

# A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Self-Portrait in LEGO, 2017, 38.1 × 38.1 cm.

## 61-12 Ai WEIWEI

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- This is Section 61 on recent artists and this talk is on the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

### **KEY BIOGRAPHICAL PHASES (1957–PRESENT)**

- 1957–1970s: Childhood and Exile. Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai was almost immediately sent into internal exile with his father, the poet Ai Qing, living under harsh conditions in northwest China near the Gobi desert. This early trauma of being "imprisoned without arrest" deeply influenced his later focus on human rights and anti-authoritarianism.
- 1983–1993: The New York Years. Ai moved to New York City to study at the Parsons School of Design, where he discovered the work of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. During this time, he began documenting his life through photography, creating early "self-portraits" that emulated contemporary Western artists.
- 1993–2015: Return to Beijing and Activism. After returning to China, Ai became a prominent critic of the government. He investigated corruption following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and documented the demolition of his own studio in 2018. His work during this period, such as the Study of Perspective series (started in 1995), involved him giving the middle finger to major cultural and political institutions globally, starting with Tiananmen Square.
- 2015–Present: Global Citizen and Refugee Advocate. Since leaving China in 2015, Ai has lived in Berlin, the UK, and Portugal. His "portrait" has expanded to address the global refugee crisis, exemplified by his feature-length

documentary Human Flow (2017) and massive installations using life jackets from migrants.

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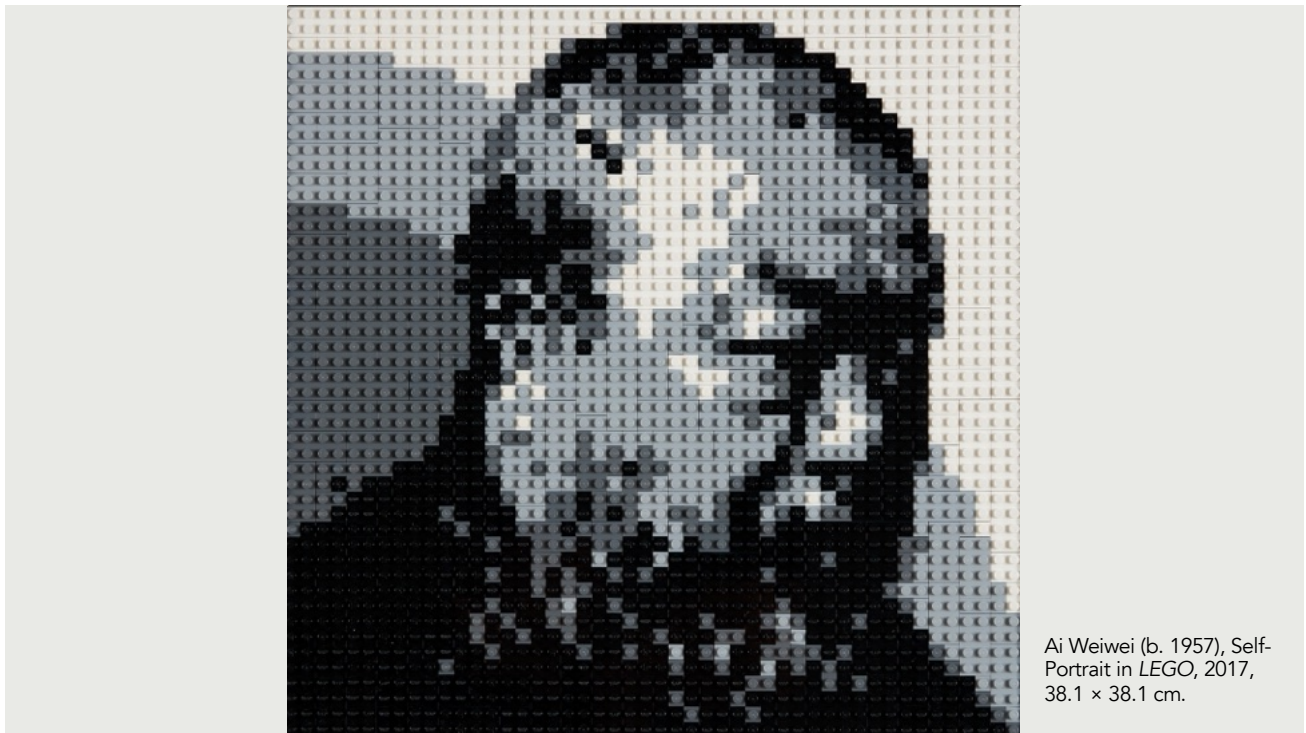
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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Self-Portrait in *LEGO*, 2017, 38.1 × 38.1 cm.

## Slide 1

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Self-Portrait in *LEGO*, 2017, 38.1 × 38.1 cm., sold at Philips, 2015, for £3.4m

- He was born in 1957 to China's **poet laureate, Ai Qing** (pronounced "eye ching"), but his father was branded an '**enemy of the people**,' along with most intellectuals. The family was **purged** to the edge of the **Gobi Desert**. For years, **one of China's greatest literary minds** was forced to **clean communal toilets**, while **young Weiwei** learned to survive by **making bricks and furniture**. This wasn't just a childhood; it was a **masterclass in power, oppression**, and the resilience of the human spirit.
- When the **Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with the death of Mao Zedong and the arrest of the "Gang of Four"**, the family **returned to Beijing**, and Weiwei hit the ground running. He didn't just join the art scene; he disrupted it, co-founding the **Stars Group** to challenge state-sanctioned aesthetics with **raw, avant-garde expression**. But Beijing wasn't big enough. **In 1981, he headed to New York City**, landing in the gritty East Village.
- His New York years were a steep learning curve. He absorbed the '**readymade**' genius of **Marcel Duchamp** and the pop-sensibility of **Andy Warhol**. He documented everything through a camera lens and befriended the legendary poet **Allen Ginsberg**. To **pay the rent**, he **sketched portraits in Times Square** and even became a **professional blackjack player** in Atlantic City—a gambler's instinct that never left him.

- Today, Weiwei frames his entire existence—his exile, his 81-day secret detention in 2011, and his global activism—as a single, continuous work titled ***Portrait of the Artist, 1957–Present***. He teaches us that life is the ultimate medium. As we move through these slides, remember: for Ai Weiwei, **art isn't something you hang on a wall; it's the act of refusing to stay silent.** His approach to art reminds me of Joseph Beuys.

## **NOTES**

*Self-Portrait (LEGO)*: A 30x30 inch work made of thousands of brightly hued LEGO bricks.

*At the Museum of Modern Art (1987)*: A photograph from his New York years where he emulates a pose by Andy Warhol.

