

Ai Weiwei: Making Sense

7th April 2023 – 30th July 2023

Large Print Guide

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**DESIGN
MUSEUM**



The Ruins at Jiaohe

As if a caravan's passing through—
amidst the crowd's clamour
the clang of camel bells.
As of old, there's a bustling market—
carriages rushing like water,
horses like dragons—

But no—the luxurious palace
has fallen into devastation and ruin,
and of a thousand years of joys and sorrows,
of meetings and parting,
nothing can be found.

Those who are alive, live on fully—
don't hope earth keeps a trace behind.

Ai Qing, 1980

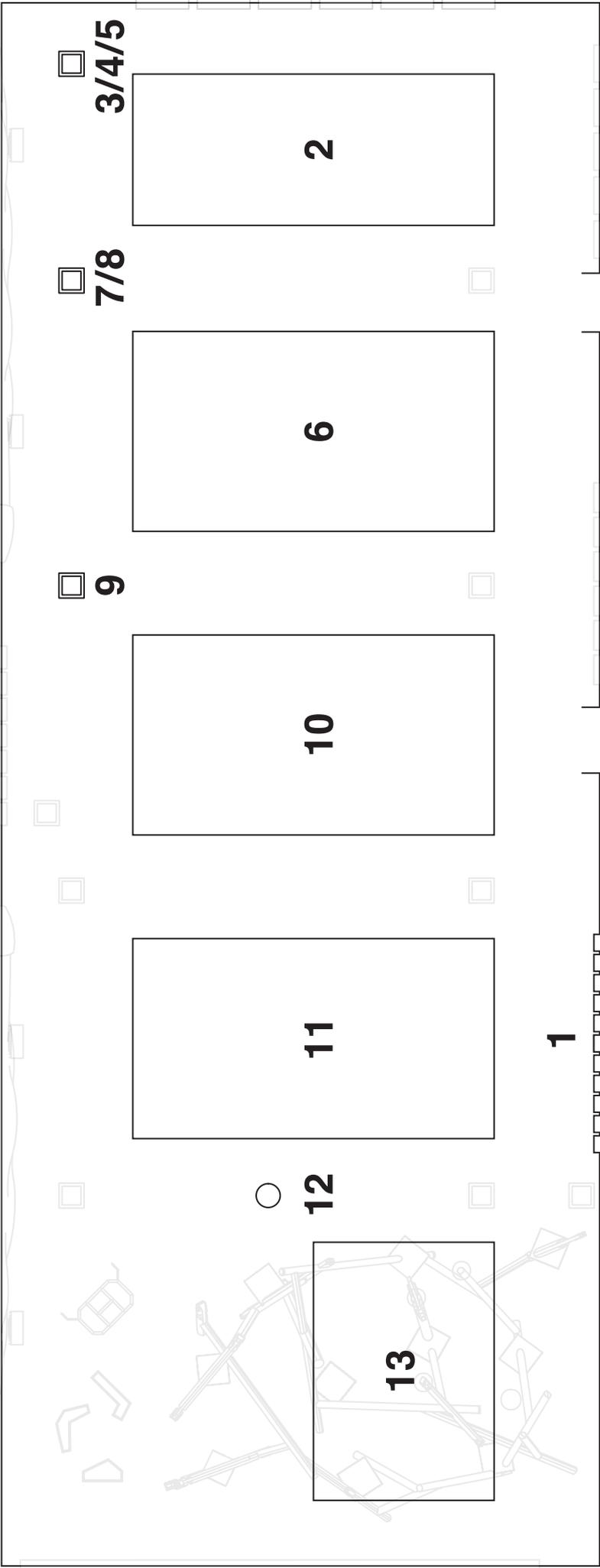
Ai Qing, Ai Weiwei's father, was one of the most influential poets of 20th-century China.

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Artist, filmmaker, architect, activist, collector—whatever mode Ai Weiwei is in, he is trying to tell us something about the state of the world. This exhibition is the first to present Ai's work as a commentary on design and what it reveals about our changing values. Here you will find a sequence of objects in vast quantities, from Stone Age tools to Lego bricks. How do we make sense of them? Is this a classic tale of technical progress, or have we lost crucial qualities with the march of time?

