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Hannibal
Patrick Derom Gallery

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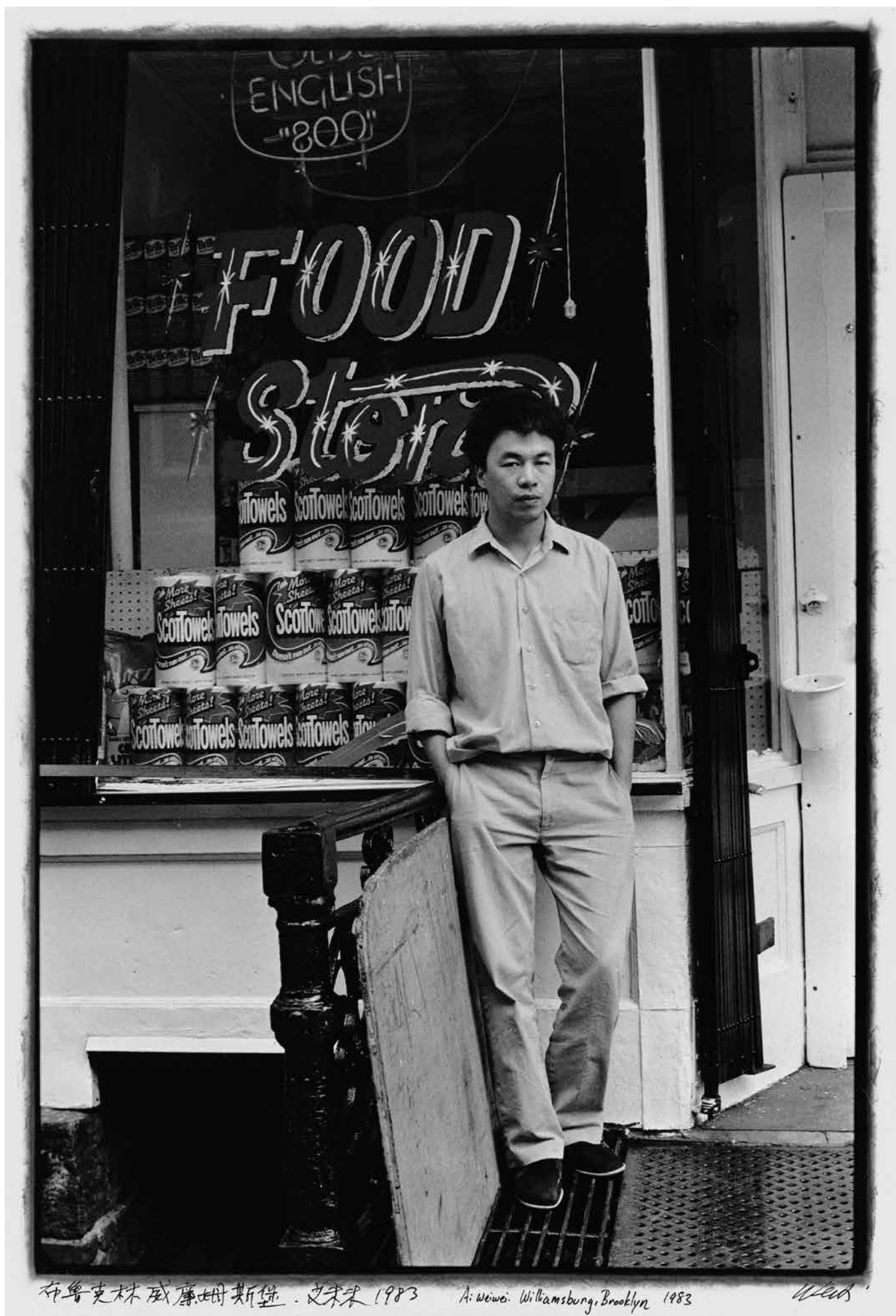
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Introduction: An Improbable Journey

Edouard Derom

Some exhibitions are planned, and some exhibitions come into being of their own accord, as if carried forward by a succession of encounters that, viewed in retrospect, appear improbably connected. This exhibition belongs to the latter category.

For the Patrick Derom Gallery, it is an immense privilege that Ai Weiwei accepted our invitation to collaborate on this exhibition and the accompanying publication. After more than two years of conversations, travels, research and preparation, I sometimes find it difficult to believe that his work now inhabits the gallery my father founded in Brussels in 1986. Ai Weiwei once seemed to belong to another scale: an artist whose work was encountered in the great museums of the world, whose name regularly appeared in international headlines, and whose life had become inseparable from the defining political questions of our age.