*Mutuophagia (2018)*: A self-portrait showing the artist nude in a fetal position on a bed of fruit.

*Heluo with Self-Portrait (2023)*: A recent work connecting mythical Chinese imagery with his own identity.

Taschen Monograph: A comprehensive 700-page book of his life and work, which Ai collaborated on to serve as a definitive record of his "portrait" through 2015.

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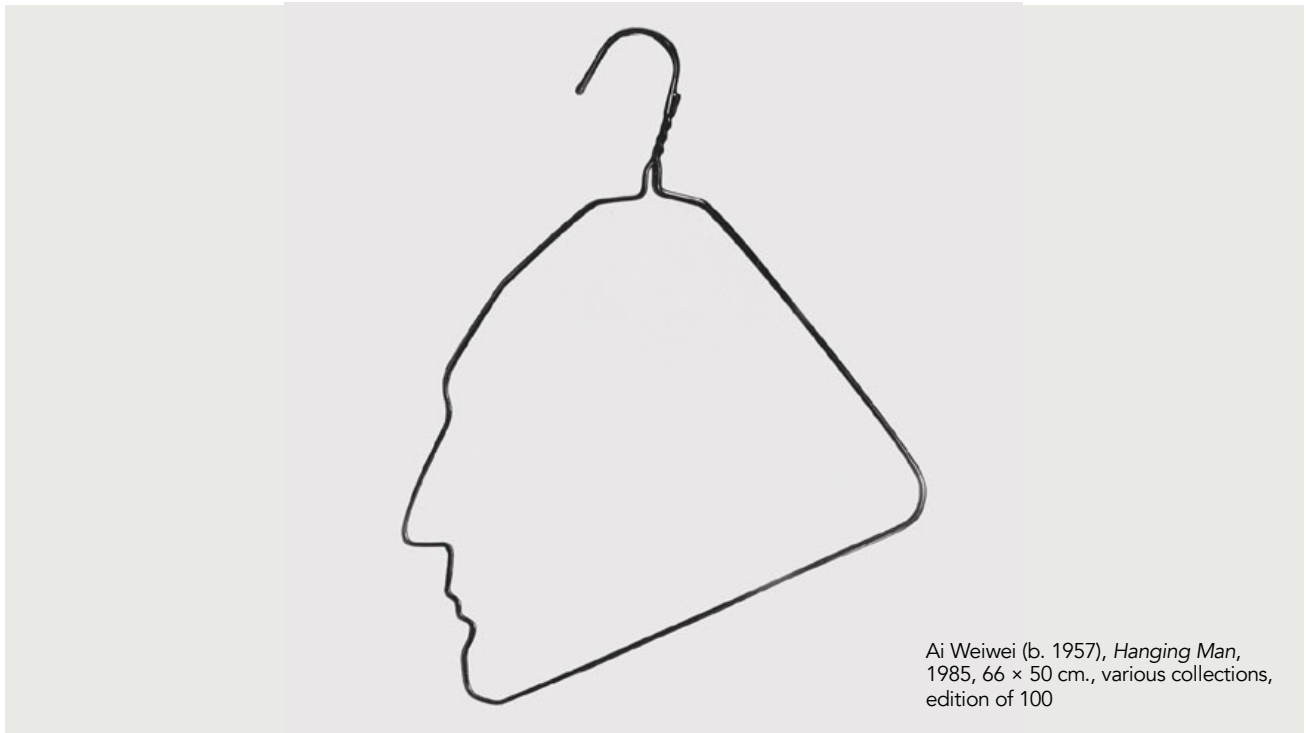
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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Hanging Man (Marcel Duchamp)*, 1985, 66 × 50 cm., various collections, numbered 95/100

- I mentioned Duchamp, he was a major influence. This work consists of a **wire clothes hanger** bent into the **profile of Marcel Duchamp's face**, displayed in a picture frame. Created whilst living in New York, it represents his engagement with conceptual art and readymades. Duchamp profoundly influenced his artistic practice. The work demonstrates his wit and economy of means. A utilitarian object becomes a portrait through simple manipulation. This prefigures his later use of found objects and cultural readymades.
- **In 1985** he was living in **Manhattan's East Village**, immersed in the city's avant-garde scene. **Duchamp's questioning** of artistic value systems became central to Ai's thinking. The clothes hanger, universally recognisable and mass-produced, perfectly embodied these ideas. By 1985 he had been in America four years, experiencing creative freedom unavailable in China. The work shows his developing conceptual approach before his **return to Beijing in 1993**.
- **New York in the mid-1980s was experiencing the height of postmodern art.** Artists were questioning authorship, originality and the art object itself. The East Village art scene was **vibrant** but economically marginal. **Ai lived modestly** whilst developing his artistic voice. He later said **Duchamp was "the most, if not the only, influential figure in my so-called art practice."** In 2009 he revisited this work, creating versions in silver glazed on porcelain, combining Western conceptualism with traditional Chinese craftsmanship.

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957). *Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1995. earthenware pot and paint; H. 25 × D. 28 cm, The Met, lent by M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong. © Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957). *Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1995. earthenware pot and paint; H. 25 × D. 28 cm, The Met, lent by M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong. © Ai Weiwei

- On his return to Beijing he became an **activist**. He took a **2,000-year-old Han Dynasty** ceremonial urn and painted it with the **Coca-Cola corporate logo** in bright pigment. This was his first work using ancient Chinese pottery. The **Han Dynasty** (206 BCE–220 CE) is considered a defining period in Chinese civilisation. The urn represents **centuries of tradition and craftsmanship**. By painting a Western corporate symbol on it, he creates a **collision between ancient and modern**, East and West. The work addresses **globalisation, cultural identity and consumer capitalism**. Some viewed it as desecration of cultural heritage. Others saw sharp commentary on China's rapid modernisation.
- **In 1993 he returned to Beijing** after learning his **father was seriously ill**. His father **Ai Qing died in 1996**. Between 1993 and 1996 he focused on performance art and sculpture. His brother took him to antique markets immediately upon his return. **Beijing was undergoing massive reconstruction and development. Construction sites and demolition unearthed vast quantities of antiquities**. Flea markets overflowed with ancient objects. He began collecting Han urns and Neolithic pottery. This was possibly the last period such objects were readily available in public markets. He handled thousands of objects, developing considerable expertise.