Over the last 30 years, China has experienced urban development on a scale never seen before. As the old world was swept away, Ai became fascinated by Chinese antiquities, becoming an avid collector. Even a pile of ancient teapot spouts seemed to speak of cultural sensibilities that have been lost. In a world of limitless production and consumerism, Ai's searching approach to history and craftsmanship forces us to question what we value. Through material culture, he explores the tensions between past and present, hand and machine, precious and worthless, construction and destruction.

The numbering in this guide suggests a possible route for exploring the exhibition, but feel free to follow your own instincts.



Entrance

Exit

Evidence

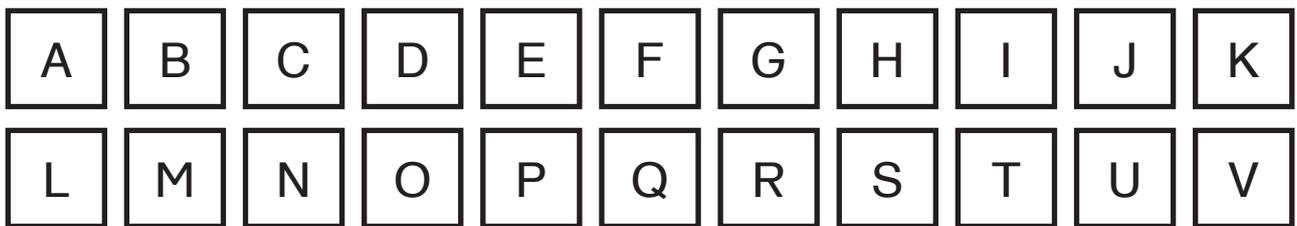
Laid out on the floor of the gallery are five ‘fields’ of objects that Ai has amassed since the 1990s. The function of some of these things is mysterious, and their value questionable. Are they made by hand or machine? Are they priceless or worthless?

When Ai started collecting, China was a nation focused on the future and in thrall to development. History and historical artefacts were often deemed to be of little value. And yet here is the story of thousands of years of human ingenuity. China has a unique history of mass production by hand, and so the impact of some of these fields lies in the fact that they pre-date the machine-led Industrial Revolution. This is the material evidence of bygone civilisations, lost craft skills and forgotten cultural values. In their sheer number, these objects also allude to one of Ai’s key themes: the repression of the individual in modern China.

“Today, all I can do is pick up the scattered fragments left after the storm and try to piece together a picture, however incomplete it may be.”

1.
Beijing Photographs, 1993–2003
Photographic prints

After twelve years in the United States, Ai returned to Beijing with a fresh curiosity about Chinese history. He took tens of thousands of photographs documenting his new life, which involved visits to Beijing's flea markets with his brother. Ai also began collecting historical artefacts, developing a keen interest in traditional Chinese craftsmanship. This became an obsession that profoundly changed his value system and influenced his practice.



A.
Forbidden City,
Beijing, 1993

B.
An antiques shop in Huang Chenggen Park,
Beijing, 1993

C.
Panjiayuan Antiques Market,
Beijing, 1993

D.
Antique vendor,
Xi'an, 1993

E.
Chen Wenji, Ma Xiaoguang and Xu Bing,
1993

F.
June 1994,
1994

G.
Soldier on sentry duty, Tiananmen Square,
Beijing, 1994

H.
Lu Qing and poster,
Beijing, 1994

I.
Buddha feet at the Longmen Grottoes,
Luoyang, 1994

J.

Ai Weiwei and Zhuang Hui working on
'White Cover Book',
Beijing, 1995

K.

Ai Weiwei smashing Qing dynasty porcelain,
Dongsi Shisiantiao,
Beijing, 1995

L.

Ai Weiwei smashing a Han dynasty urn,
Dongsi Shisiantiao,
Beijing, 1995

M, N, O, P.

Carpenters at work, Ai Weiwei's studio in Longzhuashu,
Beijing, 1997

Q.

Exchange,
Venice, 1999

R.

Ai Weiwei working on 'Still Life' in his studio,
Caochangdi,
Beijing, 2000

S.

