AI WEIWEI

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Born in 1957, Beijing

A revolutionary Chinese contemporary artist, documentarian, social and political activist

Ai Weiwei emerged as a vital instigator in Chinese cultural development, an architect of Chinese modernism, and one of the nation's most vocal political commentators.

In his work, there is no division between art and politics.

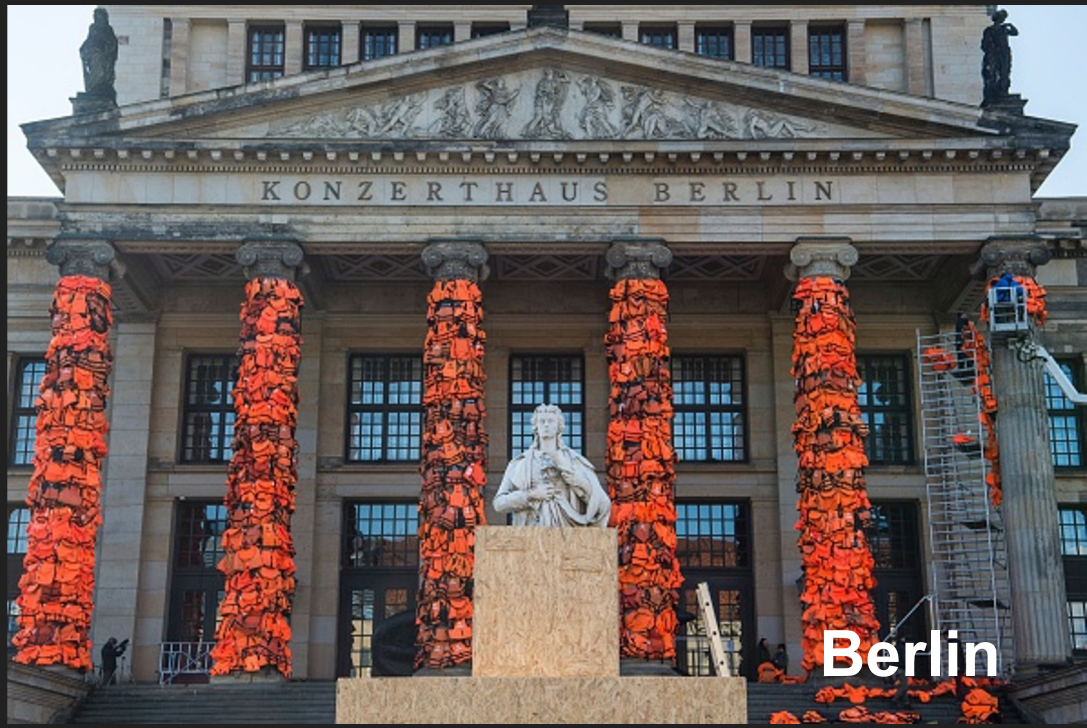
"Every object, if it can be recognized or has a name or definition, is a political work. Because of our judgment of values, even daring to say anything is a political act." The political energy of an object comes from the user or observer, who reacts to it differently depending on their life experiences.

"Your own acts and behavior tell the world who you are and, at the same time, what kind of society you think it should be."

Soleil Levant (Rising Run), 6/20-10/1, 2017

Ai attached a total of 14,000 life jackets that had each been utilized by various refugees and which he tied together before wrapping them up and down the pillars of the Berlin Konzerthaus. *Soleil Levant* draws attention to the political and social reality of today through refugee life jackets.

The jackets had been collected from Lesbos, a Greek island often used by Syrian refugees traveling to various parts of Europe as the middle point.



Copenhagen

Quebec City

Vienna

Still Life, 1993-2000

Still Life is an installation of around 4,000 stone ax-heads, which date back to China’s Stone Age, about 6000 BC, laid out on the floor.

This presentation of thousands of Stone Age ax-heads questions the value of the ancient object.

