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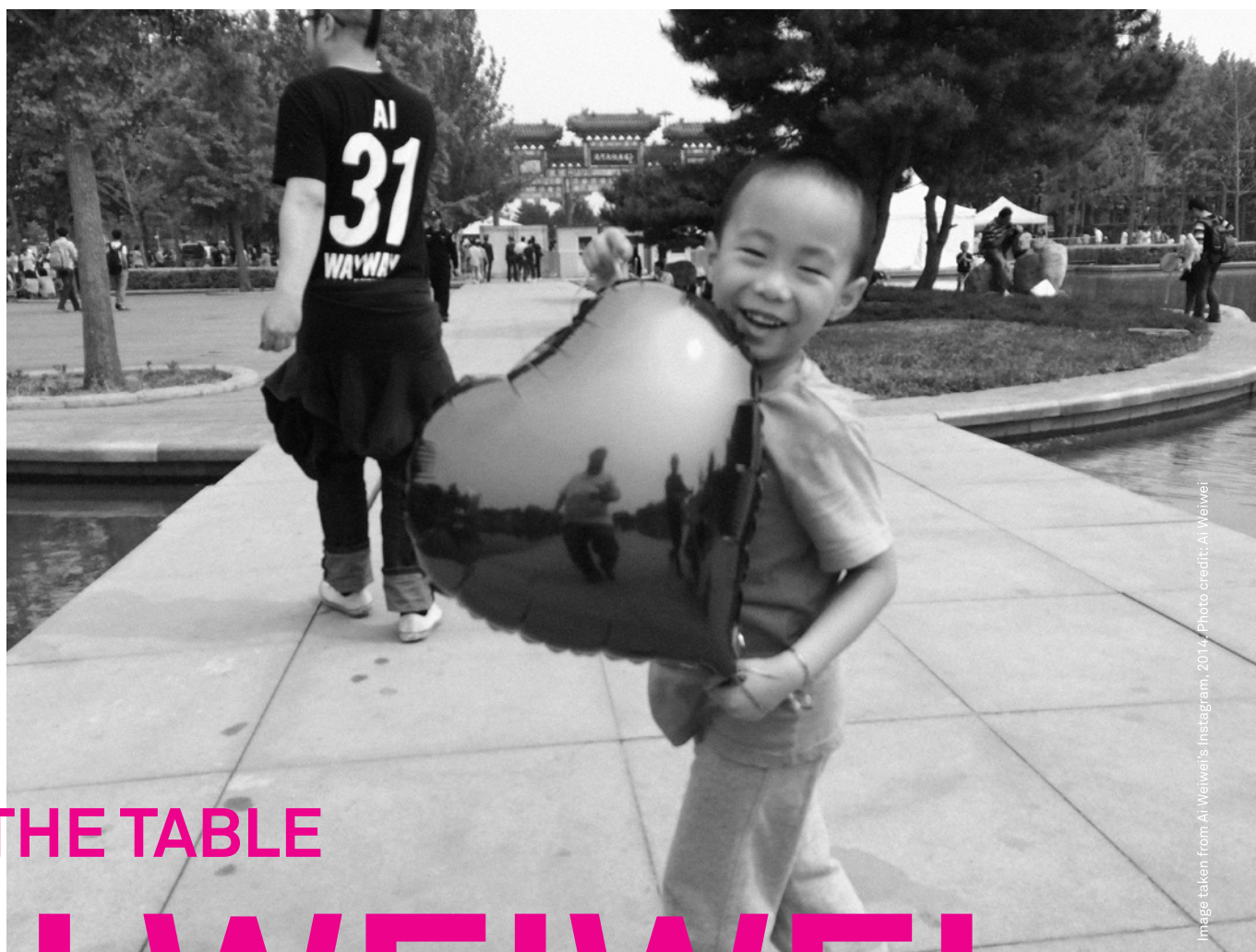


Image taken from Ai Weiwei's Instagram, 2014. Photo credit: Ai Weiwei

ON THE TABLE

# AI WEIWEI

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## On the Table. Ai Weiwei

### INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

We are actually a part of the reality, and if we don't realize that, we are totally irresponsible. We are a productive reality. We are the reality, but that part of reality means that we need to produce another reality.  
Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei is well known for his longstanding confrontation with the Chinese communist government and for his large-scale installations in leading contemporary art museums and events worldwide. He works on a global scale with any format and medium that comes to hand—or simply invents new ones.