Organizing his exhibition in Belgium was never part of any grand plan. In fact, it was almost twenty years after my first encounter with Ai Weiwei that our paths finally crossed. My first encounter with him, paradoxically, did not include meeting him in person: it was the summer of 2007, and I was an intern at the newly founded Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing. Guy Ullens was transforming a former military factory in the 798 Art District into a contemporary art museum. I had traveled to China eager to engage with a rapidly changing artistic landscape, and it quickly became apparent that one man was shaping the conversation in a substantial way, and his name surfaced in almost every conversation: Ai Weiwei.

Although Ai Weiwei had returned from New York only fifteen years earlier, his influence on Chinese contemporary art was immense, extending well beyond his own artistic production. Through the Beijing East Village, the publication of the *Black Book*, *White Book* and *Gray Book*, the organization of the legendary *Fuck Off* exhibition, and his tireless support of younger artists, he had undoubtedly become one of the principal architects of the contemporary art discourse in China.

Walking through Beijing that summer, I often found myself looking up at the immense lattice of steel taking shape north of the city. The Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium, conceived by Herzog & de Meuron in collaboration with Ai Weiwei, was nearing completion for the 2008 Olympic Games (fig. 01). At the time, it symbolized an optimistic dialogue between China and the rest of the world. Only later would history reveal the profound irony of that image.

Like many people of my generation, I subsequently witnessed his transformation from one of China's leading artists into one of the world's most visible defenders of artistic freedom and human rights. His investigation into the thousands of schoolchildren who died during the Sichuan earthquake because of corrupt construction practices, his subsequent surveillance, interrogations, secret detention, and the destruction of his studios revealed the extraordinary personal cost of speaking truth to power. Yet Ai Weiwei has distinguished himself by never confining his humanitarian concerns to China. Whether addressing the refugee crisis, mass surveillance, digital censorship, the erosion of democratic institutions or the war in Ukraine, his work consistently demonstrates that art can—and perhaps should—engage directly with political and ethical questions relevant for the broadest audiences.

Few artists have occupied so many roles simultaneously. Artist, certainly. But also architect, curator, writer, publisher, filmmaker, documentarian, collector, social critic, internet pioneer, and public intellectual. Throughout his career, Ai Weiwei has consistently dissolved the boundaries separating artistic practice from everyday life, historical research from political engagement, craftsmanship from conceptual art. His oeuvre could never be understood through any single discipline because it deliberately refuses to remain within one.

Left page:

Ai Weiwei, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1983

Following page:

fig. 01: The Bird's Nest, Beijing, 2005–2008





Over the years, I visited several of his exhibitions. Some remain vividly present in my memory. Standing before the endless field of handcrafted porcelain *Sunflower Seeds* in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, I experienced for the first time the profoundly moving effects of overwhelming repetition. *Straight*, composed of the twisted steel reinforcing rebars painstakingly recovered from schools destroyed during the Sichuan earthquake, demonstrated how sculpture could function simultaneously as memorial, political accusation and historical archive. *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, which debuted at the 55th Venice Biennale, transformed the artist's own secret detention into a sequence of sculptural environments of almost unbearable psychological intensity. Each exhibition left me with the same impression: Ai Weiwei's work always exceeds the immediate circumstances that produced it.

Ironically, our eventual meeting came not in China but in the United States. Having spent almost two decades living in America before returning to Belgium, I became close friends with Chris Mao, whose role in this story cannot be overstated. For many years, Chris directed Chambers Fine Art in New York and Beijing, one of the pioneering galleries dedicated to Chinese contemporary art outside Asia. Chris and his partner, the art historian John Tancock, collaborated on many professional endeavors with Ai Weiwei, becoming close personal friends over time. It was Chris who eventually introduced me to Ai Weiwei.

Looking back, I realize that this simple introduction was far more significant than I initially understood. It taught me something fundamental about the artist: despite his extraordinary international reputation, Ai Weiwei remains someone for whom personal relationships and trust are paramount.

Our first meeting took place in Seattle during the opening of Ai Weiwei's exhibition in March 2025. It was followed by visits to his Berlin studio, his home in Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal, and, again, a meeting in Manchester during the opening of *Button Up!*. Those encounters gradually dismantled many of the assumptions I had unconsciously formed over the years.