Ai Weiwei working on 'Whitewash' in his studio,
Caochangdi,
Beijing, 2000

T¹.

Zheng Guogu, Ai Weiwei's studio in Caochangdi,
Beijing, 2000

T².

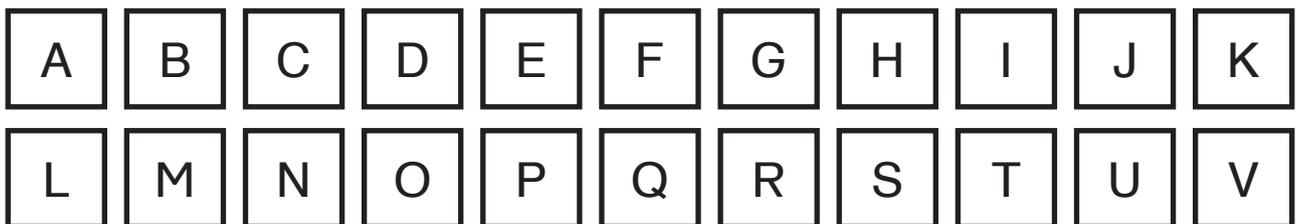
Qin Ga, Ai Weiwei, Sun Yuan, Peng Yu and
Zhu Yu at Ai Weiwei's studio in Caochangdi,
Beijing, 2000

U.

He Yunchang models for 'Arm',
Ai Weiwei's studio in Caochangdi,
Beijing, 2000

V.

The head of a Ming dynasty warrior sculpture,
Ai Weiwei's studio in Caochangdi,
Beijing, 2003



2.

Still Life, 1993–2000

Stone

These tools date from the late Stone Age. The axe-heads, chisels, knives and spinning wheels remind us that the origins of design are rooted in survival. Any one of these could be a museum exhibit, and yet Ai found them cheaply available in flea markets. In laying more than 4,000 of them side by side, he challenges our view of them as rare finds. Instead, he treats them as ordinary things, like a geological layer of forgotten history.

3.
iPhone Cutout, 2015
Jade
Courtesy of Mao Ran

This iPhone has been cut out of a jade hand-axe from the Neolithic era. The implication is that modern technology is rooted in our early craft know-how. Yet there are jade knives in Ai's collection that no one knows how to make anymore, suggesting that humans don't only gain technical knowledge but also lose it.

4.
iPhone 4 (Jade), 2015
Jade

5.
Jade axe and adze, Neolithic era
Jade, unknown maker

6.
Spouts, 2015
Porcelain

This field is made up of more than 250,000 porcelain spouts from teapots and wine ewers, crafted by hand during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE). If a pot was not perfect when it was made, the spout was broken off. The quantity here attests to the scale of porcelain production in China even a thousand years ago. Ai is also offering a commentary on freedom of speech, with the spouts—or mouths—having been removed.

7.
Handled ewer, Song dynasty
Porcelain, unknown maker

8.
Untitled (Re-firing Spouts from the Song Dynasty), 2015
Porcelain

9.

Remains, 2015

Porcelain

Porcelain is well known to be precious and fragile.

‘Remains’ is a reminder that these qualities also apply to life itself. The porcelain bones here are replicas of human bones excavated at a labour camp in operation in the late 1950s under Chinese leader Mao Zedong. Thousands of intellectuals—including Ai’s father, the poet Ai Qing—were exiled or killed during the purges of this period.

10.

Untitled (Porcelain Balls), 2022

Porcelain

When Ai first encountered these balls, he had no idea what they were. It turned out that they are cannonballs made during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) from Xing ware, a high-quality porcelain. Ai was struck by the fact that this precious and seemingly delicate material was once used for weapons of war. There are more than 200,000 here, which makes it hard to comprehend that they were hand-made.

11.

Left Right Studio Material, 2018

Porcelain

These fragments are the remains of Ai's porcelain sculptures that were destroyed when his 'Left Right' studio in Beijing was demolished by the Chinese state in 2018. You can see one of the complete sculptures, 'Bubble', nearby. The remains are a form of evidence of the repression that Ai has suffered at the hands of the Chinese government, as well as a testament to his ability to turn destruction into art.