- He began questioning the **unquestioning veneration for anything old or considered sacred**. He was interested in the real versus the fake, copy versus original. He **edited and published underground art books** featuring Andy Warhol, modern Chinese artists and his own work. These books were influential in China's emerging contemporary art scene. He co-founded **China Art Archives and Warehouse**, an experimental art space. This urn series, begun in 1994, continues to the present day. He has painted hundreds of ancient vessels with corporate logos, bright industrial colours and acrylic paint.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Han: hahn

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Dropping A Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, three photographs each 148 × 121 cm., various collections

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Dropping A Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, three photographs each 148 × 121 cm., various collections

- A more extreme example. He is shown dropping a 2,000-year-old Han Dynasty urn. His expression remains neutral throughout. He actually broke two urns to capture this moment, as the first photographs failed. The work became one of his **most famous and controversial pieces**. It was first published in *The White Book* in 1995, one of **three underground art books** he co-edited. Later enlarged to accommodate exhibition requests. In 2015 he recreated it in Lego for his Alcatraz exhibition. **The urn was probably worth a few thousand dollars.**
- **Critics were outraged**, calling it **vandalism and desecration**. Others saw it as profound commentary on value, tradition and cultural heritage. He countered criticism by **invoking Chairman Mao**, who told people they could only build a new world by **destroying the old one**.
- For me, the most important reference is the **Cultural Revolution (1966–76)** when **Red Guards systematically destroyed antiquities**. The si jiu (Four Olds)—old customs, habits, culture and ideas—were targeted for elimination. Thousands of temples, artworks and historical sites were obliterated. Ai experienced this destruction firsthand **during his childhood exile**. I think what he is saying is I was part of this terrible crime which I am forcing the world to recognise. Unfortunately, the world has forgotten the Cultural Revolution it seems and focuses on Ai, the individual not the state.

- He is asking, who decides cultural value? It is clearly not age or beauty as during the Cultural Revolution the state decreed everything old is bad.
- In 2010 a commentator noted his fame remained primarily associated with this iconoclastic work. In 2014 Miami artist **Maximo Caminero smashed one of Ai's painted urns** at Pérez Art Museum, claiming it was artistic expression. Caminero was charged with criminal mischief. The incident raised the question of where art ends and vandalism begins.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Si jiu: suh jee-oh

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Study of Perspective – Tiananmen Square*, 1995, 38.9 × 59 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), "Study of Perspective – Tiananmen Square", 1995, 38.9 × 59 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York

- A black and white photograph showing the artist's left hand extended towards the camera, **middle finger raised**, with Tiananmen Square and the Gate of Heavenly Peace in the background. This was the first in an ongoing series spanning over 20 years. Subsequent photographs show his finger before the **White House, Eiffel Tower, Reichstag and Trump Tower**. The series **mimics innocent tourist snapshots** whilst making aggressive political gestures. The photographs were posted to his blog starting in 1995. They remain banned in China.
- The obscene gesture is today interpreted as meaning "f-off" but it goes back to ancient Greece when the phallic symbol was used to mock someone by indicating they were submissive.
- Tiananmen Square is where **hundreds of unarmed protestors were killed** in June 1989 during the democracy movement. He participated in demonstrations in New York at that time but had **no interest in Chinese politics then**. The Gate of Heavenly Peace, visible in the image, is ironically named given the massacre that occurred there.
- The series title parodies Renaissance **perspective studies**. His finger becomes the focal point, rendering monuments and power structures secondary. The work emphasises the **disconnect between individual and state power**. It urges viewers to **question propagandist ideas** and allegiance to institutions. The

photograph **gained worldwide fame** after he posted it online. Chinese police detained and interrogated him about it repeatedly. The work became iconic in contemporary Chinese activist art. Critics praised its sardonic humour and powerful protest. When posted to his blog, it reached millions, demonstrating social media's potential for political dissent.

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Fairytale*, 2007, duration 100 days, Kassel, Germany

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Fairytale*, 2007, duration 100 days, Kassel, Germany

- For Documenta 12, he **brought 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel, Germany**. Most were **first-time travellers to a foreign country**. He organised everything: passports, visas, transportation, accommodation, meals. He had their wristbands, outfits, suitcases, beds and sheets specially designed and manufactured in China. They were housed in a **former textile mill**. Chefs were flown in from his Beijing neighbourhood. His team filmed the entire project, producing a **150-minute documentary**. The budget was **4.1 million dollars**. The logistics were extraordinarily complex.
- The number 1,001 references the **Arabian Nights tales**. Each person was an individual yet part of a collective experience. This tension between individual and mass is central to his work. **He has deep distrust of systems that manipulate mass consciousness**. This is very relevant today with social media selecting content in a way that manipulates the individual. His father and family were victims of mass political movements in the 1950s. He witnessed how populations could be mobilised and misled to launch ruthless revolutions. The Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution demonstrated both the potential and atrocity of mass movements.
- **Documenta 12** ran from 16th June to 23rd September 2007. Participants travelled to Germany in five groups throughout this period. For many, it was their first experience of freedom of movement and expression outside China. The project was monumental in scope and ambition. It required dealing with

every detail of 1,001 people's lives for over three months. **He also brought 1,001 antique Qing Dynasty (the final imperial dynasty from 1644 to 1912) wooden chairs** to Kassel, one for each participant. The chairs were arranged in geometric patterns throughout the city. The combination of ancient chairs and contemporary citizens created powerful dialogue about Chinese identity and globalisation.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Qing: ching

Documenta: dok-oo-MEN-tah

Kassel: KAH-sel

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Beijing National Stadium (Bird's Nest)*, 2003–2008, 330 metres long, Beijing, China

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Beijing National Stadium (Bird's Nest)*, 2003–2008, 330 metres long, Beijing, China

- Collaborated with Swiss architecture firm **Herzog & de Meuron** as artistic consultant on **China's National Stadium for the 2008 Olympics**. The stadium holds 91,000 spectators. Its distinctive **latticed steel structure** earned it the nickname "**Bird's Nest**". It became an iconic symbol of modern China. The design features **36 kilometres of unwrapped steel**. It weighs 42,000 tonnes. The interwoven steel beams create a revolutionary architectural form. It cost **428 million dollars** to construct. The stadium opened in 2008 to worldwide acclaim.
- **He later denounced his involvement and boycotted the Olympics**. In May 2008 the **Sichuan earthquake killed over 70,000 people**. More than **5,000 were schoolchildren** who died when **poorly constructed school buildings** collapsed. He became highly critical of **shoddy construction and government corruption**. He was **outraged** by the government's treatment of the poor leading up to the Olympics. The contrast between the expensive stadium and collapsed schools was stark. He felt the Olympics were **propaganda** hiding systematic failures.
- His denouncement of the Games was a turning point. After playing such a key role, he demonstrated his commitment to principle over prestige. He could no longer separate his art from political activism. Afterwards this, he faced increasing surveillance, harassment and eventual arrest.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Sichuan: sich-WAN or sich-oo-AHN

