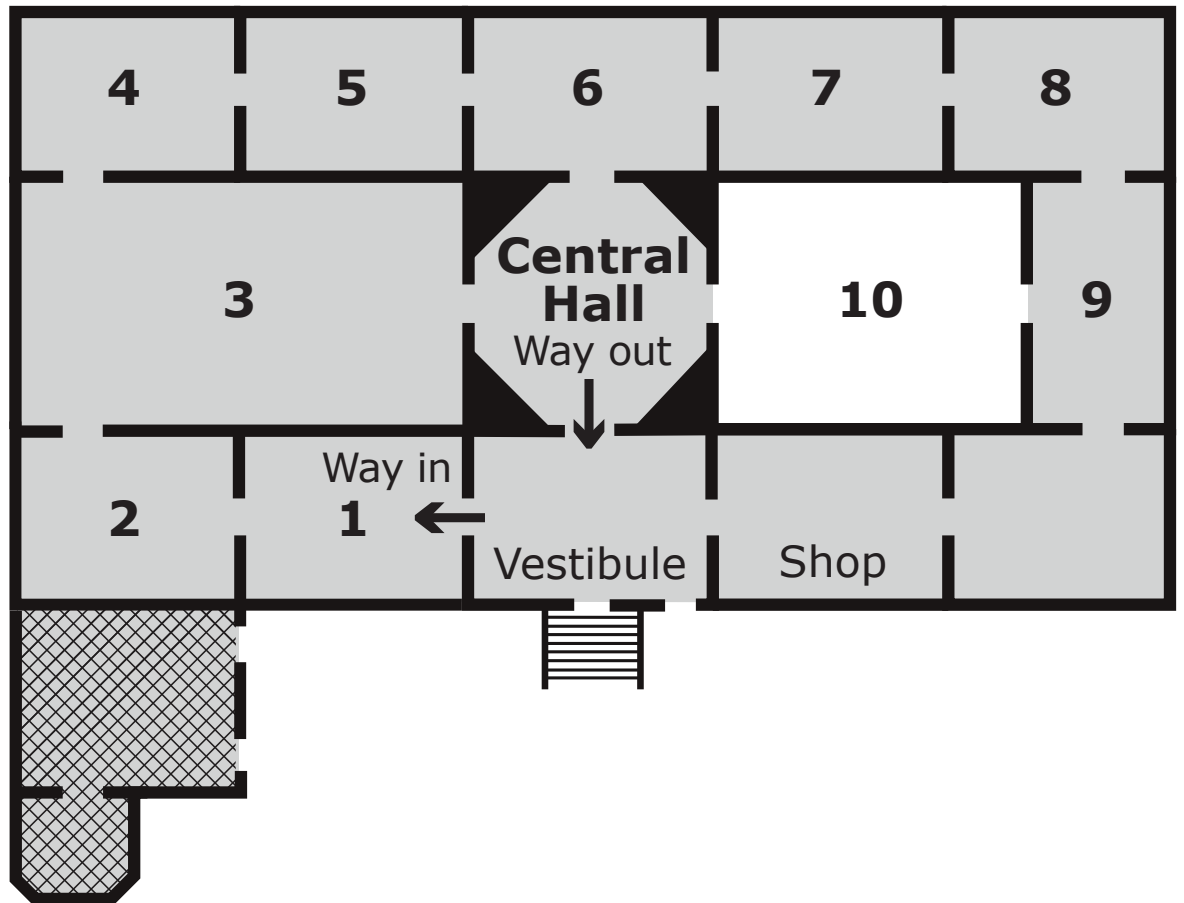


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'S.A.C.R.E.D.'



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On Sunday 3 April 2011, Ai was arrested at Beijing airport as he prepared to travel to Taipei.

He was illegally detained at a secret location for 81 days. Initially handcuffed, he was accompanied 24 hours a day by two guards who were forbidden to communicate with him. The only source of ventilation for his windowless room was a small wall fan.

Ai memorised every detail of the cell, whose walls and every piece of whose furniture were wrapped in plastic.

On his release on 22 June 2011 he was forbidden to discuss his incarceration and was placed on parole for twelve months; in addition to this his passport was withheld.

Despite this restriction Ai re-created six models of his cell, all half actual size, and populated them with figures of himself engaged in different activities under the watchful eyes of his guards.