A staunch defender in the struggle for freedom, he has used his work as a potent mouthpiece for speaking out against the unseen repression and censorship as China opens up to capitalist markets. As an artist, he strives tirelessly to raise critical awareness in society.

*On the Table. Ai Weiwei* aims to give a comprehensive overview of his work by exploring some of his best-known pieces alongside previously unseen work. Ai Weiwei makes use of a wide range of techniques—including photography, architecture, video, sculpture, graphic design, installations, objects and music videos, among others—but central to all his work is the role of the image as a construction and vehicle for reality. He then uses this to explore the tensions between truth and lies, evidence and ambiguity, control and freedom, politics, art, power and society.

Ai Weiwei sees art as a device for striking up dialogues within various contexts, comparing and contrasting different traditions and visions, negotiating, dissecting, projecting and sharing: like a table on which we can lay out our credentials and show our cards, discovering what is underneath and, if necessary, turning the tables.

**Rosa Pera**, curator *On the table. Ai Weiwei*

## On the Table. Ai Weiwei

*On the Table. Ai Weiwei* offers a comprehensive view of the artist's life and work through the display of a variety of artworks and materials.

The exhibits are arranged chronologically, but they do not follow a linear structure. The themes explored in Ai Weiwei's work can be approached in many different ways, including multidisciplinary, nonconformity and dissidence, and the impact of media.

***On the Table. Ai Weiwei*** contains over 40 exhibits—including photography, videos, installations, architecture models, sculptures, graphic design projects, publications and music—set up to match the scale of La Virreina Image Centre. It features previously unseen works alongside pieces that have become global icons. These objects and images are heavily charged with meaning, reflecting Ai's life and experience as an artist and an active participant in society, and documenting the political and social realities of modern-day China. As a whole, this selection of compared and contrasted pieces explores issues often thought of as antagonistic or incompatible: individual v collective, construction v deconstruction, present v past, real v false, exclusivity v reproducibility, together with a stream of questions sparked by the different ways in which Ai Weiwei invites us to ask.

Crisscrossing the whole exhibition—from the series of photographs of 1980s New York and 1990s Beijing to the more recent pieces, such as the previously unseen *Cao, Untitled (Ai Weiwei Studio table)* and *Untitled (Ai Weiwei Studio chairs, Qing Dynasty, Qianlong)*—are recurring practices and militant attitudes such as resistance and transfer. Followed tirelessly by the artist without restraint, they launch processes that turn individual into collective action, and turn gestures into global movements that are hard to predict or control. Meanwhile, Ai Weiwei constantly appeals to the context surrounding—and often engulfing—him at every moment as he keeps up his ardent struggle to call for greater freedom in his country.

The exhibition begins with ***New York Photographs*** (1983–1993), Ai Weiwei's photo series of his decade in New York, to where he travelled as part of a generation of Chinese artists who decided to leave their country in search of the freedom of expression and a stimulating, dynamic artistic and cultural scene where they might begin a promising career. One of the most active members of the Chinese diaspora, Ai Weiwei discovered work by creators who would become his major references, including artists Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, and met intellectuals such as poet Allen Ginsberg, photographer Robert Frank and masters such as painter Sean Scully. This period saw some of his first self-portraits—a practice he has continued up to the present day—as well as the first signs of an insight eager to appropriate its context in order to grasp and get across the taut energy and the state of conflict that make up urban space. And he did so ironically and critically by appropriating objects and then altering their form and function, as in ***Suitcase for Bachelor*** (1983), ***Hanging Man*** (1987), ***One-Man-Shoe*** (1987), and ***Château Lafite*** (1987), which gives a knowing nod at Duchamp.

A new stage in Ai Weiwei's career is reflected in ***Beijing Photographs*** (1993–2001), a photo series he made after returning to Beijing because he found out that his father, poet Ai Qing, was ill. This unique, highly revealing series contains images that hint at attitudes, perspectives and practices that Ai Weiwei has worked on throughout his entire career. They bear witness to the artist's return to his city in an artistic context that was utterly isolated from the rest of the world. He published three books—***Black Cover Book*** (1994), ***White Cover Book*** (1995) and ***Grey Cover Book*** (1997)—to raise Chinese artists' awareness of contemporary art and, together with Hans van Dijk and Frank Uytterhaegen, set up China Art Archives & Warehouse, an alternative art space where he could facilitate, show and study the work of local artists from the mid-1980s onwards. It is still going strong today.