Public imagination often casts Ai Weiwei almost exclusively as an activist. That dimension is undoubtedly central to his identity, yet spending time with him revealed a far richer and more nuanced personality. Conversations shifted effortlessly between politics, philosophy, archaeology, architecture, literature, and cooking. Meals occupy an unexpectedly central place in his world.

One evening in Portugal remains particularly vivid in my memory. That evening, Ai Weiwei spent hours introducing me to his collection of ancient Chinese jade. One object after another emerged from boxes in which jades were carefully arranged. He spoke about craftsmanship, provenance, symbolism, dynastic history, and the extraordinary continuity of Chinese civilization with the same intensity that others reserve for contemporary politics. Only gradually did I begin to understand that this collector's eye is inseparable from his artistic practice.

Behind the obvious iconoclasm lies someone who possesses an exceptionally deep understanding of Chinese cultural history. He repeatedly challenges inherited traditions, yet he does so precisely because he knows those traditions so intimately. Destruction and preservation, rupture and continuity, criticism and admiration coexist throughout his oeuvre in ways that often escape viewers encountering only its political surface.

When I returned to Belgium permanently in 2023 and joined the gallery my father founded, a question gradually emerged. Why had Belgium never organized a major survey exhibition of Ai Weiwei? The absence seemed all the more surprising considering how often Belgium had quietly intersected with the artist's story. In 2004, through the remarkable initiative of Frank Uytterhaegen, the Caermersklooster in Ghent hosted one of the earliest exhibitions devoted to Ai Weiwei in Western Europe. Frank was a co-founder of the China Art Archives & Warehouse, along with Ai Weiwei and Hans van Dijk. In 2009, for Europalia China, BOZAR presented *The State of Things*, curated by Luc Tuymans, Ai Weiwei and Fan Di'an. Antwerp's FOMU devoted an exhibition to his photography in 2017–18. Belgium has maintained a constant presence throughout Ai Weiwei's career, yet a comprehensive exhibition has remained unrealized until now.

Initially, I imagined my role as simply bringing together the artist and a Belgian institution. Almost accidentally, a formerly absurd idea began to feel strangely logical... If no institution was prepared to organize the exhibition, perhaps the gallery itself should. To my astonishment, Ai Weiwei agreed.

Ai Weiwei's collaborations are founded on interpersonal relationships, far predating institutional involvement. As our conversations developed, the exhibition itself began to evolve. Ai Weiwei invited us to collaborate on the show he curated for the Emile Verhaeren Museum. The con-

nection between the Belgian poet Verhaeren and Ai Qing—Ai Weiwei's father—extends far beyond literary history. It represents a dialogue between two poets profoundly marked by exile, political upheaval, and the moral responsibilities of art. Unexpectedly, Belgian history itself became part of the exhibition's narrative rather than merely its location.

Looking back, I no longer think this exhibition is simply about Ai Weiwei. It is also about the improbable chain of human relationships through which art is created. This exhibition could never have been possible without the generosity, trust, and commitment of many individuals and institutions.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Ai Weiwei. He has consistently welcomed me with extraordinary openness. His willingness to entrust our gallery with this ambitious project is an honor I will always cherish. I would also like to acknowledge Jennifer Ng and the entire Ai Weiwei Studio for their professionalism, patience, and collaboration throughout every stage of this exhibition.

This project simply would not exist without Chris Mao. His decades-long friendship with Ai Weiwei, his unwavering confidence in our vision, and his generosity in opening so many doors transformed what initially seemed an impossible dream into reality. Chris did far more than introduce me to the artist; he made this collaboration possible.

This accompanying publication is likewise the product of an extraordinary community of scholars and friends. My sincere thanks go to Gautier Platteau and the entire team at Hannibal Books, whose commitment to producing a publication worthy of Ai Weiwei's work has been steadfast.

My heartfelt thanks also go to John Tancock, whose scholarship on Ai Weiwei is unparalleled. His intellectual generosity, careful advice, and willingness to share years of research have enriched every aspect of this exhibition and publication. His essay in this book is poised to become one of the definitive studies of Ai Weiwei's use of LEGO® and toy bricks, a medium that has fundamentally transformed his recent practice.

My deepest thanks go to Lee Ambrozy, with whom I had the privilege of studying at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York. Her essay is, in my view, among the most original and perceptive studies of Ai Weiwei to date. Rather than interpreting his practice solely through the lens of Western contemporary art, she situates it within Chinese intellectual traditions, opening up an entirely new way of understanding his work.