The dioramas of 'S.A.C.R.E.D.' reveal how degrading Ai's detention was and leave little doubt that the intense and claustrophobic experience he underwent was designed to break his spirit and discourage him from publicly challenging the Chinese authorities.

Following Ai's release, his company Fake Design Ltd was formally charged with tax evasion.

The authorities fined the company nearly £1.5 million and gave 15 days to pay. The public offered their unsolicited support by giving him money towards settling the tax demand.

Some threw donations over the wall of his studio compound while others contributed online. Ai responded with 'I.O.U.', a work in which he wrote promissory notes to each of these 30,000 donors. These notes were in turn scanned and turned into wallpaper.

The wallpaper work 'Golden Age' is decorated with the Twitter logo, a pair of handcuffs and a surveillance camera, all presented in gold, referencing Ai's interest in social media and the curtailment of his personal freedom by the authorities.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Golden Age

2014

Wallpaper in gold

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

S.A.C.R.E.D.

2012

Six dioramas – Supper, Accusers, Cleansing, Ritual, Entropy, Doubt

Fibreglass, iron, oxidised metal, wood, polystyrene, sticky tape

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio and Lisson Gallery



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Ai Weiwei

Wohl Central Hall
& Courtyard

11



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Ai Weiwei

Main Galleries:

19 September – 13 December 2015

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L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