Herzog: HAIR-tsog

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Remembering*, 2009, 925 × 10605 × 10 cm., Haus Der Kunst, Munich

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Remembering*, 2009, 925 × 10605 × 10 cm., Haus Der Kunst, Munich

- **Nine thousand children's backpacks** installed on the façade of Haus der Kunst museum. Like many of his works it or other versions have been exhibited around the world. I saw a much smaller version of this work in the Design Museum in London in 2023
- The backpacks spelled out a quote in Chinese characters: "**She lived happily for seven years in this world.**" These were the words of a **bereaved mother**. The backpacks were coloured to create the text in shades **matching the Toys R Us logo**. The work memorialised the over 5,000 children who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake when their schools collapsed. **The government refused to acknowledge the death toll** or take responsibility. He visited the destroyed areas, speaking with parents and teachers to collect names and birthdates of victims.
- The idea came from his visit to Sichuan after the earthquake. Bags and study materials were scattered everywhere. He realised individuals were being erased by state propaganda and the children would soon be forgotten. He and volunteers conducted a **citizen investigation**, collecting over 5,000 names. The government actively resisted his efforts. **They suppressed information about shoddy construction and corruption**. He published the names on his blog despite government warnings. His blog was shut down in 2009.
- The work was part of his retrospective exhibition "**So Sorry**" at Haus der Kunst

from October 2009 to January 2010. Two months before the opening, in **August 2009, he was severely beaten by police in Chengdu**. They punched him in the face, causing **cerebral haemorrhaging**. He needed **emergency brain surgery**. The beating occurred whilst he tried to testify for Tan Zuoren, a fellow investigator of the construction scandals. The attack was clearly intended to silence him. Instead, **it increased international attention** on his activism. The backpack installation became one of his most moving and powerful works.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Chengdu: cheng-DOO

Tan Zuoren: tahn ZWOR-en

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Straight*, 2008–2012, 600 × 1200 cm., steel reinforcing bars, 600 × 1200 cm, Lisson Gallery, London

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Straight*, 2008–2012, 600 × 1200 cm., steel reinforcing bars, 600 × 1200 cm, Lisson Gallery, London

- **One hundred and fifty tonnes of steel** reinforcing bars **salvaged from schools that collapsed** in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Each bar was **manually straightened** over four years. The bars are laid on the floor in two facing stacks. Heights oscillate creating an undulating landscape. A jagged rift runs down the centre like a fault line. The work weighs 38 tonnes in some installations, **90 tonnes** in others. From above it resembles a seismograph reading. Close inspection reveals the labour of straightening each piece. The rebar still bears traces of concrete and rust from the earthquake.
- **He purchased the mangled steel** before it could be recycled. **Over 200 workers** spent years straightening each bar by hand. The process itself became an act of remembrance. He stated the work needed to look as though nothing had ever happened, though of course something terrible did happen. The piece was first exhibited at the Hirshhorn Museum Washington in 2012. It travelled to **Venice Biennale 2013**. The **Royal Academy London** installed 90 tonnes in 2015. Critics called it his heaviest and most sombre work. Adrian Locke noted it bears a real sense of loss of life.
- The work **memorialises over 5,000 schoolchildren** killed when poorly constructed buildings collapsed. Substandard construction and corruption were responsible. He visited the destroyed Wenchuan Middle School where over 1,000 students died. Rebar without proper hooks failed to anchor into concrete.

**Structures simply fell apart** during the earthquake. His citizen investigation **collected names the government suppressed**. He published them despite official warnings. The government refused to acknowledge construction failures. Parents lost their only child under **China's one-child policy**.

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Wenchuan: wen-CHWAHN

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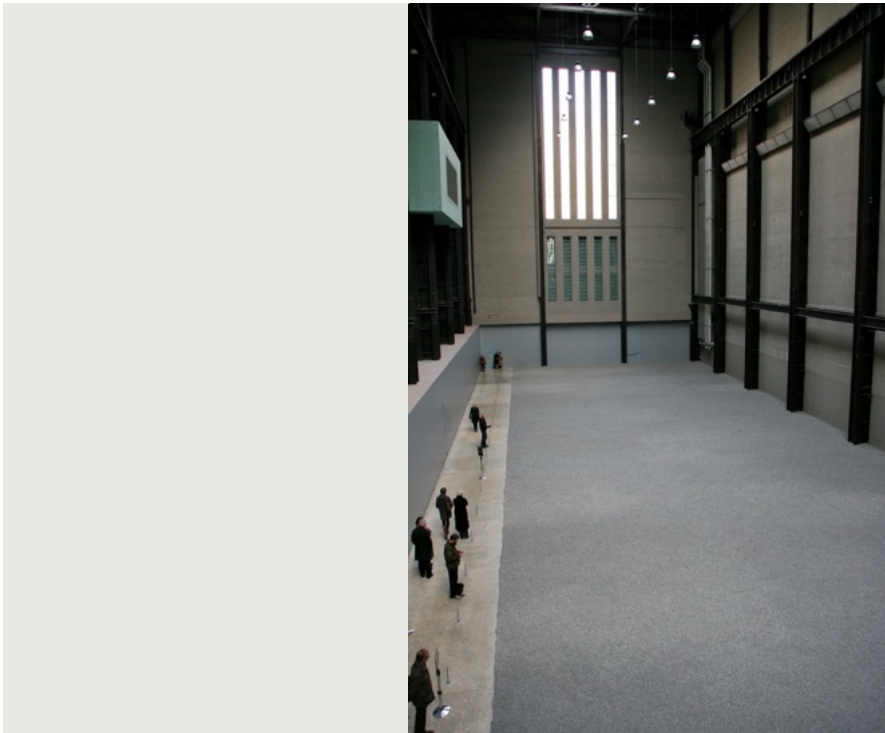
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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, 100 Million Seeds, 1000 Square Metres, Tate Modern, London

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, 100 Million Seeds, 1000 Square Metres, Tate Modern, London

- **One hundred million individually handcrafted porcelain sunflower seeds** covering the Turbine Hall floor to a depth of ten centimetres. The entire work weighs **150 tonnes**. Over **1,600 artisans** in Jingdezhen worked for **two and a half years** creating the seeds. Each seed underwent a **30-step process**. Each was **hand-sculpted, hand-painted** and fired at 1,300 degrees Celsius. From a distance they appear identical. Up close, **each is unique**. Visitors were initially invited to walk on and handle the seeds. After three days **the installation was roped off** due to concerns about **ceramic dust** from the porcelain pieces grinding together. The work could still be viewed from multiple angles and the bridge above.
- Jingdezhen is known as the "**Porcelain Capital**", producing **imperial porcelain for over a thousand years**. Porcelain is almost synonymous with China. By employing traditional craftsmen to create millions of mass-produced-looking objects, he comments on labour, consumption and "Made in China" phenomena. Sunflower seeds were common in Communist propaganda during his childhood. Chairman Mao represented himself as **the sun**. The **Chinese people were sunflowers** turning towards him. He also remembers **sharing sunflower seeds as treats during poverty** in Xinjiang. Seeds represented hope and potential growth during difficult times. The metaphor operates on multiple levels.