Ai is known for using antiquities in his work to interpret history. A lot of his later works explore the remnants of Chinese heritage and its relationship to current geopolitical concerns.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995

In 1995, Ai smashed an antique urn. He had became fascinated with China's traditional heritage that Mao had tried to wipe out during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

Ai visited antique markets, gathering items that could be presented as artworks in themselves, or "readymades" – among them, 2000 year-old urns from the Han Dynasty.

Creating what is still one of his most provocative works, the artist photographed himself dropping one.

Fragments, 2005

For *Fragments*, Ai salvaged pillars and beams of “tieli”, Chinese ironwood, from demolished Qing dynasty temples, and worked with carpenters to create an “irrational” structure of poles with linking arms. When viewed from above, it becomes apparent that the anchored poles mark out the borders of a map of China.

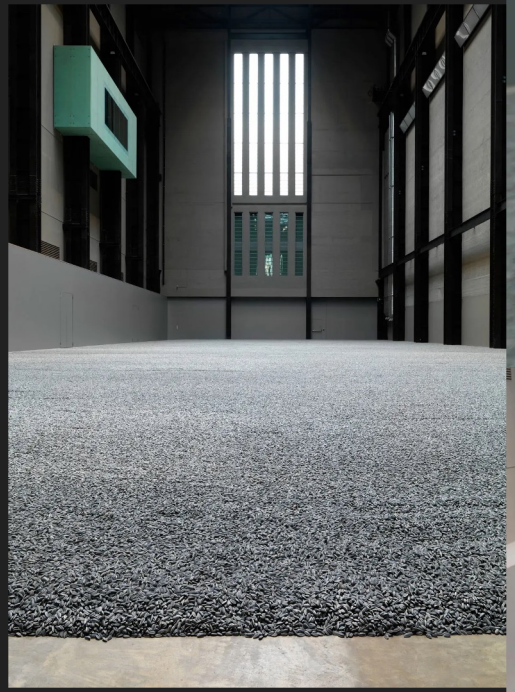
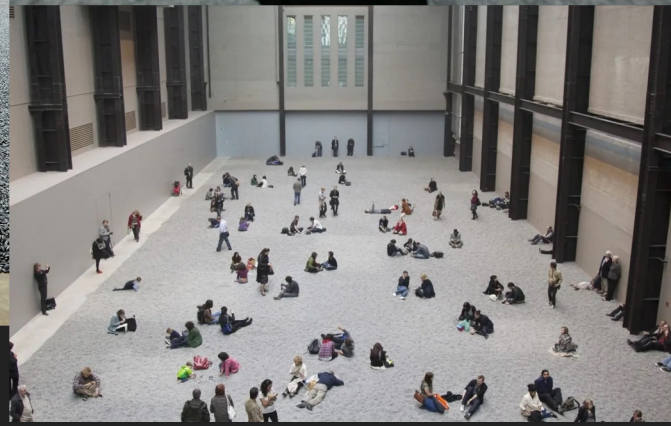
Dimension and material: 500 x 850 x 700 cm; Iron wood (tieli wood) table, chairs, parts of beams and pillars from dismantled temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

Straight, 2008-12

Straight was housed at the largest gallery at the Royal Academy of Art. It's Ai Weiwei's poignant response to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008. Poorly built schools in the Sichuan province – held up by steel rods which twisted and mangled in the quake – were devastated, leaving thousands of students dead. These rods (which Ai had labourers straighten by hand) make up the 90-ton floor-based sculpture, that is laid out in broken undulations recalling fault lines.

Dimension and material: 20 x 60 x 1200 cm; Reinforcing steel bars

Sunflower Seeds, 2010

In 2010, Ai Weiwei's sunflower seeds – 100 million of them – were poured into the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern.

Each one was unique: hand-crafted from porcelain in Jingdezhen – the Chinese town that once produced imperial porcelain for over a thousand years. It took 1,600 artisans over two years to make the seeds, which were created out of the kaolin from local mountains, hand-painted and fired at 1,300 degrees. (While the seeds were on display in London, Ai was arrested and detained without explanation by the Chinese authorities for 81 days.