

# Ai Weiwei

Interlacing

21 February – 29 April 2012





Ai Weiwei, June 2010



June 1994, 1994

As an architect, conceptual artist, sculptor, photographer, blogger, Twitterer, interview artist and political activist, Ai Weiwei is a sensitive observer of current topics and social issues: a great communicator and networker who brings life into art and art into life. "Interlacing" is the first important exhibition in France devoted to the prolific, iconoclastic and provocative work of this major figure in the independent Chinese art scene. Ai Weiwei was born in 1957, the son of the poet Ai Qing. Following his studies at the Beijing Film Academy, in 1978 he was part of the artists' collective The Stars, which rejected Social Realism and advocated artistic individualism and experimentation in art. In 1983 Ai Weiwei went to New York, where he studied at Parsons School for Design in the class of painter Sean Scully. In New York he discovered artists like Allen Ginsberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and, above all, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp is important for him for his conception of art as a part of life. At this time, Ai Weiwei produced his first readymades and thousands of photographs documenting his life and friends in the Chinese art community in New York. In 1997, four years after returning to Beijing, he cofounded the China Art Archives & Warehouse (CAAW) and began to tackle architecture as well. Ai Weiwei opened his own studio in 1999 in Caochangdi and set up the architecture practice FAKE Design in 2003. In the same year, he collaborated with the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron in the conception of the Olympic stadium in Beijing,

the so-called "Bird's Nest, which has become a new symbol of the city. In 2007, he created a work entitled *Fairytale* for Documenta 12, which involved bringing 1,001 Chinese visitors to Kassel. In 2010, he installed a vast, minimalist carpet at the Tate Modern, London, composed of millions of porcelain sunflower seeds, handmade and painted by Chinese craftsmen.

Ai Weiwei deliberately confronts social conditions in China and other countries: through photographs, he documents the widespread demolition of Beijing carried out in the name of progress; in the *Study of Perspective* series, he adopts a provocative stance with regard to established values; he breaks with the past in works made from reassembled pieces of furniture. His principle is always the same: to create new possibilities for the present and the future, asserting his position through tens of thousands of photographs – often taken with a mobile phone – and texts posted on his blog or on Twitter. This exhibition focuses precisely on Ai Weiwei's diversity, complexity and his ability to create links, the "interlacing" and "networking" typical of his output, that one can discover here through hundreds of photographs and text blogs, as well as in explanatory essays. Imprisoned by the Chinese authorities on 3 April 2011, released under bail on 22 June, Ai Weiwei is, at the time of writing, still forbidden to leave the country.



Gu Changwei, Chinese New Year on Mott Street, 1989  
From *New York Photographs*, 1983–93

### **New York Photographs, 1983–93**

Ai Weiwei lived in New York from 1983 until 1993. He himself often described this time as “aimless hanging around with friends”. During these years in New York he photographed the East Village, where he lived, as well as other places. He also recorded images of himself and the people he met: the Chinese artists who visited him in his tiny apartment and his American friends, notably the poet Allen Ginsberg. In 1988 the mood of his photographs changed radically, Ai moved away from these tranquil, casual portraits and townscapes and started to focus on the “dark sides” of urban life, on decay and homelessness, but also on the human rights demonstrations in the streets and the police brutality accompanying them. By the end, he had “accumulated” more than 10,000 photographs that were developed only after his return to Beijing in 1993. There are fascinating correspondences to be detected between these photographs taken from day to day in New York using an analogue camera and his digital photographs taken by the artist with a mobile phone and posted on his blog and his Twitter account over the past few years (since 2005).

### **Beijing Photographs, 1993–2002**

When Ai Weiwei returned to China in 1993 to be near his ill father, he continued his documentary-style photography, capturing everyday moments of his new life in Beijing. He quickly became immersed in the arts scene,



From *Provisional Landscapes*, 2002–08

and made friends with many artists. Among the avant-garde artists of Beijing’s “East Village” he was instrumental in documenting their work, and became a natural leader of the movement fighting for a more open and unrestricted artistic expression. In 1999 he established his art studio and residence in Caochangdi, an enclave on the northeast outskirts of Beijing. A selection of unpublished photographs has been specifically chosen for this exhibition. They depict Ai’s everyday and artistic activities as well as the growth of the contemporary Chinese art scene in Beijing during the early 1990s.