- The work gains international praise but six months later he was arrested and detained for 81 days without charge.

## **NOTES**

- The installation was commissioned for The Unilever Series at Tate Modern. It opened 12th October 2010 and ran until 2nd May 2011. Critics called it a masterpiece. Andrew Graham-Dixon noted these seeds "face and follow no one", unlike propaganda sunflowers. Richard Dormant called it a masterpiece. Adrian Searle praised it as "audacious, subtle, unexpected but inevitable". Art Asia Pacific called it "meticulous, beautiful, sparse, suggestive, even emotional". The work earned him international acclaim. Six months later, in April 2011, he was arrested at Beijing Capital International Airport and detained for 81 days.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Jingdezhen: jing-deh-JEN

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, 2011–2013, six dioramas each 377 × 198 × 153 cm., Lisson Gallery, London  
 Six-part work composed of (i) S upper, (ii) A ccusers, (iii) C leansing, (iv) R itual, (v) E ntropy, (vi) D oubt.  
 Six dioramas in fiberglass and iron  
 377 x 197 x 148.4 cm each

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, 2011–2013, six dioramas each 377 × 198 × 153 cm., Lisson Gallery, London

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Six dioramas in fiberglass and iron

377 x 197 x 148.4 cm each

- This is how he was detained.
- The artwork consists of six iron boxes containing three-quarter-scale dioramas depicting his 81-day detention in 2011. The acronym stands for Supper, Accusers, Cleansing, Ritual, Entropy and Doubt. Each box weighs 3.5 tonnes. Viewers peer through **small apertures and skylights** to observe scenes inside. The dioramas show him sleeping, eating, showering, being interrogated and using the toilet. **Two guards watch him constantly in every scene.** The figures are crafted in fibreglass with meticulous detail. **He memorised every crack** in the ceiling, every mark on the wall during his imprisonment. The work recreates his experience with hyper-real precision.
- Officials cited alleged economic crimes but provided no specifics. The international community, including major US art institutions, protested and rallied for his release. His Sunflower Seeds installation was showing at Tate Modern during his detention. The arrest was widely seen as retaliation for his activism regarding the Sichuan earthquake and criticism of the government. He was released in June 2011 but forbidden from speaking about his detention. His

passport was confiscated. He could not leave China. He broke this silence after a few months, speaking to foreign journalists.

- The work premiered at the 2013 Venice Biennale in Chiesa di Sant'Antonin. The church setting is significant. The installation evokes the Stations of the Cross. His mother Gao Ying broke down in tears after viewing it. Curator Maurizio Bortolotti noted he "upturns the surveillance situation, making us the viewers watch the guards who are watching him". The work transforms viewers into complicit voyeurs. The doors on the boxes are facades that cannot open. This enhances feelings of confinement and isolation. Critics praised it as deeply autobiographical and powerfully unsettling. The work exposes methods used against political dissidents whilst raising questions about surveillance in all societies.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Maurizio Bortolotti: mow-REET-zee-oh bor-toh-LOT-tee

Chiesa di Sant'Antonin: kee-EH-zah dee sant an-TOH-neen

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, 2010–2011, twelve bronze sculptures each approximately 300 cm. high, various locations

- Twelve monumental bronze animal heads representing the Chinese zodiac. Each head weighs several tonnes. They are oversized reinterpretations of **heads looted from Beijing's Old Summer Palace in 1860**. During the Second Opium War, British and French forces ransacked Yuanmingyuan palace. They stole countless treasures including twelve bronze animal heads from an imperial water clock fountain. These heads represented the traditional Chinese zodiac animals. Seven have been recovered through purchases and donations. Five remain missing. The looting symbolises colonial humiliation and cultural theft.
- His zodiac heads are both homage and critique. They address questions of authenticity, ownership and cultural property. Are they copies, reinterpretations or new works? The originals themselves were designed by European Jesuits for the Qing court, blending Chinese subjects with Western baroque aesthetics. This cultural hybridity complicates narratives of pure Chinese heritage. His versions have toured globally, appearing in New York, London, Los Angeles and other cities. They spark discussions about repatriation of cultural artefacts. **Should museums return looted objects** to their countries of origin?
- The sculptures were created between 2010 and 2011. They debuted amid controversy about returning the original heads to China. **In 2009 two of the original heads appeared at a Christie's auction**. Chinese authorities demanded they not be sold. The auction proceeded anyway. **A Chinese bidder**

**won but refused to pay**, calling it patriotic resistance. The incident highlighted ongoing tensions about cultural property. His zodiac series emerges from this context. By creating new versions, he questions what constitutes authentic cultural heritage. The works have been exhibited at major institutions worldwide.

## **NOTES**

- Ai reinterpreted the 12 bronze heads representing the traditional Chinese zodiac that once adorned the famed fountain-clock of the Yuanming Yuan, the imperial summer palace retreat in Beijing. Ransacked in 1860 during the Second Opium War by the British and French, only seven of the original heads have been returned to China – the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, horse, monkey, and boar. The locations of the other five – dragon, snake, goat, rooster, and dog – are still unknown. Central to Ai's reimagined zodiac is the metamorphosis provoked by expulsion, migration, and deliberate change of location undergone by people and objects alike. In 2015, Ai was awarded the Ambassador of Conscience Award by Amnesty International.
- Cast in bronze and standing three-metres-high, the sculptures each weigh 363kg. Through the re-interpretation of the heads on a larger scale, Ai comments and encourages debate on the politics of ownership, cultural history, repatriation and authenticity. The artist also wanted the work to be playful and accessible to the general public.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Yuanmingyuan: yoo-ahn-ming-yoo-AHN

Qing: ching

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Blossom*, part of *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, 2014–2015, site-specific installation, Alcatraz Island, San Francisco

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Blossom*, part of *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, 2014–2015, site-specific installation, Alcatraz Island, San Francisco

- Seven major installations created specifically for **Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary**. Key works included the Lego portrait series "Trace", **porcelain flowers place in sinks and toilets** "Blossom", the wind-powered "With Wind", and sound installations like "Refraction," prompting reflection on political prisoners and censorship.
- He was still under house arrest in Beijing and could not attend. His studio team installed the works remotely. The exhibition explored human rights and freedom of expression. It recontextualised the former military fortress, **notorious penitentiary and site of Native American history**. Works included **portraits of 176 prisoners of conscience** made from Lego bricks. He also created dragon kites from materials found in oppressive regimes. There were sound installations and works addressing surveillance.
- Alcatraz closed as a prison in 1963. It held notorious criminals like **Al Capone** but less well known are the **conscientious objectors and political prisoners**. These include the three **Hofer brothers and their brother-in-law sentenced to 20 years** as conscientious objectors for religious reasons during World War I. They were a dark, damp dungeon and two died of abuse and exposure. Others were held for refusing to give up their children or speaking out against war or the government. The history of incarceration, resistance and activism made it perfect for his artworks.

