

# RA

Royal Academy of Arts

## Art Detectives

A guide for  
young visitors

Art Detectives are supported  
by the Flow Foundation



**Ai  
Weiwei**

You will need  
a pencil to  
write and draw

## Introduction

Ai Weiwei is probably one of the most famous artists in the world right now. He creates artworks that look at issues of human rights and how people are treated unfairly, and the history and culture of China (where he was born in 1957). Ai Weiwei's work is very much tied to the fight for free speech. He has drawn attention throughout his career to injustice and corruption in the Chinese government, and has been imprisoned as a result. This exhibition at the RA looks back at artworks he has produced over the last 22 years, and features ceramics, photography, video, sculpture, wallpaper, furniture and so much more, including new work created just for this exhibition.

Let's explore...

Please be aware that some material in this exhibition may be unsuitable for young children.

## Section 1.



*Bed* is a most unusual 3-D map of China; a mass of ridged wood whose curved edges actually trace the country's border. It certainly doesn't look like a traditional map, but it starts to if you imagine China's outline has been laid flat on the floor.

### Find *Bed*, 2004

Why do you think Ai Weiwei called this work 'Bed'?

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Do you think this sculpture is made up of one single piece of wood, or lots of different pieces? How can you tell?

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Section 2.



Find *Grapes*, 2010

This work is from a series called 'Useless Objects', where Ai Weiwei changed the original purpose of a piece of furniture –in this case a stool – so that it could never be used in that way again. It would be hard to sit on these stools!

'Grapes' is made up of 27 stools from the Qing Dynasty (a period of time in Chinese history, ranging from 1644 to 1911). How many of the 27 stools are actually touching the ground?

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What does the shape of this sculpture remind you of?

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Section 3.



Find *Straight*, 2008–12

In 2008, an earthquake struck the Sichuan province of southwest China. It claimed the lives of nearly 5200 school children, who died when their government-constructed schools collapsed. *Straight* is made of 96 tonnes of steel bars that the artist and his team collected from the site of the earthquake. The steel bars had been used in the construction of the school buildings. On the walls are the names of those who died.

What message do you think the artist is trying to get across with this work?

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Describe the shapes and colours that you can see within 'Straight'. Does it remind you of the fault lines and Richter scale shapes associated with earthquakes?

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If you crouch down to look at the side of the work, do the layers you can see remind you of anything?

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How does this work make you feel?

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## Section 4.



Find *He Xie*, 2011

'He Xie' means 'river crab' in Chinese, but can also be another word for 'censorship'. Ai Weiwei wanted to give a feast of river crabs to his friends and supporters to celebrate a new studio he had built, but was banned from attending by the Chinese police.

What do you think these crabs are made of?

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How many do you think there are here?

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What colour are the crabs? Why do you think the artist chose these colours?

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Would you describe this work as:

Crawling   Alive   Multi-coloured  
Cooked   Fun   Tasty  
Gross   Pretty

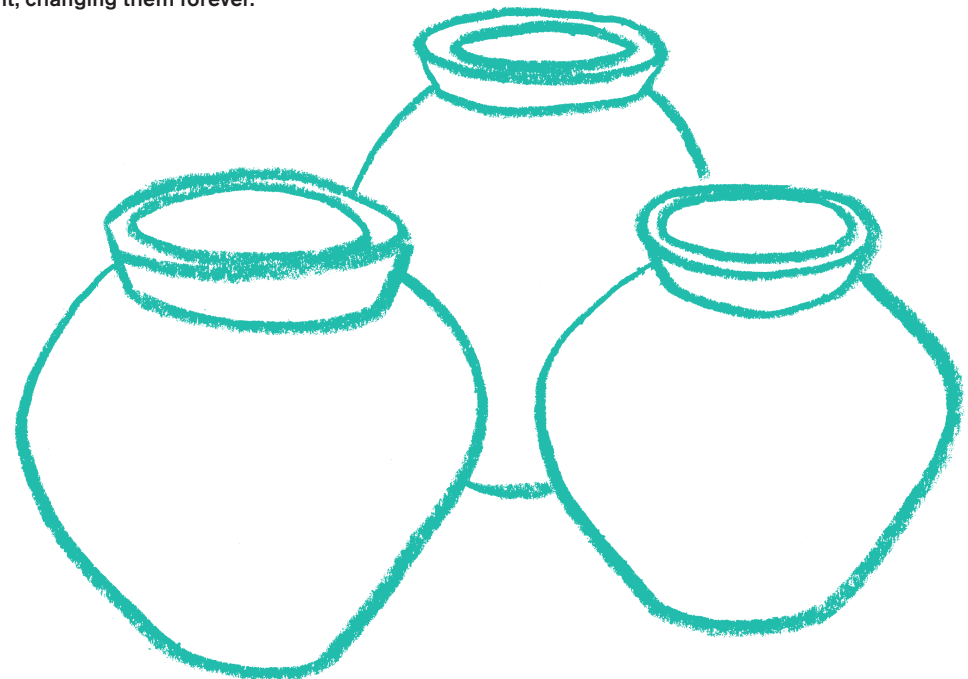
## Section 5.



Find *Coloured Vases*, 2015

Ai is a very modern man – he uses Instagram and Twitter a lot – but he is also interested in Chinese heritage. These priceless antique vases are from the Twelve Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and the Neolithic era (5000–3000 BC). He has dipped them in brightly coloured industrial paint, changing them forever.

Create your own coloured vases by colouring in the picture below. You can always work on your picture at home and send it to us!



## Section 6.



### Find *Fragments*, 2005

This large sculpture is made from bits of beams and pillars from old temples, and furniture like tables and chairs. When viewed from above, it becomes clear that each pole marks out the borders of a map of China.

Does this sculpture remind you of any of the works we have seen already in this exhibition?

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Stand underneath *Fragments*, right in the middle. How do you feel?

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## Section 7.



### Find *Surveillance Camera*, 2010

In China, marble can be seen as a symbol of wealth and power. Here Ai Weiwei has taken normal objects, like blades of grass, video cameras and a pushchair, and cast them in marble.

If you look around the room, what are both the surveillance camera and video camera pointing at?

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Ai Weiwei made the marble pushchair after he discovered secret police were taking photos of him and his son without their knowledge. How would you feel if you were being spied on?

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Look at the grass marble pieces. Do you think any two pieces are the same? Why or why not?

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## Section 8.



### Find *Crystal Cube*, 2014

In this room, the artist has created a series of cubes, each with sides of one metre. *Crystal Cube* took 12 months to cool down after being cast using extreme heat!

Look closely at *Crystal Cube*. Can you see the steel bar at the base of the cube? This was originally used to measure the temperature of the cube, but accidentally fell into the mixture as it was cooling! Ai Weiwei decided to keep it.

If you walk around and look through the cube at people on the other side, what happens to their bodies, and yours?

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Can you also see the black hair suspended in the cube?

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### Find *Ton of Tea*, 2008

Stand up close to *Ton of Tea* and breathe in deeply. What can you smell?

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## Section 9.



### Find *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, 2011–13

This work is a six-part diorama with painted fiberglass figures representing Ai Weiwei's 81-day imprisonment that happened in a secret location. Each letter and each iron container represents a different activity, for example, 'S' for Supper and 'C' for Cleansing, and shows two guards standing over the artist at all times as he completes this activity.

How would you describe the works in this room?

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How would you communicate your ideas as an artist if you were imprisoned?

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### Find *Bicycle Chandelier*, 2015

This amazing chandelier is made up of a special brand of bicycles available in China called 'Forever' bicycles.

How many bicycles do you think have been used to make this artwork?

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If you would like to see your drawings on the RA website, please hand in your completed Art Detective at the Reception Desk. Alternatively, if you would like to work on your picture at home and send it to us later, you can post it to:

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