12.

Bubble, 2008

Porcelain

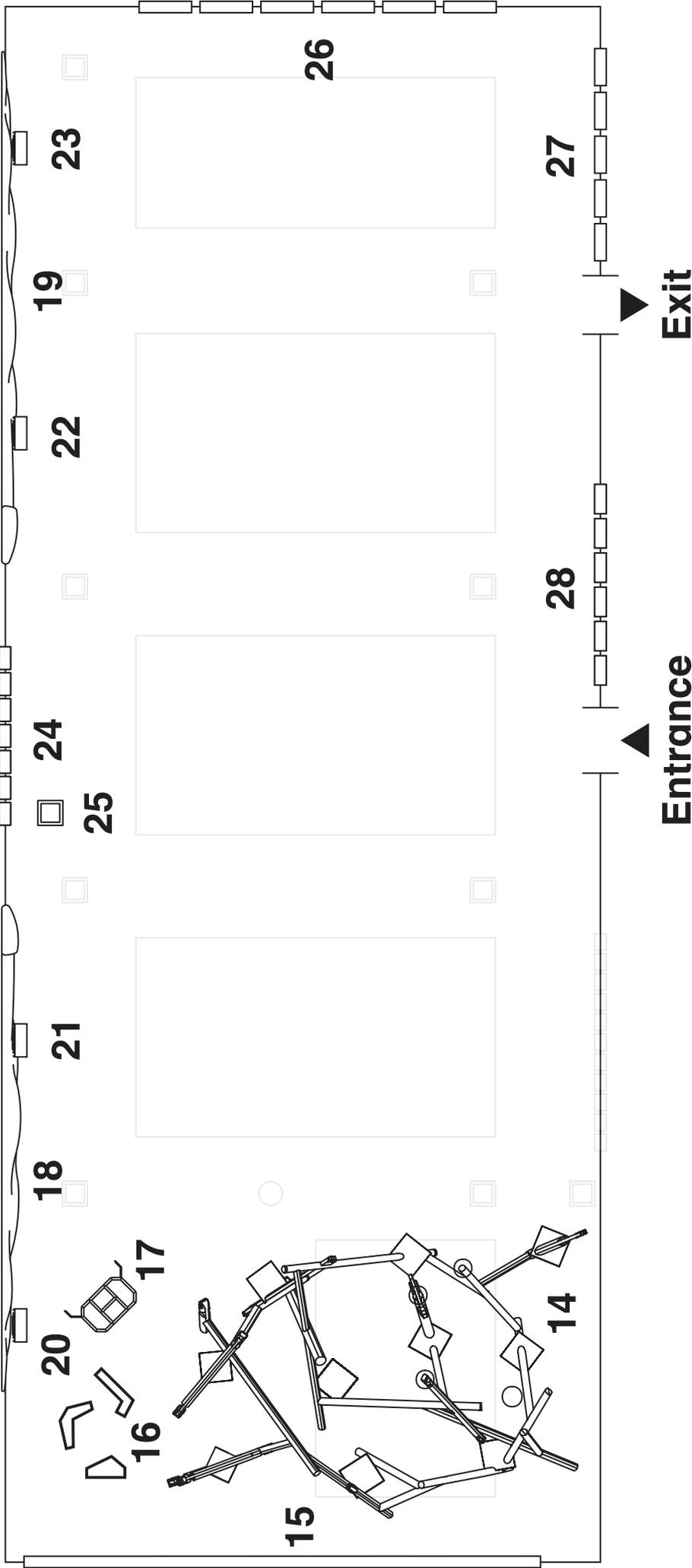
With this sculpture, Ai wanted to test the limits of porcelain craftsmanship, as this is the largest sphere it is possible to make in porcelain without it cracking in the kiln.

13.

Untitled (Lego Incident), 2014

Lego bricks

As a modular building system, Lego is a good metaphor for the speed and repetitiveness of much recent construction in China. Like other objects in these fields, it is produced on an industrial scale, though machine-made as opposed to hand-crafted. Ai started working with this material in 2014, to produce portraits of political prisoners. When Lego briefly stopped selling to him as a result, his response on social media led to overwhelming donations of bricks from the public. Ai often uses Lego to construct images because it is an objective kit of parts that removes the trace of the artist's hand and does not rely on his skill or taste.