- Despite being confined to China, he maintained global dialogue through Twitter and Instagram. Technology allowed him to circumvent physical restrictions.
- The exhibition ran from September 2014 to April 2015. Over 800,000 visitors attended. Critical reception was overwhelmingly positive. **His Lego portraits included Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr, Edward Snowden and Liu Xiaobo.** After the exhibition, **Lego initially refused to sell him bricks** for political artwork. This sparked **international outcry.** Supporters donated Lego to his studio worldwide. The incident demonstrated his ability to turn restrictions into dialogue. His passport was finally returned in July 2015, four years after his arrest. He promptly left for Germany to reunite with his young son.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Liu Xiaobo: lee-OH shah-oh-boh

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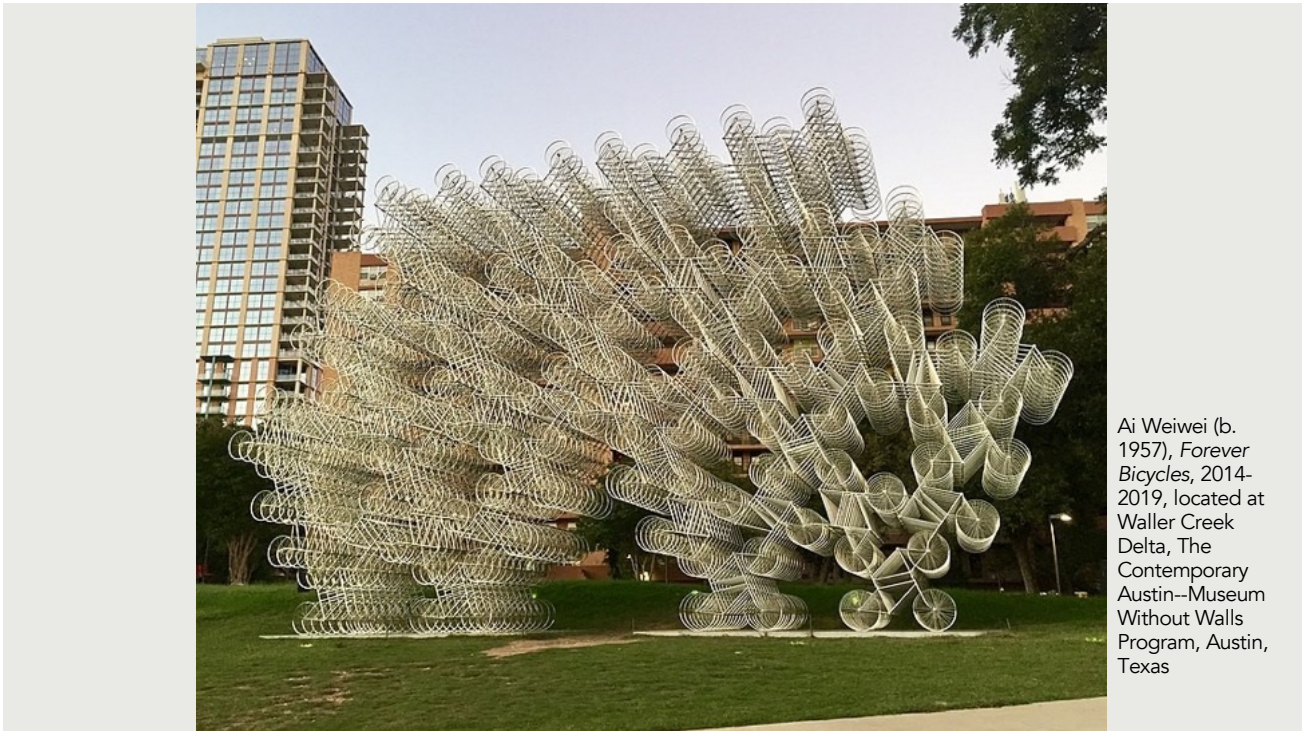
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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Forever Bicycles*, 2003–ongoing, dimensions variable, multiple locations worldwide including

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Forever Bicycles*, 2014-2019, located at Waller Creek Delta, The Contemporary Austin--Museum Without Walls Program, Austin, Texas (consists of 1254 Forever brand (Yongjiu) mass-produced Chinese bicycles)

- A monumental installation composed of **over 1,000 stainless steel bicycles**. The work has been reconfigured multiple times with varying numbers of bicycles. Toronto featured 3,144 bicycles in 2013. Taipei had over 1,000 in 2012. Winnipeg displayed 1,254 bicycles in 2019. Austin showed 1,300 bicycles in 2017. Each installation reaches heights of 30 feet or more. The bicycles are interconnected without handlebars, seats, chains or pedals. **Only frames, wheels and spokes remain**. They form towering **crystalline structures**. The optical illusion creates **infinite depth**. Viewing angles constantly shift perspective. The structures resemble traditional **Chinese paifang gates** found in Chinatowns globally.
- The title **references the Forever brand, Yongjiu in Chinese**. This company based in Shanghai **produced mass-manufactured bicycles** from the 1940s onwards. Forever **bicycles flooded Chinese streets** during his childhood. They were **ubiquitous** before cars became widely accessible. When I was in China they filled the streets. However, they remained financially out of reach for many families including his own. For him personally, bicycles represented freedom during exile in the Gobi Desert. When teaching architecture later, he used

bicycles to show students they could build with materials beyond bricks and concrete. The first version from 2003 suspended real Forever bicycles in a circle. He removed chains, handlebars, pedals and seats. This abstraction allowed pattern play and ambiguity.

- Critics see it as commentary on changing social environments in China and globally. The bicycle, once China's primary transport, vanishes as car culture dominates. The work mourns this loss whilst celebrating the bicycle's cultural significance.