I am profoundly grateful to Thomas Crow, my doctoral supervisor and one of the foremost historians of art and politics, for contributing a remarkable essay on Ai Weiwei's *The Death of Marat* (2025, cat. 53). The inclusion of this work feels particularly meaningful, as only a few hundred meters from our gallery hangs Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793, fig. 05, p. 130), one of the masterpieces of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Like Ai Weiwei, David believed that artistic practice could not be separated from political commitment, and like Ai Weiwei, he ultimately experienced exile. Their dialogue across more than two centuries is one of the exhibition's unexpected pleasures.

My sincere gratitude goes to Chris Dercon, who immediately embraced the project and enthusiastically agreed to engage in holding a conversation with Ai Weiwei at BOZAR, coinciding with the exhibition. No exhibition and publication of this scale can be realized without an exceptional team. Alessio Palmeri and Daniel De Decker have devoted countless hours to every conceptual, logistical, and editorial aspect of this project. Their enthusiasm, intelligence, and determination made possible what often appeared impossible. I could not have wished for better collaborators.

Finally, I wish to thank my father, Patrick Derom. When I first suggested that our gallery should organize an exhibition devoted to Ai Weiwei, it undoubtedly sounded like an improbable undertaking. He nevertheless trusted both the project and the people behind it. Throughout this journey, he has shared not only his experience and wisdom but also his remarkable ability to transform every challenge into an opportunity. Without his confidence, encouragement, and unwavering support, neither this exhibition nor this publication would have come into existence.

To all who contributed, in ways both visible and non, I offer my deepest gratitude. This book is as much yours as it is ours.



An Ai for Humanity

Lee Ambrozy

“I was not born an artist;
I was born a human. I care about
human conditions rather than the
opinions of others. I don’t have
a choice.”
—Ai Weiwei¹

The Sichuan Earthquake of 2008 saw a devastating loss of human life, including of 5,197 school-aged children buried by collapsing schools. These buildings, made of substandard concrete, crumbled like sandcastles during the earthquake. They were of poor quality because local officials siphoned funds intended for their construction, their greed ultimately causing immeasurable grief for the thousands of families now bereft of their children. Ai Weiwei mobilized dozens of citizen volunteers to investigate this (fig. 01), resulting in documentary films exposing those responsible and the artwork *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens’ Investigation* (2008–11), recording their names and basic information for posterity.² Without the efforts of Ai’s studio, such corruption would have been completely whitewashed in the public ethos.

The period marked a shift in Ai’s artworks, in which his ethical stance and humanitarian concerns became transparent, and the functions of art and activism began to merge. He later paid a high personal toll for his outspokenness, as Chinese bureaucrats at the provincial and national levels exacted their revenge. Around 2015, Ai began advocating for global populations, critically documenting the refugee crisis in Europe, and his public persona as an artist-provocateur reached vast new audiences. In his most recent book, *On Censorship* (2026), Ai reflects on how the suppression of free speech occurs not only in China and similar authoritarian regimes but also in liberal democracies. Slavoj Žižek lauded the book as that of an “authentic” dissident with a “properly ethical stance.”³ Now in his sixties, Ai Weiwei occupies several personas with characteristic mettle: artist, architect, designer, writer, dissident, activist, and philosopher—all unapologetically political.

Ai Weiwei’s political orientation is unquestionably generational, the result of sharing in the consequences meted out to his father, the revolutionary and poet Ai Qing. A remarkable family story and a dramatic childhood in exile honed Ai’s critical thinking from a young age, ensuring he could never thrive within narrow social constructs. Yet, despite the ease with which he engages controversy and transgresses conventional boundaries, Ai’s art practice is rooted in traditional materials, techniques, and a handful of topics squarely within the realm of conventional Chinese art history. Just as the poetry of the Belgian Émile Verhaeren inspired Ai Qing, Ai Weiwei has similarly synthesized Chinese and “Western” influences in artistic concept and craft. His artworks are renowned for flaunting traditional craftsmanship and antiques, yet Ai’s artistic bedrock lies in the Western avant-garde, established in the East Village movement of 1980s New York. It wasn’t until Ai’s return to Beijing in 1993 that his interest in antiques began to translate into his art practice.⁴ Likewise, he inherited his rational, cosmopolitan humanism from his father. It reflects our contemporary political moment but is equally informed by an epistemological tradition unique to China’s connoisseurial history, the “investigation of things” (*gewu* 格物). Instrumental in self-cultivation and the perfecting of one’s moral character, *gewu* developed over the centuries, eventually embracing connoisseurship and antiquities. Similar objects are now synonymous with Ai’s practice, and consistently overlap with craft and craft labor. Their coevolution with Ai’s humanism over the decades suggests that his own “investigation of things” influenced the formation of his ethical stance.