### **Provisional Landscapes, 2002–08**

This series was photographed between 2002 and 2008 in various cities in China. Since 1949 all land in China has belonged to the State, which allows it to develop – and in many cases demolish – large parcels of land without negotiations with landowners. Before a new development is begun, vast empty plots suddenly appear. Where *hutongs* – the small houses and lanes characteristic of traditional China – had recently stood, now lie only piles of rubble and debris. Sometimes entire villages are uprooted and relocated elsewhere, often with little compensation for the inhabitants. Centuries of history and cultural heritage are destroyed overnight to make way for “progress”. These landscapes are indeed only “provisional”, a temporary void that marks the end of the old way of life before the arrival of the new.



From *Bird's Nest*, 2005–08

### **Beijing Airport Terminal 3, 2002–07**

In preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing underwent tremendous changes to its landscape. To accommodate the anticipated influx of visitors from all over the world a new airport terminal was designed by Norman Foster and construction began in 2004. At the time Ai was documenting the building of the Olympic stadium, for which he served as artistic consultant, and proposed to do the same for Foster's project. Access to the site was highly restricted and permission was granted only after a series of triumphs over bureaucratic red tape. For Ai this made it all the more important to record the building's progress as it evolved, as for him architecture is not just about the end result of a building but also the struggle, process and achievement of an idea from start to finish. These images are just a selection from an exhaustive record spanning more than four years.

### ***Bird's Nest*, 2005–08**

Ai Weiwei was part of a joint venture along with Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Stefan Marbach and Li Xinggong, chief architect of CADG (China Architecture Design and Research Group), to design the Beijing National Stadium to host the 2008 Olympic Games, serving as artistic consultant for the design. Given the seemingly random placement of the numerous columns that enclose the inner bowl, the stadium was nicknamed *The Bird's Nest*, which can also be viewed as a compliment, as in China a bird's nest



*Fairytale 1*  
From *Fairytale Portraits*, 2007

is an expensive delicacy eaten only on special occasions. Although Ai eventually distanced himself from the project as the opening of the Olympics approached (he was critical of the Chinese government's use of the Olympics as propaganda), when asked why he participated in the design process he says he did so because he loves design. As with all of his projects, Ai religiously documented the construction, sometimes over a 24-hour period.

### ***Fairytale Portraits*, 2007**

In 2007, Ai Weiwei was invited to participate in Documenta 12, one of the world's most important exhibitions of modern and contemporary art, held every five years in Kassel, Germany. For his involvement Ai undertook arguably one of his most ambitious art projects, which had many layers and components. The centerpiece involved bringing 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel, as a kind of "living installation" and conduit for cultural exchange. In China, obtaining a passport – let alone a visa – for foreign travel is extremely difficult and, for most of the poor, more like a fairytale dream than a reality. For the project Ai recruited Chinese people of all backgrounds from some 20 provinces in China: workers, farmers, ethnic minorities, police officers, prison warders, artists, students, teachers, etc. Each person was photographed in China near the different embassies where they were interviewed prior to getting their papers processed. The portraits show the anxiety and hope of each individual.



Tiananmen  
From *Study of Perspective*, 1995–2010

### **Study of Perspective, 1995–2010**

The first *Study of Perspective* was shot in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1995, and the series is continually growing. It is a simple gesture that speaks volumes about the artist's perspective on authority and the autonomous right of the individual to freedom of expression. Each time, we see the same formula of the left arm extended forward, middle finger raised against the backdrop of iconic or symbolic landmarks from all over the world. This "giving the finger" invites viewers to challenge their own unquestioned deference towards established power, be it that of governments, institutions, beautiful landscapes or cultural monuments.

### **Blog Photographs, c.2005–09**

Ai Weiwei hosted a blog in China from 2005 to 2009 before it was shut down by the Chinese authorities for its "politically sensitive" criticism of the government. He often posted photographs, showing everything from his everyday life and journeys to social and political issues. Only a fraction of the 200,000 photographs in his archives is shown here, but this sample is nonetheless representative of the breadth of Ai's interests. For Ai these photographs are a way to engage and connect with the world in order to promote open uncensored communication. The entire blog archive was seized by the police during Ai Weiwei's detention. Fortunately a pre-selection had already been made for the exhibition before the police searched the studio.