## **NOTES**

- Subsequent versions embraced manufactured aesthetics with spectacular architectural proportions. The gleaming stainless steel ossifies the bicycles. They appear self-propagating yet strikingly immobilised. This creates potent metaphors for arrested movement. Mass-produced elements suggest circumscribed individuality. The series has appeared at major venues including National Gallery Victoria, Taipei Fine Arts Museum and Nathan Phillips Square Toronto. Each iteration is unique to its location. The work remains among his most recognisable public sculptures.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Yongjiu: yong-JEE-oh

Paifang: pie-FAHNG

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Tree*, 2010, tree sections and metal bolts, 680 x 650 x 650 cm., Tate Modern

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Tree*, 2009–2010, 510 × 515 × 511 cm., multiple locations including

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Tree*, 2010, tree sections and metal bolts, 680 x 650 x 650 cm., Tate Modern

- Monumental sculptures constructed from **sections of dead trees**. He created **twelve trees** in this series between **2009 and 2010**. Each tree reaches five metres in height. The pieces are assembled from trunks, branches and roots of **different trees**. He sourced the wood from markets in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province in southern China. The trees come from mountainous regions. He had been **collecting these fragments for years** before finding their artistic purpose. The branches are joined using traditional hidden mortise and tenon joints. **Steel bolts** add structural support. The joints are deliberately visible.
- (CLICK) I saw them at the Tate and when eight trees were displayed outdoors at the **Royal Academy London in 2015**. The work addresses **Chinese traditions of collecting tree fragments for contemplation**. In China, trees serve as counterparts to the dead on earth. (CLICK) They represent **the realm between heaven and the underworld**. Ancient emperors valued curiously shaped trees and rocks. Dead trees in Beijing's Forbidden City Imperial Garden are photographed by tourists today. They symbolise the temple's venerable age. His trees appear organic from a distance. Up close, their fabrication becomes apparent. Each tree combines parts from different locations and species. They are simultaneously authentic and artificial.

- **Later he cast the trees in iron, creating Iron Tree works from 2013 onwards.** The iron versions oxidise over time. They develop rust patinas suggesting seasonal cycles. This transitions from natural material to industrial reproduction. The concept expands questions about authenticity and the relationship between humans and nature. Two Iron Trees were permanently installed at the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem in 2017, where Dead Sea Scrolls are preserved. The trees have been exhibited globally at major institutions.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Jingdezhen: jing-deh-JEN

Jiangxi: jee-AHNG-shee

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Safe Passage*, 2016, 14,000 life jackets on building columns, Konzerthaus, Berlin

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Safe Passage*, 2016, 14,000 life jackets on building columns, Konzerthaus, Berlin

- **Fourteen thousand bright orange life jackets** attached to the columns of Konzerthaus Berlin. The jackets had been **discarded by refugees** arriving on Greek island shores, particularly Lesbos. He **visited refugee camps** throughout 2015 and 2016. He was **deeply moved** by the refugee crisis. He collected life jackets left behind by those who survived the Mediterranean crossing. Each jacket represents a person who risked everything fleeing war and persecution. Many refugees drowned making this journey. The vivid orange colour creates striking visual impact against the neoclassical building.
- The European refugee crisis peaked in 2015–2016. **Over one million refugees and migrants crossed into Europe**, mainly fleeing conflicts in **Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Thousands drowned** in the Mediterranean. The Greek islands became arrival points for overcrowded boats. **Lesbos received over 500,000 arrivals in 2015 alone.** The life jackets, many counterfeit and inadequate, littered the beaches. They became symbols of desperation and humanitarian catastrophe. He also filmed a documentary, *Human Flow*, capturing refugees' experiences across 23 countries. The film premiered in 2017.

## NOTES

- The Berlin installation was erected in February 2016. Later that year he created

a similar installation at Belvedere Palace in Vienna. He also wrapped columns at Venice's Palazzo Ducale with life jackets. These works brought global attention to the refugee crisis. They transformed abstract statistics into visceral human reality. Each jacket had protected a specific person during their most vulnerable moment. The installations were temporary but photographically documented. They circulated widely on social media. He continues to work on refugee issues, creating installations, films and advocacy campaigns. He now lives in Portugal, itself a destination for refugees.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Konzerthaus: kon-TSERT-house

Lesbos: LEZ-boss

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Law of the Journey*, 2017, 6000 × 600 × 300 cm., National Gallery Prague

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Law of the Journey*, 2017, 6000 × 600 × 300 cm., National Gallery Prague

- A massive **inflatable black rubber boat suspended from the ceiling**. The boat measures 60 to 70 metres long. It contains **258 oversized faceless refugee figures**. The boat was made in a Chinese factory that manufactures actual refugee vessels. These precarious boats are used by thousands crossing the Mediterranean. The figures are squeezed within the confines of the temporary shelter. They represent refugees undertaking a journey into the unknown. The scale is monumental. The work floats above viewers in the gallery. The black colour creates a sombre atmosphere.
- The title **references Walter Benjamin's reading of Franz Kafka**. The law of the journey involves unexpected reversals and distortions. It deranges casual connections between origins and destinations. The exhibition opened in Prague in March 2017. It ran until January 2018. **The Czech Republic was refusing to accept refugees at the time**. The location carried symbolic weight. The Trade Fair Palace building served as an assembly point for Jews before deportation to Terezín concentration camp from 1939 to 1941. The historical parallel is deliberate and powerful.
- **He visited over 40 refugee camps** whilst developing this work. He travelled to Greek islands, the Greece-Macedonia border and other locations. He was filming his documentary *Human Flow* simultaneously. The work accompanies other refugee-themed pieces including *Laundromat* and *Snake Ceiling*. He

spent more than 40 days in camps documenting conditions. The United Nations emergency relief coordinator called **Syria "a slaughterhouse, a complete meltdown of humanity, the apex of horror"**. **He stated there is no refugee crisis, only human crisis**. He argued that dealing with refugees means losing basic values. The work is a call to action. It condemns ignorance and blindness of political apparatus. Critical reception was strong.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Terezín: teh-reh-ZEEN

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Good Fences Make Good Neighbours*, 2017, site-specific installations, over 300 sites, New York City  
Art works include this work *Arch*, and *Five Fences*, *Circle Fence*, *Harlem Bus Shelter*, and *Gilded Cage*.

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Good Fences Make Good Neighbours*, 2017, site-specific installations, over 300 sites, New York City

Art works include *Arch*, *Five Fences*, *Circle Fence*, *Harlem Bus Shelter*, and *Gilded Cage*.

