

RA

Royal Academy of Arts

Ai Weiwei

Main Galleries

19 September – 13 December 2015



Ai Weiwei in his studio in Caochangdi, Beijing, taken in April 2015.



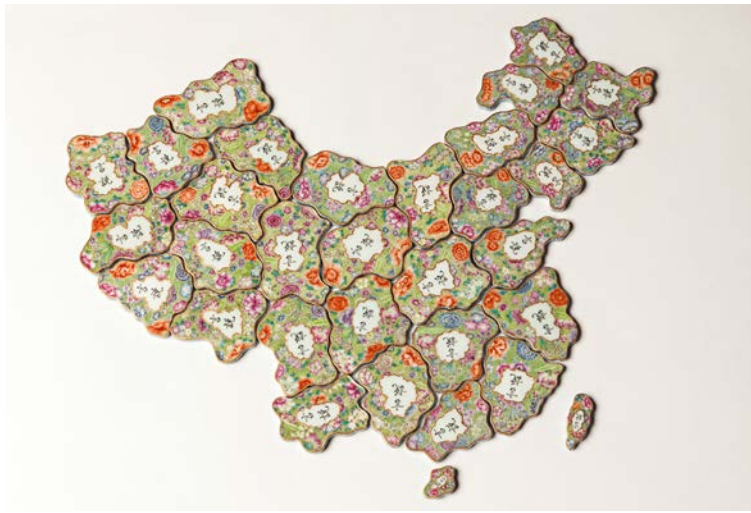
Straight, 2008–12

Following the devastating earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, Ai clandestinely collected some two hundred tonnes of bent and twisted rebar (the steel rods used in the construction of reinforced concrete buildings) destined for recycling which he transported to his studio in Beijing. Here it was straightened by hand, returned to the form it would have had before it was encased in concrete and then mis-shapened by the earthquake. Ai created this sober monument to the victims of the earthquake, the form subconsciously referencing those of seismic waves, whilst also commenting on the sub-standard building methods applied in the delivery of regional government construction projects.



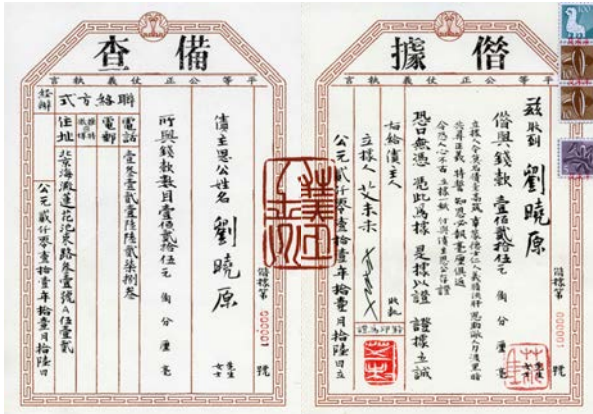
Coloured Vases, 2015

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 skill 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 more valuable as a contemporary artwork than it was before? In China, which is so marked by rapid change and development, Ai exposes the tension between old and new.



Free Speech Puzzle, 2014

The slogan 'Free Speech' decorates each of the individual porcelain ornaments that collectively form a map of China. Ai has produced numerous *Map* works in disparate materials, such as wood, milk powder cans and cotton, over the past twenty years. The components of *Free Speech Puzzle* are based on traditional pendants made of various materials such as wood, porcelain or jade, depending on the wealth of the individual, that bore a family's name and served as a marker of status and as a good-luck charm for the wearer. Through the multiple pieces Ai creates a rallying cry that reflects the distinct geographic and ethnic regions that together form modern China and which, despite their differences, ought to have the right to free speech as their principal common denominator.



I.O.U. Wallpaper, 2011–2013

In 2011 Ai was illegally detained for 81 days. On his release he was accused of tax evasion and presented with a fine of over £1 million to be paid within fifteen days. Thousands of individuals offered their support often in the form of small donations, some made literally by throwing packets of money over the wall of his compound in Caochangdi. In this way people showed their support for his actions and identified with him as a 'spokesman' for the ordinary person, one who stood for the rights of the individual. Ai wrote a promissory note for each donation he received, vowing to repay every single contribution that helped him settle his tax bill.



Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995

Although Ai plays down the significance of this work referring to it as a 'silly act' *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* overtly refers to the wilful destruction of China's historic buildings and antique objects that took place during his formative years in the decade following Chairman Mao's announcement of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Many may have been forgiven for thinking that such government-led acts of cultural vandalism might never be seen again. Yet Ai's work also alludes to China's pursuit of economic development which has been marked by a lack of protection provided by the authorities for the historic fabric of many of China's towns and cities.



Table and Pillar, 2002

Table and Pillar is the single most important work in the *Furniture* series, one of the first bodies of work that Ai made on his return to China in 1993. Conscious of the massive changes taking place in Beijing as China sought to modernise, Ai purchased material from Qing dynasty (1644–1911) temples and other buildings that were being dismantled to make way for new developments. Along with period furniture Ai created new pieces, making his interventions invisible through the use of traditional carpentry. In this way he subverted their intended function, making aesthetically and technically appealing but ultimately 'useless objects' in the process.



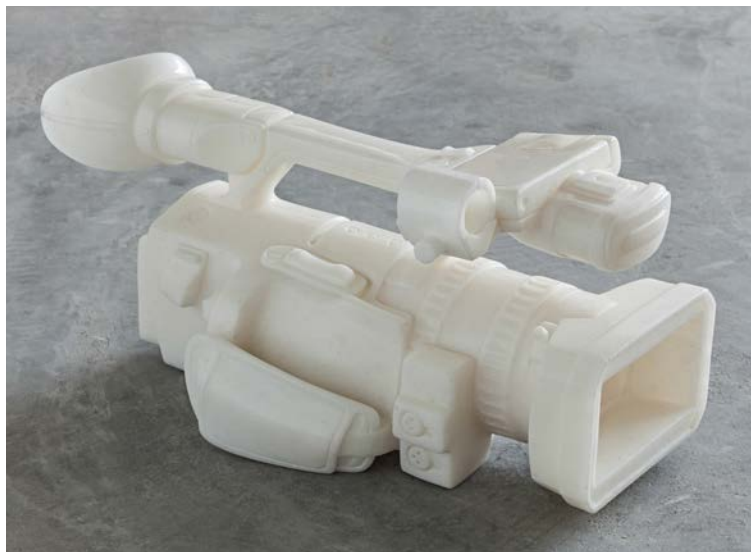
Remains, 2015

In 1958, when Ai was still a child, his father, the celebrated poet Ai Qing, was denounced as a criminal during a state-sponsored crackdown, known as the Anti-Rightist Movement, aimed at silencing intellectuals against collectivisation. Ai Qing and his family were sent to a military re-education camp in the northwest province of Xinjiang where they lived in appalling conditions until 1976 when he was rehabilitated. A recent clandestine archaeological excavation uncovered a group of bones, the remains of an unknown intellectual who perished under similar circumstances in a labour camp. These bones were brought to Ai who replicated them in meticulous detail in porcelain. The work commemorates the suffering of his father and thousands of others during the brutal regime of Chairman Mao.



Surveillance Camera, 2010

As an outspoken critic of the government, Ai's studio residence in Caochangdi has been under surveillance by the authorities for many years. To this end there are at least twenty cameras trained on his compound, conspicuously attached to buildings and telegraph poles especially since Ai has attached a red lantern below each one. By making a marble version Ai references Ming dynasty (1368–1644) tomb offerings where everyday objects were made in precious materials and interred alongside members of the Imperial family in an ostentatious display of power and wealth. Here the hand carved marble camera serves no function other than decorative as it cannot witness or record anything.



Video Recorder, 2010

Ai has made a number of films using handheld video cameras over the past twenty years many of which document significant events such as the changing face of Beijing, the impact on the families of the victims of the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 and the demolition of his Shanghai studio in 2011. The hand carved marble video recorder eternalises the equipment Ai uses to record these events and to question the rights of the individual. The work is also a deliberate counter point to *Surveillance Camera* in that one watches and records the artist perceived as a threat to the state while the other watches and records the authorities.