From *Blog Photographs*, c.2005–09

### **Earthquake, 2008–10**

On 12 May 2008 a catastrophic earthquake of magnitude 8.0 on the Richter scale occurred in the central province of Sichuan, China. Within minutes, entire villages had been transformed to piles of rubble, killing at least 69,000 and leaving almost 5 million people homeless. A week after the earthquake Ai travelled to the area to document the devastation. Staring at the hundreds of bags and belongings of innocent children strewn about, he realised that all the effort and life before the disaster hit had been sadly reduced to nothing but crumbled bricks, as a result of corruption and negligence. The death of thousands of schoolchildren in shoddily constructed schools became a sensitive political issue and Ai's attempts to obtain an official list of fatalities was met with fierce resistance and even violence (he suffered head injuries in a police beating in August 2009 that resulted in emergency brain surgery to alleviate a cerebral hemorrhage a month later). The photographs serve to record a tragedy and also show Ai's frustration with the lack of accountability of those responsible. On his return to Beijing, Ai and his team gave their support to an investigation into the student casualties, resulting in a list of 5,385 names published on his blog on the first anniversary of the earthquake. He subsequently also made a work entitled *Remembering* in 2009, using 9,000 children's backpacks on the facade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany, spelling out the sentence "She lived happily for seven years in this world" in Chinese characters, a quote from one of the schoolchildren's mothers.





From *Earthquake*, 2008–10



August 12, 2009  
From *Cell phone Photographs*, 2009–10

### **Cell Phone Photographs, 2009–10**

Since Ai Weiwei's blog was shut down in 2009 he has used Twitter as his online communication platform. Embracing the technology of mobile-phone cameras, Ai often takes photographs with his phone and transmits them immediately onto his Twitter page. Communication is instantaneous, and netizens are able to see what is happening in real time. This immediacy is an interesting phenomenon, especially within the highly monitored and censored media-sphere of China. News outlets are also able to access these images and transmit them via their own sites. Information becomes viral and spreads faster than ever before. These mobile-phone photographs illustrate the breadth of Ai's activities, as an artist and a committed advocate for freedom of expression and an open society.

### **Shanghai Studio, 2010–11**

In early 2008 Ai was invited by the Shanghai local government to build an arts and cultural studio on the outskirts of the city. Though he hesitated for a long time, having given up his architecture practice, the officials were insistent and seemingly sincere, repeatedly visiting him in Beijing. Eventually Ai conceded and construction commenced under the local council's supervision for the next two years. However, immediately upon completion in August 2010, the authorities announced it was an illegal building that needed to be torn down immediately. From Ai's perspective this was clearly a politically informed

decision to keep him in Beijing where his activities could be better monitored by the government. In January 2011, by cover of night, demolition of the building commenced without any prior warning. Ai went to the site early the next day, but by the time he arrived the dismantling was already well under way. In just a few days all evidence that the building had ever existed was meticulously removed, including the foundations, and the site was re-ploughed to look like an unassuming agricultural field. Fortunately, Ai kept a visual record of the process from its very beginning to its untimely and unjust end.



*Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995*

## related events

■ **tour** of the exhibition by **Urs Stahel**, curator  
**Tuesday 21 February, 7pm**

■ **talk** "La grande image n'a pas de forme"  
 [The great picture has no form], by **François Jullien**,  
 philosopher and sinologist.  
 In this talk, François Jullien looks at Ai Weiwei's  
 capacity to use diverse coexisting forms within  
 his work.

**Friday 24 February, 7pm, in the auditorium**

### ■ Children First!

visit and workshop "Cities in transformation"

**Saturday 25 February, 31 March and 28 April, 3.30pm**

### ■ Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

tour of the exhibitions "Ai Weiwei: Interlacing"  
 and "Berenice Abbott (1898–1991), Photographs",  
 with a guide from the Jeu de Paume

**Tuesday 28 February, 6pm**

■ **discussion** "Ai Weiwei : décryptage d'un  
 symbole" [Ai Weiwei: uncoding a symbol],  
 with **Jean-Philippe Béja**, researcher specialising  
 in contemporary China, **Franck Renaud**, Head of  
 the Asia-Pacific Service at *Courrier international*,  
**Alain Le Bacquer**, photo-journalist, and **Pierre Haski**,  
 journalist and Director of *Rue89*.

In partnership with *Courrier international*,  
*Polka Magazine*, *Rue89* and France Info.

**Tuesday 6 March, 6.30pm, in the auditorium**

■ **symposium** related to the exhibition,  
 with **Pierre Haski**, journalist and Director  
 of *Rue89*, **Urs Stahel**, curator of the exhibition,  
 and **Marie-José Mondzain**, philosopher, writer  
 and Director of Research at the CNRS.  
 What is at stake in Ai Weiwei's work in  
 today's political, economic and social context?  
 What unites his artistic creations and his  
 engagement as an artist activist?