- A **citywide public art exhibition spanning over 300 locations across New York's five boroughs**. The project included monumental sculptures, bus shelter installations, photography banners and light pole banners. Major works included **Gilded Cage in Central Park's Doris Freedman Plaza**.
- **This golden birdcage structure stands near Trump Tower and the Plaza Hotel**. *Arch* was installed inside Washington Square Arch. It features galvanised steel and mirror-polished stainless steel. **The passage door references Marcel Duchamp**. *Circle Fence* surrounded the Unisphere in Flushing Meadows Park, Queens. It uses rope netting attached to black bars.
- The title comes from **Robert Frost's 1914 poem Mending Wall**. The proverb questions whether boundary walls are necessary. He chose it with **ironic intent**. The work addresses the international migration crisis. It responds to rising nationalism and closing borders worldwide. It comments on President Trump's immigration policies. Trump's border wall with Mexico and travel bans from Muslim countries are referenced. The exhibition ran from 12th October 2017 to 11th February 2018. It was presented by Public Art Fund for their 40th anniversary. The budget exceeded initial expectations. Kickstarter campaigns helped fund production.

- **He lived in New York for over ten years from 1981 to 1993.** He sold T-shirts at the Unisphere location when he was a struggling artist living illegally in the city. He **learned much from New York and loves it deeply.** He stated doing **this work was paying back respect and love to the city.** He chose bus stops and public transport routes over prestigious locations like Rockefeller Centre. He wanted to **reach people** who use the city as a facility. The democratic approach made art accessible throughout daily life. Variations on fencing motifs—chain link, synthetic netting, barriers—adapted to their sites. They appeared to grow out of urban space. The work changed how people relate to fences and their environment. His documentary Human Flow premiered simultaneously in theatres. The projects are deeply intertwined.

## **NOTES**

- Arch, Washington Square Arch, Washington Square Park, Ai's nearly 40 foot tall cage structure is located within the triumphal arch. The sculpture's center is a polished mirror passageway, depicting two united human silhouettes. Visitors must use this passageway to pass through the Washington Square Arch, and will see their reflection, and reflection of many others along the way. In Ai's words: "The basic form of a fence or cage suggests that it might inhibit movement through the arch, but instead a passageway cuts through the barrier – a door obstructed, through which another door opens."

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Three Perfectly Proportioned Spheres and Camouflage Uniforms Painted White*, 2025, Kyiv, Ukraine

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Three Perfectly Proportioned Spheres and Camouflage Uniforms Painted White*, 2025, Kyiv, Ukraine

- **Ai Weiwei's most recent major works** include the large public installation "**Camouflage**" at New York's Four Freedoms Park (until Dec 2025) and another significant installation in Kyiv, Ukraine, featuring "**Three Perfectly Proportioned Spheres and Camouflage Uniforms Painted White**", shown in late 2025, all dealing with **themes of war, truth, and concealment**, building on his **recent experiences in Ukraine**. He continues to use materials like LEGOs for large-scale recreations, such as *Water Lilies* (2022) displayed in Seattle in 2024-2025, and explores daily objects in marble, like *Marble Toilet Paper* (2020).
- "I came here not just to hold an exhibition, but to understand what is happening and how the Ukrainian people have managed to fight this brutal war," the artist told The Kyiv Independent. "Being here inspired me to decide to create the exhibition, as a way to express my solidarity with the people and, hopefully, contribute in some small way to the pursuit of peace for this country."
- "My artworks are not merely an aesthetic expression," the artist said in a statement about the Ukraine exhibition, "but also a reflection of my position as an individual navigating immense political shifts, international hegemonies and conflicts."

### **RECENT KEY PROJECTS (2024-2025):**

**Three Perfectly Proportioned Spheres and Camouflage Uniforms Painted White** (2025): An installation in Kyiv, Ukraine, addressing the ongoing conflict.

**Camouflage** (2025): A large structure draped in camouflage netting at Four Freedoms State Park, NYC, reflecting on human rights, vulnerability, and concealment.

**Water Lilies** (2022): A massive LEGO rendition of Monet's work, shown in Seattle in 2024-2025, merging art history with contemporary experience.

**Works using LEGOs:** Continuing his signature style, he created pieces like The U.S. Navy collecting the remnants of a Chinese high-altitude surveillance balloon shot down by an Air Force fighter (2023).

### **RECURRING THEMES:**

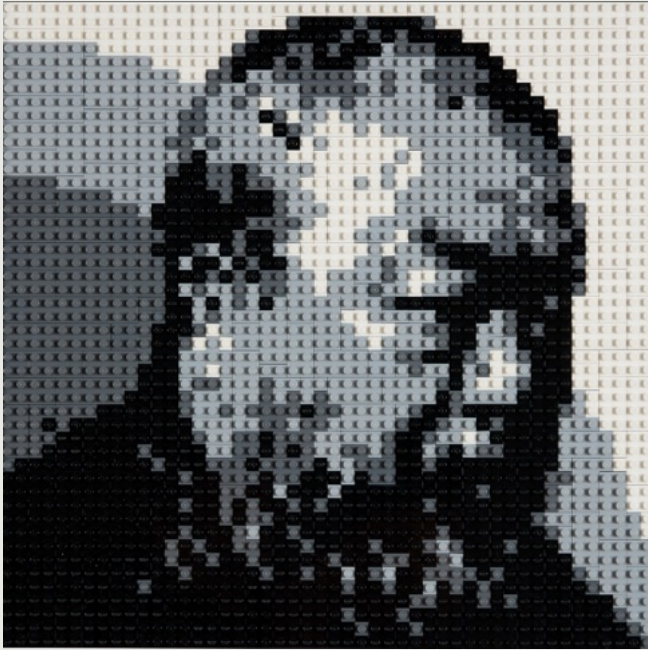
**Human Rights & Conflict:** Addressing global events, including the war in Ukraine, through symbolism and installation.

**Truth & Concealment:** Using camouflage to question hiding, misleading, and revealing realities.

**Everyday Objects:** Elevating mundane items (like toilet paper, masks, or buttons) into artistic statements on societal conditions.

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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Self-Portrait in LEGO, 2017, 38.1 × 38.1 cm.

## 61-12 Ai WEIWEI

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

[WWW.SHAFE.UK](http://WWW.SHAFE.UK)

- Ai Weiwei is a global icon of contemporary art and social activism, best known for his **unyielding commitment to human rights, freedom of expression, and critiques of authoritarian power**. His legacy lies in redefining the role of the artist from a mere creator of objects to a vital social commentator who uses various media—sculpture, photography, documentaries, and social media—to challenge political injustice and preserve historical truth. His upcoming work is “Button Up!” For Manchester Factory International opening in July 2026. It uses millions of buttons weighing 30 tons which he purchased from a disused British factory to comment on imperialism and industrial history
- That brings me to the end of today’s talk. Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



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