Linking the two photo series is ***Cao*** (2014), on display in a room wallpapered with a design created by Ai Weiwei based on his now-iconic provocative gesture of protest—an outstretched arm giving the finger—which the artist often brandishes in front of symbols of established power. The combination of the marble grass installation and the repeated gesture employs a common juxtaposition or word play in Ai's works: “fake” and “fuck”. When the word “fake” is pronounced in Chinese pinyin, it sounds like the English word “fuck”. Further, *cao*, the Chinese word for “grass”, is a homophone for the Chinese word for “fuck”.

“Fake” and “fuck” are also present in the adjoining rooms. Mentions of the pair appear explicitly in the title of the first exhibition of contemporary artists in Beijing curated by Ai Weiwei, ***Fuck Off*** (2000), and in the name of his studio, Fake Design, as shown in ***258 Studio Model*** (1999), and also implicitly in ***Coca Cola Vase*** (1994), made by drawing the Coca-Cola logo on an ancient Chinese vase, a stinging criticism of communism's disdain for Chinese tradition from the Cultural Revolution onwards and its current embrace of capitalist consumerism.

The tension between tradition and contemporaneity, and Ai Weiwei's biting view of China's transformation is also clear in works such as ***Souvenir from Beijing*** (2002) and ***Provisional Landscape*** (2002–2008), where destruction and construction are interwoven in the same shot, the past inseparable from the present to the extent that one merges into the other. Likewise, opposites also feature in ***National Stadium*** (2014), a photo series on the construction of the Olympic stadium that Ai Weiwei helped design in conjunction with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron in 2008; here, the exterior form is nothing more than a supporting structure for the building, thus inverting inside and outside.

Running all the way along the corridor connecting the two wings of the Palau de La Virreina, ***Study of Perspective, 1995–2011 (2014)*** is one of Ai Weiwei's best-known series: made at different cities across the world between 1995 and 2011, it is an eloquent manifesto of his nonconformist, provocative stance.

A turning point in Ai Weiwei's career—and also for the layout of this show—is the devastating earthquake that struck Sichuan, in the heart of China, on 12 May 2008, with tragic consequences: over 90,000 people dead or missing. Ai Weiwei saw first-hand the remains of shoddily constructed schools that caused the deaths of thousands of children. He recruited and organised a group of volunteers to survey and film the post-quake conditions and compiled a list of 5,196 children who died. While the government was busy trying to hush up victims' names, their total number and the circumstances surrounding their death, Ai Weiwei published the list on his blog in full.

In order to express his thoughts on the disaster and document its conditions, the artist made several pieces on the Sichuan earthquake, including sculptures, large-scale installations and documentaries. These include the film ***Box Your Ears*** (2009), a raw account of the tragedy and the Chinese government's means of repression, cruelty and corruption. The screening is flanked by photographs of the devastation and families' calls for the authorities to be held to account. It is a clear example of the artist's commitment to empowerment and social emancipation in the struggle for human rights in China.

In 2010, Tate Modern invited him to create the piece *Sunflower Seeds* for the Turbine Hall. Ai Weiwei filled the space with 150 tonnes of porcelain sunflower seeds: 100 million of them individually sculpted and hand-painted by hundreds of Chinese craft workers in Jingdezhen, the city where imperial porcelain was made for over a thousand years. Evoking the hardships of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, these highly symbolic seeds make up a mysterious, beckoning ocean, in a stark contrast of identity and individual experience on the one hand and collective belonging on the other.

The heart of the room is dominated by ***Map of China*** (2004), a sculpture made out of ironwood salvaged from Qing dynasty (1644–1911) temples destroyed to make way for modern developments. A map is defined by its specific, “exact” nature in accordance with established political conditions and is therefore an expression of power and control over a territory. Maps are a recurring feature in Ai Weiwei's work, from static objects and moving images to social networks and the internet.

With the same urge to create a map, but this time capturing its dynamic evolution, Ai Weiwei crisscrossed Beijing with his video camera: in ***Chang'an Boulevard*** (2004) he took 608 one-minute sequences of the whole 45-km-long avenue that crosses the city from east to west, and the resulting film is over 10 hours long. He also captured the urban rhythm and dynamics of change in a thousand-year-old city that has been turned into the administrative and political centre for a communist regime, now one of the main capitals for the global capitalist market. In ***Beijing: The Second Ring*** (2005), Ai Weiwei took one-minute shots from both sides of over 30 bridges on cloudy days (he later made another video, *Beijing: The Third Ring*, following the same methodology on sunny days). These shots are sharp intakes of the city's breath, reflecting to a certain extent the many cameras that litter the bridges.