Construction/Destruction

In the last two decades, China has witnessed a pace of urban expansion never seen before. With rapid construction came mass destruction, as historical urban fabric was erased to make way for new development. Ai himself has been both a beneficiary and a victim of this cycle. He has designed dozens of buildings, including his own studio complexes in Beijing and Shanghai. Both studios were destroyed by the state as punishment for Ai's political activism.

The works in this section provide the context for Ai's continual questioning of value. He has documented the changing face of Beijing through photographs and video. At the same time, he has acquired temples and houses that would have been demolished—not to preserve these structures but to present them as reconfigured ruins that suggest a world in flux. Ai invites us to ask how prevailing value systems construct the world, and in turn to imagine what landscapes we desire.

“I was also recording the demolitions, the perpetual upheavals and ruinations that accompanied the urbanisation process ... I began to see these acts of documentation as essential to my life not only as an artist but as a citizen.”

14.
Through, 2007 – 8
Wood

Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

‘Through’ combines the columns of a Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 CE) temple with tables from the same period, bringing architecture and furniture together in a complex structure. In Chinese, furniture-making is known as ‘small carpentry’ and architecture as ‘big carpentry’. Here, the two are merged. Destruction is the starting point of something more constructive: a ruin becomes a new ensemble.

15.

Water Lilies #1, 2022

Lego bricks

Courtesy of Galleria Continua

The largest Lego work Ai has ever created, this is a recreation of one of the most famous paintings by French Impressionist Claude Monet. We think of the painting as a portrait of nature, but Monet's lily pond at Giverny was a construct—an idealised landscape that he himself designed. To the right of Ai's version is a dark portal, which is the door to the underground dugout in Xinjiang province where Ai and his father, Ai Qing, lived in forced exile in the 1960s. Their hellish desert home punctures the watery paradise. The image has been constructed out of Lego bricks to strip away Monet's brushstrokes in favour of a depersonalised language of industrial parts and colours.



16.

Rebar and Case, 2012

Wood, marble, foam

More than 90,000 people died in the 2008 earthquake in China's Sichuan province. Ai was deeply affected by the fact that many were children trapped in collapsing school buildings. The sub-standard construction of these buildings was likely linked to corruption. From the rubble, Ai took some of the twisted steel rebar used to reinforce the concrete and had replicas made in marble. Here, they have become commemorative sculptures on coffin-like plinths.

17.

Cabinet, 2014

Wood

This sculpture is crafted from a hardwood of the kind used traditionally for the finest furniture. Ai has used it instead to memorialise a tragedy. In 2012, five boys in Guizhou province in southwest China took shelter from the cold in a rubbish container, lit a fire, and died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Ai's sculpture replicates that container.

18.
Backpack Snake, 2008
Backpacks

19.
Life Vest Snake, 2019
Life vests

These sculptures are among several works dedicated to the victims of the refugee crisis in Europe and the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China. One snake is made of life vests, and the other from schoolchildren's rucksacks. Ai has assembled these unremarkable objects, linked to man-made and natural disasters, to draw attention to society's most disempowered. The snake motif is a reference to the complex and unpredictable nature of these crises.

20.

Beijing 2003, 2003

Video, 150 hours

The early 2000s were a period of intense development in Beijing. When Ai was invited to teach an architecture course at Beijing's Tsinghua University, he asked his students to look at the way the city was changing. They rented a bus and filmed for 16 days as they drove through every hutong (narrow alley) and street. The result is this monumental record of a city that has since vanished.

21.

Chang'an Boulevard, 2004
Video, 10 hours 13 minutes

22.

Beijing: The Second Ring, 2005
Video, 1 hour 6 minutes

23.

Beijing: The Third Ring, 2005
Video, 1 hour 50 minutes

This trilogy of films further explores the growth of modern Beijing. On his return to China in 1993, Ai hadn't seen the capital since 1981. The change was startling. Since then, the Second and Third Ring Roads that structure the city had been built, and the main east–west axis expanded. The three films share the same method, where one minute of footage is recorded at a series of specified points.

