

Teaching

Ai Weiwei

ARTIST

AI Weiwei

(i way-way)

艾未未



Ai Weiwei, 2012

BORN

1957, Beijing

LIVES & WORKS

Beijing, Berlin, & New York

THEMES

History
Materials and Process
Symbols

“Creativity is the power to reject the past, and to change the status quo, and to seek new potential.”¹

ART MEDIUM

Sculpture

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing, the capital of the People’s Republic of China, which had been founded as a communist state by Mao Zedong in 1949. Ai Weiwei’s father, Ai Qing, was a revered modern poet who ended up being branded as “anti-revolutionary” during the Anti-Rightist Campaign to purge intellectuals in 1958. The entire family was exiled to a labor camp in a remote region of the country, and Ai moved back to Beijing after his father’s standing as one of China’s greatest poets was reinstated by the Communist Party following Mao’s death in 1976.

Ai enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, but in 1981 he moved to New York to attend Parsons School of Design. Like many artists of his generation around the world, Ai was interested in Conceptual practices, such as the Duchampian idea of the readymade. He also was drawn to the language of appropriation used by Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, whom he knew in New York’s downtown scene. When Ai returned to Beijing in 1993, China was in the throes of accelerated industrialization, which paralleled the speed of industrialization during the American Industrial Revolution in the early 19th century. Beijing’s art community was also reeling from the crackdown on political expression following the June Fourth Incident at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Upon his return, Ai helped establish Beijing East Village, a community of experimental artists, and later immersed himself in social activism, championing human rights

and freedom of expression within China’s authoritarian regime.

China Log (2005) is built from ironwood—or *tieli mu*, a wood that was traditionally used in Chinese furniture—which was salvaged from a demolished Qing-dynasty temple. Due to rapidly expanding urban developments during the 1990s and 2000s in Beijing, it was common to find old cultural and heritage sites hastily torn down to make room for new construction.

Ai expands on the logic of the readymade by repurposing the ironwood to create an eleven-foot-long sculpture with the shape of the map of China running through the entire length. To create the effect, Ai employed a team of woodworking artisans to join eight carved logs with interlocking dovetail joints, which hold the pieces together without any nails or glue. This appropriation of materials and technique, both symbols of China’s quickly disappearing past, critiques the progress-oriented future of modern-day China and calls attention to the importance of not forgetting the growing nation’s recent history. Ai’s map of China includes the contested territories of Hainan island and Taiwan, calling attention to China’s political ambitions in the age of globalization.

¹ Ai Weiwei, “We Have Nothing,” in *Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006–2009*, ed. and trans. Lee Ambrozy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), p. 140.



Ai Weiwei, *China Log*, 2005. Ironwood, 57.8 × 337.5 × 55.2 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Lybess Sweezy and Ken Miller 2012.138

View and Discuss

→ Look at the sculpture *China Log* (2005).

What do you notice about the shape of this sculpture? Its title is *China Log*.

What do you notice about how this sculpture is made? *China Log* was created with different pieces of wood, combined with interlocking dovetail joints. How is this process different from other ways of joining wood?



Ai Weiwei, *China Log*, 2005

Looking at the work from the side, you can see the shape of the map of China, including the contested territories of Hainan and Taiwan in the lower-right corner.

→ To build *China Log*, Ai worked with a team of artisans trained in traditional woodworking techniques. These labor-intensive methods have largely become obsolete in a world of industrialized processes that focus on mass production, efficiency, and speed.

Why do you think Ai chose to use these particular processes to create his artwork?

→ *China Log* was made with reclaimed wood. The pillars of wood in the sculpture were originally columns in a centuries-old Qing-dynasty temple, and Ai purchased them from an antique-furniture dealer after the temple was demolished.

Why do you think Ai chose to reuse old materials instead of purchasing new wood?

How is this sculpture a comment on Chinese politics and its identity as a nation?

Classroom Activities

Create a Readymade

“Readymade” is a term coined by French modern artist Marcel Duchamp in 1915 to describe common, everyday objects or mass-produced materials that an artist chooses to reuse for the purpose of art. Ai spoke about using reclaimed materials to create a readymade: “For example, an old, destroyed temple: you know the old temple was beautiful and beautifully built. We could once all believe and hope in it. But once it has been destroyed, it’s nothing. It becomes another artist’s material to build something completely contradictory to what it was before.”²

What do you think about this statement? Based on *China Log*, do you agree or disagree—why? Challenge your students to use reclaimed or recycled materials to create a readymade.

Past versus Present

In this work, Ai assigns value to handmade objects rather than to those made using modern modes of mass production. Ask students to compare furniture items that have been traditionally constructed versus furniture items that have been mass produced, e.g., a wooden antique chair versus a plastic chair from Ikea.

Which object has more value in our society—why? Which object do you value more—why?

² Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist* (London: Penguin UK, 2011), p. 64.

Classroom Activities

Compile a Time Capsule

China Log criticizes how urban development in Beijing has led to the erasure of its rich cultural past. By salvaging materials to create artwork, Ai preserves a piece of China's history.

Brainstorm with your students: If you were to create a time capsule about the history of your neighborhood, what would you choose to preserve? What is in danger of being lost? What objects, artifacts, or documentation of historical sites would you want to preserve for future generations?



Tower of Buddhist Incense, Summer Palace, Beijing, a Qing-dynasty temple supported by eight ironwood pillars

Research Political Culture

Ai said, "I'm interested in all of the value judgments we make. . . . In Chinese history, there are so many dynasties, and each built the most beautiful Buddhist sculptures or temples. Yet the next dynasty immediately destroys everything. So, you can see in the changing of political power, those aesthetics also change dramatically."³

Ask your students to research the impact of politics on cultural movements and aesthetics. How have cultural tastes changed in our country in the last fifty, one hundred, two hundred years? How does the culture of the American colonial period differ from the culture of the country after the Revolutionary War?

3 Patrick Rhine, "Ai Weiwei," *Miami Rail*, November 2013, <https://miamirail.org/visual-arts/ai-weiwei/>.

Resources

Websites

- Ai's Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/aiww/?hl=en>.
- Ai's Twitter. <https://twitter.com/aiww?lang=it>.
- Ai's Website. <http://www.aiweiwei.com/>.

Videos

- *Art in the Twenty-First Century*. Season 6, "Ai Weiwei in 'Change.'" April 14, 2012. <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/ai-weiwei-in-change-segment/>.

Articles

- Kunzru, Hari. "Ai Weiwei: The Dissident Artist." *Guardian*, May 17, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/may/28/ai-weiwei-artist-hari-kunzru>.
- Rhine, Patrick. "Ai Weiwei." *Miami Rail*, November 2013. <https://miamirail.org/visual-arts/ai-weiwei/>.
- Sorace, Christian. "China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2014). www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674120.
- Stevens, Mark. "Is Ai Weiwei China's Most Dangerous Man?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2012. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/is-ai-weiwei-chinas-most-dangerous-man-17989316/>.
- White, Mason. "Ai Weiwei: Fragments, Voids, Sections and Rings." *Archinect*, December 5, 2006. <https://archinect.com/features/article/47035/ai-weiwei-fragments-voids-sections-and-rings>.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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