

## Ai Weiwei: The Liberty of Doubt

12 February - 19 June 2022

Press View: 11 February 2022



Ai Weiwei, *Dragon Vase*, 2017. Courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio.

Kettle's Yard is pleased to announce a new solo exhibition by internationally renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing) in which new and existing work will be shown alongside historic Chinese objects. The exhibition will explore notions of truth, authenticity and value, as well as globalisation, the coronavirus pandemic and the current geopolitical crisis. Ai Weiwei will reflect upon the liberty in the West, in contrast to China and other authoritarian regimes, to question truth and authority, express doubt and seek transparency in political matters. However, in relation to art appreciation, the Chinese have a long tradition of a more fluid and less fixed view in relation to authenticity than is the case in the West, often valuing the act of copying.

The exhibition in the galleries is a single installation with 13 artworks by Ai Weiwei exhibited alongside 14 antiquities which the artist bought at an auction in Cambridge in 2020. This will be the first time the artist has juxtaposed historic Chinese objects with his own works. Some of the auction pieces acquired by the artist are thought to date from the Northern Wei (386 – 534 CE) and Tang (618 – 907 CE) dynasties, while others have been identified as counterfeits, later copies of original works. A number of recent films made by the artist will also be screened on each day of the exhibition's run – *Coronation* (2020), *Cockroach* (2020) and *Human Flow* (2017) – while two *Fairytale Chairs* (2007) will be placed in the Kettle's Yard House for visitors to use.

In his earlier works on display, Ai reflects upon the interplay between the modern and the traditional as in *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca Cola Logo* (2014), which will be juxtaposed with a similar vessel from the Han Dynasty (*Chinese painted Han Dynasty pottery graduated 'cocoon' vase*). Similarly, the base for *Surveillance Camera with Plinth* (2014) is an exact replica of the lamp posts to be found from the Northern Qi Dynasty, around 560CE (shown in the exhibition will be *A Chinese black limestone pedestal oil-lamp*). The exhibition will also include one of the artist's most renowned works, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (2015), made in a favourite medium: LEGO bricks.

Ai's more recent works allude to globalisation and the ongoing pandemic, such as *Marble Takeout Box* (2015) and *Marble Toilet Paper* (2020). *Marble Helmet* (2015) recreates a worker's hat, which is the kind of hat used by the rescue team of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. They also reflect the worship of contemporary objects with *iPhone Cutout* (2015), for example, juxtaposed with Buddhist statues which would have been revered in the past.

By displaying works from different periods together and those whose full identity has not yet been researched or established, Ai draws attention to the ways in which we attribute meaning and value to objects. The exhibition will question the role played by museums as historical and cultural gatekeepers – celebrating certain objects

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and not others – as well as exploring differing concepts of truth and authenticity in China and the Western world. Ai sees the West as obsessed with notions of truth and artistic authenticity, whereas truth in Chinese philosophy is allied to nature and therefore constantly in flux. Though this attitude attributes value to the defective and the imperfect, the exhibition will also celebrate the craftsmanship displayed in all the works and objects: ancient, forged and those commissioned by Ai from some of the most skilled crafts people in China.

**Ai Weiwei writes:**

*In China, everything, including the human condition and aesthetic judgements, is considered a part of nature. The concept of 'truth' is also part of nature and hence not an absolute. That's why reinterpretation, re-rendering and recreation of artworks through personal reflections are valued more in the common perception than artworks which are deemed absolutely 'true' or 'real'. This nuanced and blurred understanding of 'truth' is not only a Chinese state of mind with respect to philosophical approaches including modern aesthetics and ethics, but also what distinguishes China from the West in the matter of politics and social considerations.*

Accompanying the exhibition will be a new Kettle's Yard publication, fully illustrated with essays by John Tancock and James Lally and an interview with the artist. Publication date: March 2022.

With special thanks to Ai Weiwei Studio and Lisson Gallery for their assistance and support for the exhibition and publication.



*A Chinese lacquered greystone fragmentary hand clutching a vase. Courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio.*



*Ai Weiwei, Surveillance Camera with Plinth, 2014. Courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio.*

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### About Ai Weiwei

A global citizen, artist and thinker, Ai Weiwei moves between modes of production and investigation, subject to the direction and outcome of his research, whether into the Chinese earthquake of 2008 – for works such as *Straight* (2008-12) and *Remembering* (2009) – or the worldwide plight of refugees and forced migrants – for *Law of the Journey* and his feature-length documentary *Human Flow* (both 2017). From early iconoclastic positions in regard to authority and history, which included *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and a series of middle-finger salutes to sites of power, *Study of Perspective* (both begun in 1995), Ai's production expanded to encompass architecture, public art and performance. Beyond concerns of form or protest, Ai now measures our existence in relation to economic, political, natural and social forces, uniting craftsmanship with conceptual creativity. Universal symbols of humanity and community, such as bicycles, flowers and trees, as well as the perennial problems of borders and conflicts are given renewed potency through installations, sculptures, films and photographs, while Ai continues to speak out publicly on issues he believes important. He is one of the leading cultural figures of his generation and serves as an example for free expression both in China and internationally.

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing and now lives and works in Berlin. He attended Beijing Film Academy and later, on moving to New York (1983–1993), continued his studies at the Parsons School of Design. Major solo exhibitions include Serralves Museum, Porto, Portugal (2021); Cordoaria Nacional, Lisbon, Portugal (2021); Imperial War Museum, London, UK (2020); K20/K21, Düsseldorf, Germany (2019); OCA, São Paulo, Brazil (2018); Corpartes, Santiago, Chile (2018); Mucem, Marseille, France (2018); PROA, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2017); Sakip Sabanci, Museum, Istanbul, Turkey (2017); Public Art Fund, New York, NY, USA (2017); Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2017); Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy (2016); 21er Haus, Vienna, Austria (2016); Helsinki Art Museum, Finland (2016); Royal Academy, London, UK (2015); Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (2014); Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN, USA (2013); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture

Garden, Washington D.C., USA (2012); Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan (2011); Tate Modern, London, UK (2010) and Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2009). Architectural collaborations include the 2012 Serpentine Pavilion and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Stadium, with Herzog and de Meuron. Among numerous awards and honours, he won the lifetime achievement award from the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards in 2008 and was made Honorary Academician at the Royal Academy of Arts, London in 2011. His human rights work has been recognised through the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent in 2012 and Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2015.

### About Kettle's Yard

Kettle's Yard is one of Britain's best galleries - a beautiful and unique house with a distinctive modern art collection, and a gallery exhibiting modern and contemporary art. Supporting this is an established learning and community engagement programme, archive, and programme of chamber concerts. In February 2018, Kettle's Yard reopened after a two-year development by architect Jamie Fobert. The new Kettle's Yard includes exhibition galleries, education spaces, a café and welcome areas. Kettle's Yard's mission is to contribute to society by inspiring and engaging audiences through art, learning and research of the highest quality. We believe that great art should not be the privilege of the few, but for everyone. Our values reflect Kettle's Yard's creator Jim Ede's support for artists and belief in art's power to make us look again and change how we act in the world.

[www.kettlesyard.co.uk](http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk)



Ai Weiwei, *Han Dynasty Urn With Coca-Cola Logo*, 2014. Courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio.

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