24.

Nian Nian Souvenir, 2021

Ink, paper

To Ai, the significance of design often lies in its potential to give form to our memories and experiences. This graphic monument bears the names of the 5,197 schoolchildren who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Ai identified them by organising a volunteer-led investigation. Each name has been stamped in an ancient script, using a hand-carved jade seal. Some of those seals are displayed nearby.

25.

Nian Nian Souvenir Seals, 2021

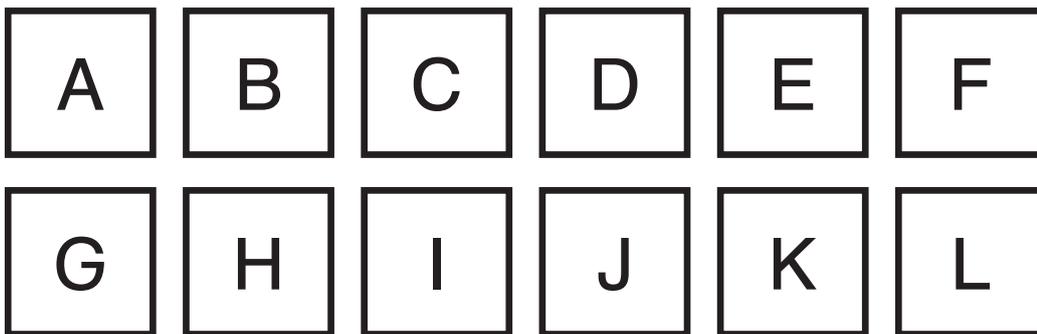
Jade, ink

26.

Study of Perspective, 2022

Pigment prints, canvas

Power, as embodied by culturally and politically significant sites, is Ai's target in this longstanding series. Ai repeatedly performs a scornful gesture, subverting the traditional artistic method of measuring perspective. In doing so, he rejects the expectation that these institutions should be respected or revered. Begun in 1995 as a series of photographs, these have been turned into pigment prints, using what Ai sees as the more graphic language of design.



A.

Tiananmen Square,
Beijing, China

B.

The White House,
Washington DC, USA

C.
Victoria Harbour,
Hong Kong

D.
St Mark's Basilica,
Venice, Italy

E.
Eiffel Tower,
Paris, France

F.
'Mona Lisa',
Louvre, Paris

G.
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, USA

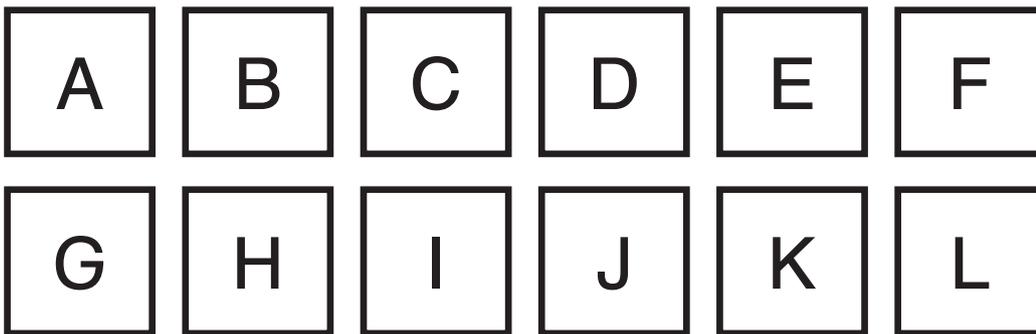
H.
Reichstag,
Berlin, Germany

I.
Colosseum,
Rome, Italy

J.
Houses of Parliament,
London, UK

K.
Bern,
Switzerland

L.
Trump Tower,
New York, USA



27.