Following the static, distant vision of the wooden map and the dynamic panorama of the videos, Ai Weiwei surpassed the map and broke down borders by inviting 1,000 Chinese citizens to visit Kassel as part of his project at the leading international contemporary art event, documenta. Ai Weiwei had two works at the 2007 edition, including **Fairytale**, a multifaceted work that included videos, installations and objects, which was a long time in the making. This piece evoked contrasting reactions from Chinese and European visitors and among international art professionals and the general public. Above all, it explored the central issue that pervades so much of Ai Weiwei's work: his questioning of reality and fiction, how each is produced and how influence and intensity are achieved.

Ai Weiwei's criticism on the lack of freedom in China, by means of his work, his presence and activities online, especially on social networks, has led to his opinion being censored. His work is impacted by the full force of a political apparatus that actively encourages and stokes capitalism yet refuses to tolerate the slightest whiff of democracy. This political pressure can be seen in **Illumination** (2009), a selfie, and **Brain Inflation** (2009), an X-ray image of the artist's brain showing damage caused by the brutal beating he suffered at the hands of the police. Like **IOU** (2011–2013) and **Stamp** (2011), repression is also felt in **Ai Weiwei's Appeal ¥15,220,910.50** (2014), a film which documents his arrest and 81-day confinement and the lengthy legal process that ensued when he was accused of tax fraud. The resulting global reaction was staggering: protests outside Chinese embassies and consulates and at leading art museums worldwide all coordinated and organised by hundreds of thousands of online users.

The artist had already been deprived of his freedom before, when he was subjected to house arrest after deciding to hold a party to mark the imminent demolition of his studio in Shanghai by the same government that had encouraged him to open it. Even though he couldn't attend the event in person, it went ahead without him in defiance of the government's threats. Hundreds of people feasted on the river crabs he had ordered in a further provocative gesture, since the Chinese word for river crab (河蟹 *héxiè*) sounds like the word for harmony (和谐 *héxié*), one of the pillars of communist doctrine and a common euphemism for the government's censorship. 10,000 crabs were served, the number a common figure in Maoist slogans, such as "Chairman Mao will live for 10,000 years!" The works **Shanghai Studio** (2010), **Shanghai Studio Demolition** (2011), **He Xie** (2011), **Malu Studio Shanghai** (2011), and **The Crab House** (2012) are linked to these events.

Waiting, surveillance and invisibility are all related to situations of control where one party wants to exert its power at a distance. It is barely perceptible but imposes a threatening presence. There are objects that remind us of the efforts, but at the end they are reduced to relics of decadent voyeurism when seen from the context of global visibility. Ai Weiwei placed ironic red lanterns to point out the location of surveillance cameras surrounding his home and studio in Beijing, and same sardonic look led him to make a CCTV device in marble, a material historically reserved for monuments and tombs. **Surveillance Camera** (2010), **Untitled (ashtray)** (2012) and **Police Portrait** (2011) are all objects or images that the artist "stole"

from those keeping tabs on him. They testify to the paranoia of futile, anachronistic, routine surveillance. They are presented together in an empty room, because, as Ai Weiwei says, “When everything’s visible, there’s nothing to spy on.”

This idea is reinforced by *Handcuffs* (2012), a set of jade handcuffs lying on the floor in the middle of a room decorated with baroque wallpaper featuring cameras, handcuffs and the Twitter symbol in gold: *Wallpaper (gold)* (2014), a fresh play on words, here referring to both the physical wallpaper decorating the room and the wallpaper on a computer screen.

*Dumbass* (2013) is a biting, satirical explosion in the form of a music video starring Ai Weiwei based on his 81-day imprisonment, under constant surveillance by two policemen day and night. With music by Zuoxiao Zuzhou, lyrics and vocals by Ai Weiwei, and cinematography by Christopher Doyle, it clocked up thousands of hits in only a few short hours after being released on YouTube. It is included on *The Divine Comedy*, Ai Weiwei’s music album.