Multimedia tour



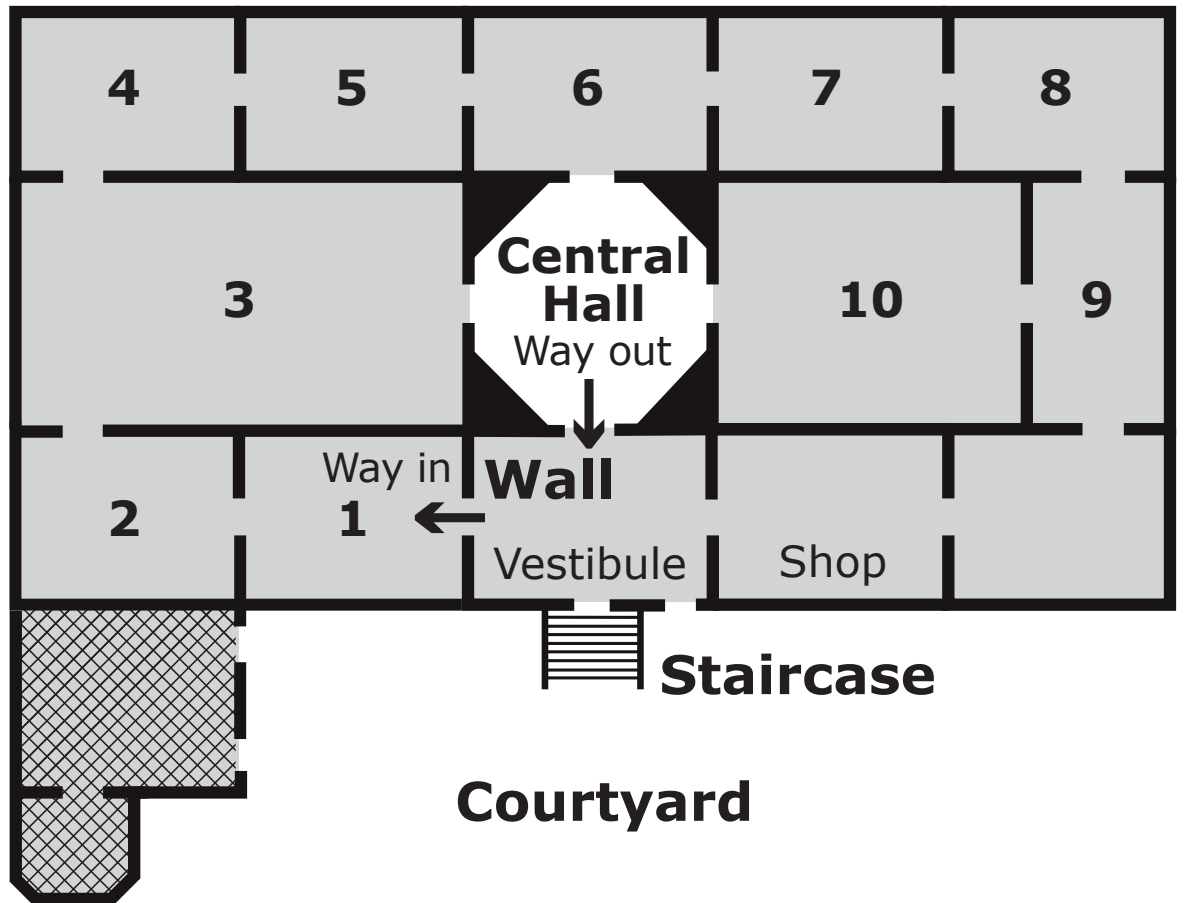
Main commentary



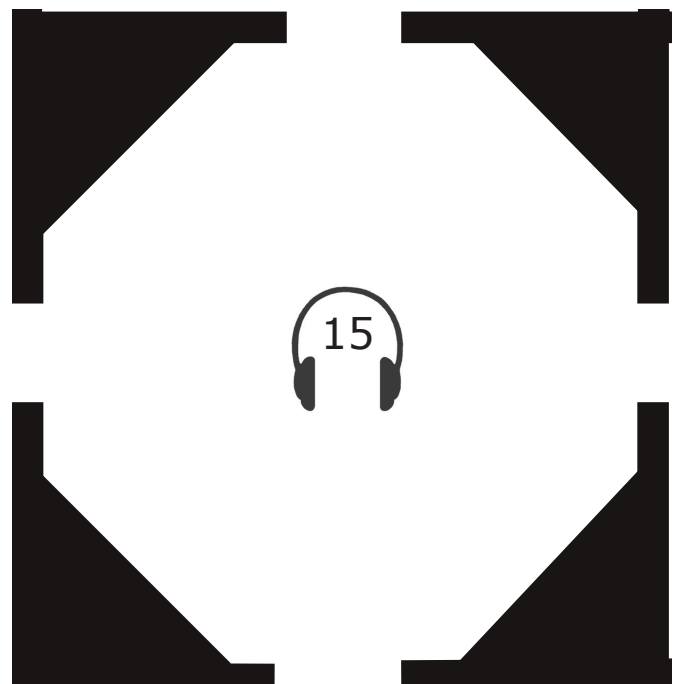
Descriptive
commentary



'Bicycle Chandelier'



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Ai first began working with chandeliers in 2002: “I became interested in light as an object: both the object that gives off light, but also the form the light creates by itself in the illumination that it creates, and how illumination alters the surrounding environment.”

Ai’s point of reference was the grand chandelier of the vast Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square; he even sourced his crystals from the same place, in Zhejiang province.

At around the same time as he made his first chandelier work, Ai began creating sculptures and installations with bicycles.

When collecting kindling as a boy, he used to ride a Forever bicycle, a Chinese brand, first produced in 1940, synonymous with the mass transportation of the urban workforce before cars became widely available:

“My work with them started from the question how can the bicycle use its structure to grow according to its own logic.”

These bicycle sculptures are designed to be placed inside or outside, from the small scale, using two bicycles, to the monumental, comprising 3,144.

The present work is the first in which Ai has combined the two ideas, creating a chandelier from bicycles. The white crystals are suspended from the rims of the bicycles' wheels and cascade down in illuminated circles to create this dramatic, site-specific sculptural installation.

Bicycle Chandelier

2015

Bicycles and crystals

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio



Courtyard

Ai Weiwei

Tree

2009–2010, 2015

Tree sections and steel

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Marble Couch

2011

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Ai Weiwei's installation 'Tree' comprises structures made from sections of dead trees collected on the mountains of southern China.

Over several months, these disparate parts were pieced together in Ai's studio in Beijing to create the eight "complete" trees seen here.

These artificial constructions have been interpreted as a commentary on the way in which geographically and culturally diverse peoples have been brought together to form 'One China' in a state-sponsored policy aimed at protecting and promoting China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The marble couch placed within the grove of trees references the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) vogue for fashioning commonplace objects from luxurious materials, resulting in items that served no practical use but which emphasised the wealth of the rulers of Imperial China.

Over 1,300 Kickstarter backers funded the installation of this sculpture.

We are incredibly grateful to them all.

See all our Kickstarter supporters online at <http://roy.ac/ksthanks>

#AiWeiwei

Staircase

Surveillance Camera and Plinth

2015

Marble

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Wall outside Gallery 1

I.O.U. Wallpaper

2011–2013

Wallpaper

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

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