National Stadium, 2005–7

Photographic prints

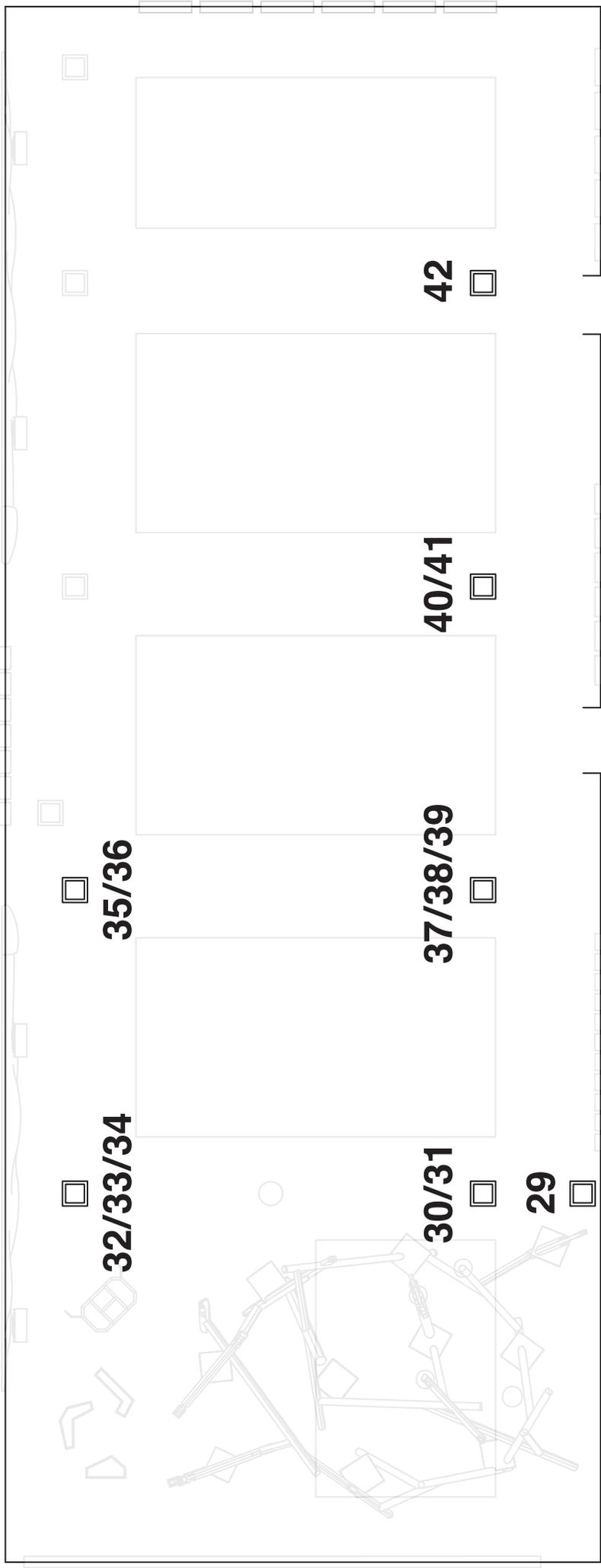
In the build-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the National Stadium became the symbol of a newly powerful China. Ai worked on the design of the Bird's Nest, as it became known, with the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. He photographed the construction of this monumental structure to capture the labour of the tens of thousands of largely rural migrant workers. Ai later distanced himself from the stadium, not wishing to become a tool of government propaganda.

28.

Provisional Landscapes, 2002–8

Photographic prints

These photographs capture the empty spaces left by demolitions as Chinese cities underwent an unprecedented wave of development in the 2000s. Ai photographed hundreds of void spaces as evidence of the erasure of the urban fabric in the name of progress. But Ai was also documenting the aftermath of the often violent process by which the state confiscated land from landowners in its pursuit of high-speed economic growth.



Entrance

Exit

Ordinary Things

Ai has always worked with found objects—ordinary, often disposable things, made of plastic or polystyrene, that embody the most everyday and invisible kind of design. Using precious materials, Ai then transforms something useful but worthless into something useless but valuable. In forcing our attention on to the easily overlooked, he asks us to assess its value. Is a takeaway container carved in marble a critique of consumer society, or a monument to the daily lives of millions of people?

The tension that animates these works is between the cheap, mass-produced object and the highly skilled craftsmanship that turns it into art. Ai works with traditional Chinese craftspeople—masters of jade, porcelain and marble—and seeks to keep their centuries-old skills alive. Elevating everyday objects into artworks, Ai brings past and present together.