The former dining room at the Palau de La Virreina houses two installations that give the show its title, *Untitled (Ai Weiwei Studio table)* (2000) and *Untitled (Ai Weiwei Studio chairs, Qing Dynasty, Qianlong)* (2000), featuring a table and ten chairs made out of huanghuali wood from Ai Weiwei’s studio in Beijing. This unprecedented exhibit is Ai Weiwei’s work desk and dining table, around which professionals from all over the world have had meetings with the artist to organise and discuss each and every project, publication and exhibition he has worked on since 2000. This piece is therefore an eloquent expression for the artist’s desire for dialogue and conversation, for sharing and discussing ideas and attitudes available to anyone who wants to sit at it during the exhibition. Ai Weiwei has not been able to leave China since 2011, because the government has confiscated his passport. The installation is also a representation of his enforced absence, and his emissary to Europe.

Rosa Pera

Excerpt from the interview **WE ARE ALL AT THE SAME TABLE**

Llucià Homs in an interview with Ai Weiwei

**LH:** Within the context in which these pieces were originally produced, in your country, China, considering the current difficult political and social conditions, can you identify any key moments when the government began to perceive you as a so-called “dissident?”

**AW:** It is very difficult to pinpoint a specific moment because my government will not admit any dissent in society. On one occasion, to answer a reporter’s question about a dissident such as myself, the government spokesperson responded that there are no dissidents in our society, only criminals. This society still believes that there should only be one unique idea. It is intellectually shocking, because a society can only be alive and healthy if there are differences. Without them, it is impossible to make progress or face new challenges.

**LH:** How do you value your contribution to the fight for freedom of expression and human rights in China?

**AW:** I think that my efforts are very evident, considering the significant restrictions. They are validated for the difficulties involved. If my efforts weren’t substantial, they wouldn’t have led to the seriousness of my current situation

(...)

**LH:** Talking about different forms of activism, you are surrounded by people who openly and actively struggle for freedom of expression, each using their own tools. I am referring to Hu Jia, Tsering Woeser, Wang Lixiong and Ilham Tohti, who appear in this photograph with you after Woeser received the International Women of Courage award at the United States embassy in China last May.

**AW:** It is unfortunate that only five or six people appeared in this photo. Five million or five hundred thousand should be in it. The photo represents an idea shared among scholars, writers, poets, activists and artists: to build a stronger society with a more solid intellectual base. None of these people are professional politicians. However, some of them are either under home confinement, sentenced to jail or imprisoned for life. None of them can travel. Therefore, the question is: How can the nation constantly persecute people who are intellectually seeking a better future for the society? They are brave, sincere and honest. How can a nation afford this constant repression?

(...)

**LH:** Talking about photography as a medium, you seem to have an almost compulsive way of using photography to document the things happening around you. Sometimes it seems as though you view a photograph as proof, as evidence. I am thinking about photographs like the one in the lift in Chengdu when you were arrested. Do you think that photography is capable of serving as proof?

**AW:** All photographs are proof in and of themselves since they record a piece of reality. Photography is not reality, but it always suggests a reality. Sometimes it is more, sometimes less, or sometimes it is misinterpreted, but it is never reality. A photograph is only the reality of itself. This is a fascinating philosophical idea: it is like seeing your image in a mirror, capturing the image of a specific moment, cutting a piece out of reality. It is truly meaningful and charming.

**LH:** Do you view photography as an essential weapon in your struggle for freedom of expression, especially in the context of the social media, or are your photographs more like a complement to your works, a way of attracting attention to their message?



**AW:** Yes, any piece of photography shows some kind of intention, but a photograph can be more than an intention. Therefore, photography is useful for social change because we can record many images. We forget many historical details, but photography tells us about history and sheds light on some of the details. For this reason, photography can be used as proof of history, and it is important for social change.

Excerpt from the interview. Full text in the Catalogue. On The table, Ai Weiwei



Images for downloading are kept here:  
<https://eicub.net/?grup=Virreinacentredelaimatge>



Cao, 2014 © Ai Weiwei



Coca Cola Vase, 1994 © Ai Weiwei



*National Stadium Photographs, 2014*  
National Stadium No. 2 (04.04.2006)  
© Ai Weiwei



*Map of China, 2004*  
© Ai Weiwei



He Xie, 2011  
© Ai Weiwei



Study of Perspective, 1995–2011, 2014  
© Ai Weiwei



Beijing Photographs, 1993–2001  
A guard on the Gate of Heavenly Peace,  
Tiananmen Square. 1993  
© Ai Weiwei



Beijing Photographs, 1993–2001  
Han Dynasty urn for sale outside of the city wall of  
Xi'an. 1995  
© Ai Weiwei



Illumination, 2009  
© Ai Weiwei



New York Photographs, 1983–1993. Profile of  
Duchamp, Sunflower Seeds. 1983  
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