**Saturday 17 March, 2.30pm, in the auditorium**

■ **talk** related to the exhibitions "Ai Weiwei:  
 Interlacing" and "Berenice Abbott (1898–1991),  
 Photographs", by **Jean-Luc Nancy**, philosopher.  
 Both Berenice Abbott and Ai Weiwei pinpoint  
 the architectural and urban evolutions of their  
 respective periods, while evoking the notions  
 of citizenship and community. Jean-Luc Nancy  
 will examine the way these two artists treat such  
 themes and will, in particular, consider the way  
 their images function as artworks in relation to  
 their sociopolitical concerns.

**Friday 30 March, 6pm, in the auditorium**

■ **publication:** *Ai Weiwei: Interlacing*,  
 texts by Daniela Janser, Urs Stahel, Philip Tinari  
 and Carol Yinghua Lu, 496 pages, 17 x 23.5 cm,  
 co-publication Steidl/Éditions du Jeu de Paume,  
 €45

# Jeu de Paume – Concorde

## exhibitions

21 February – 29 April 2012

- **Ai Weiwei: Interlacing**
- **Berenice Abbott (1898–1991), Photographs**
- **Satellite Programme, Jimmy Robert: Langue matérielle**

until 15 March 2012

- Virtual Space, "Side Effects" cycle: **Blow-up**

## forthcoming exhibitions

16 March – 18 September 2012

- Virtual Space, "Side Effects" cycle: **Form@ts**

22 May – 23 September 2012

- **Eva Besnyó, 1910–2003: The Sensuous Image**
- **Laurent Grasso**
- Satellite Programme, **Rosa Barba**

## practical information

1 Place de la Concorde, 75008 Paris  
access via the Tuileries Gardens, Rue de Rivoli entrance  
[www.jeudepaume.org](http://www.jeudepaume.org)  
<http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org>  
information +33 (0)1 47 03 12 50  
Tuesday (late opening) 11 am–9 pm  
Wednesday to Sunday 11 am–7 pm  
closed Monday

■ **exhibitions:** admission: €8,50; concessions: €5,50  
*free admission to the exhibitions of the Satellite Programme*

**Young Visitor's Tuesday:** free admission for students and visitors under 26 every last Tuesday of the month from 5 pm to 9 pm

■ **guided tours and workshops:** free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

**Tours for individual visitors with guides from the Jeu de Paume**

Wednesday and Saturday at 12.30 pm

### Family Tours

Saturday at 3.30 pm (except last Saturday of the month)  
by reservation on +33 (0)1 47 03 12 41/[rendezvousentfamille@jeudepaume.org](mailto:rendezvousentfamille@jeudepaume.org)

### Children First!

visit and workshop for 7 to 11 year olds  
every last Saturday of the month at 3.30 pm  
by reservation on +33 (0)1 47 03 04 95/[lesenfantsdabord@jeudepaume.org](mailto:lesenfantsdabord@jeudepaume.org)

### Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

every last Tuesday of the month at 7 pm  
■ **talks:** free admission on a first-come, first-served basis  
■ **discussions:** free admission  
reservation required on [infoauditorium@jeudepaume.org](mailto:infoauditorium@jeudepaume.org)  
■ **symposia:** €3 per session or free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

texts: Marta Gili, Daniela Janser, Lucas Lai and Urs Stahel  
translation: Charles Penwarden  
layout: Élise Garreau

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# Jeu de Paume – extramural

## exhibitions

until 20 May 2012

- **Photography of Reconstruction. Rebuilding of the French Cities (1945–58)**

Château de Tours  
25 Avenue André-Malraux, 37000 Tours  
information +33 (0)2 47 70 88 46  
Tuesday to Friday 2 pm–6 pm  
Saturday and Sunday 2.15 pm–6 pm  
admission: €3; concessions: €1.50

22 March – 13 May 2012

- Satellite Programme, **Tamar Guimarães: The Afterlife (of names and things)**

Maison d'art Bernard Anthonioz  
16 Rue Charles-VII, 94130 Nogent-sur-Marne  
[www.maisondart.fr](http://www.maisondart.fr)  
information 01 48 71 90 07  
daily noon–6 pm  
closed Tuesday and public holidays  
free admission

## forthcoming exhibition

17 June – 4 November 2012

- **Pierre Bourdieu, Images of Algeria: An Elective Affinity**
- Château de Tours

**This exhibition is coproduced by the Jeu de Paume, Paris, and the Fotomuseum Winterthur.**

**Curator: Urs Stahel**

In partnership with:



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