“By changing the meaning of the object, shaking its foundations, we are also changing our own condition. We can question what we are.”

29.

Hanging Man, 2009

Wood, steel

This homage to Marcel Duchamp turns a coat hanger into the French artist's profile. Ai has credited Duchamp as one of his greatest influences. Duchamp's pioneering use of manufactured objects as 'readymade' art—and his witty subversion of an object's function and meaning—are echoed in many of the works in this gallery.

30.

Glass Helmet, 2022

Glass

31.

Marble Foam, 2018

Marble

A worker's hard hat cast in glass becomes at once strong and fragile; a foam block rendered in marble is hardness disguised as softness. These works highlight Ai's use of the universal language of everyday designed objects to disrupt our expectations.

32.

Marble Takeout Box, 2015

Marble

33.

Marble Toilet Paper, 2020

Marble

34.

Glass Toilet Paper, 2022

Glass

Humanity's desire for convenience has given rise to hyper-disposable objects. Items for daily use such as toilet paper and Styrofoam takeaway boxes represent a throwaway culture that has shaped our lives. When toilet paper became scarce in the United Kingdom during the Covid-19 pandemic, it exposed our dependency on humble things. Yet toilet paper was a luxury when Ai was growing up in China, revealing how the value of objects also changes over time.

35.
Cosmetics, 2013
Jade

36.
Sex Toy, 2014
Jade

37.
Hanger, 2011
Wood

38.
Hanger, 2012
Stainless steel

39.
Hanger, 2013
Crystal glass

An everyday plastic hanger, rendered in different materials, becomes sculptural or unexpectedly refined. The hanger is a symbolic object for Ai, as it was one of the few possessions he was permitted during his secret detention by the Chinese authorities for 81 days in 2011. Like the nearby 'Handcuffs', the hangers reflect larger themes of free speech, incarceration and surveillance in Ai's work.

40.
Handcuffs, 2011
Jade

41.
Handcuffs, 2015
Wood

42.
Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo, 2014
Earthenware, paint

Is Ai trying to shock us by painting a modern corporate logo on a Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) urn, or is he asking us to reflect on the cultures that they represent? In bringing them together, Ai collides two opposing value systems: one embodying ancient craftsmanship, and the other a symbol of global consumerism perpetuated through mass-produced branding.

Outside the gallery

Coloured House, 2013
Wood, paint, crystal glass

This house once belonged to a prosperous family in Zhejiang province, in eastern China, during the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911 CE). The timber frame follows a traditional post-and-beam system. Most houses of this period have been demolished, giving this structure a ghostly quality. Artist Ai Weiwei has painted the house with industrial colours, combining ancient and modern, and installed it on crystal bases—giving presence and status to this unlikely survivor.

With support from the Ai Weiwei Supporters Circle.

The Animal That Looks Like a Llama
But is Really an Alpaca 2023,
2023
Wallpaper

The pattern of this wallpaper features handcuffs, CCTV cameras and the Twitter logo, illustrating themes of surveillance and free speech.

Marble Sofa [pair], 2011

Marble

These armchairs are replicas of those owned by artist Ai Weiwei's father. In replacing leather with marble, Ai has turned a commonplace object into a sculpture that is less functional but more precious, which was a common practice among the rulers of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE).

Pendant

(Toilet Paper), 2021

Marble

Toilet paper—a seemingly worthless item—was suddenly much sought after when it became scarce during the Covid-19 pandemic. Artist Ai Weiwei was particularly struck by this because toilet paper was a luxury when he was growing up in China. By carving this roll in marble on a grand scale, he memorialises a moment when we were forced to recognise the value of ordinary things.

交河故城遺址

艾 青 一九八〇年

彷彿有駝隊穿城而過
人聲喧嚷裡夾著駝鈴
依然是熱鬧的街市
車如流水馬如龍

不，豪華的宮闕
已化為一片廢圩
千年的悲歡離合
找不到一絲痕跡

活著的人好好地活著吧
別指望大地會留下記憶

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Text by Justin McGuirk (Chief Curator) and Rachel Hajek (Assistant Curator).

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For information about related events visit designmuseum.org/aiweiwei

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