“Superior craftsmanship is always a criterion for people to judge the value of the work... In art, the logic of the universe is transformed into the logic of the artist’s self-interpretation, and, with craftsmanship, it is made accessible... Good quality is not about presenting a perfect object, but rather that one can understand the object.”

After arriving in the United States in 1981, Ai Weiwei crafted art objects using his own hands (fig. 02); upon his return to Beijing in 1993, he began frequenting antique markets, and his art

Left page:

Ai Weiwei standing before a flag from the *Button Up!* exhibition, Factory International, Manchester, 2026





cat. 06: *Grapes*, 2007
9 stools from the Qing Dynasty, 79 × 137 × 160 cm

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cat. 32: *Han Dynasty Vase with Coca-Cola Logo*, 2015
Han Dynasty vase, paint, 37 × 41.5 × 28 cm



The Studio as Artwork

Edouard Derom

The first time I encountered the nine *Montemor-o-Novo Studio Models* (cat. 54) was not in a museum but in Ai Weiwei's Berlin studio. It was May 2025. They had only recently arrived from China and still rested on the wooden crates in which they had travelled halfway around the world. Ai Weiwei moved slowly from one to the next, inspecting every joint, every beam, every meticulously crafted detail. He seemed genuinely pleased. More than once he remarked on the remarkable precision of the Chinese craftsmen who had produced them. There was no trace of nostalgia in his observation, only admiration for a tradition of craftsmanship that remains deeply rooted in Chinese culture despite the extraordinary transformations the country has undergone.

At first sight the objects appear to be conventional architectural models. But almost immediately something feels unusual. Architectural models are normally made before a building exists. They serve as tools of projection, allowing architects and clients to imagine a future structure before construction begins. Ai Weiwei reverses this familiar sequence. These models were made only after the building had already been completed. Instead of preparatory studies, they are acts of remembrance.

The nine models are small scale replicas of the artist's studio in Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal (p. 132; pp 136–37, fig. 04–07). They are displayed in the same way that I saw them in Berlin: each model standing upon the shipping crate that transported it. The crates are not concealed once they have fulfilled their practical function. On the contrary even, they become an integral part of the installation. Constructed from untreated timber, they preserve the biography of the artwork itself. They remind us that works of art spend a remarkable part of their existence travelling between studios, museums, and collections. Rather than hiding this logistical reality, Ai Weiwei makes it visible. The crates function simultaneously as pedestals, archives, and silent witnesses to the lives these objects continue to lead.

Instead of presenting a single model that depicts only the exterior of the studio in Portugal,

Ai Weiwei conceived a series of nine distinct models, each corresponding to one section of the building. The studio is meticulously divided into nine equal squares through two parallel cuts on each side, and each segment is opened to reveal its interior. Arranged in a parallelogram of three by three, the installation encourages movement rather than contemplation from a fixed point. Visitors weave between the models, discovering each one from constantly changing perspectives. Structural beams, partition walls, staircases, roof trusses, and supporting columns are laid bare with extraordinary precision. What was once an opaque architectural volume is rendered transparent, exposing its inner workings. The building is dissected much like an anatomical specimen. Architecture becomes anatomy.¹

Looking into these structures, I found myself unexpectedly transported back to my childhood. I was reminded of the celebrated *Cross Sections* books by Stephen Biesty, whose meticulous illustrations revealed the hidden interiors of castles, ships, cathedrals, and submarines. Those books inspired a peculiar fascination. Their magic lay not in the exterior of buildings or machines, but in the invisible complexity that lay concealed beneath familiar surfaces. Ai Weiwei's models evoke that same irresistible curiosity. They invite us to look inside the body of architecture itself, revealing not only how a building stands but how it thinks.

However, unlike Biesty's illustrations, these models are not simply educational tools. Besides their architectural function, they possess an undeniable sculptural autonomy. Their intricate timber structures produce rhythms of line, shadow, and volume that can be appreciated independently of the building they represent. They are beautiful objects in their own right. This autonomy is never complete, however, as the sculptures remain inseparable from the architecture they depict.

Perhaps one of the defining characteristics of Ai Weiwei's practice is that throughout his career, the studio has never functioned merely as the site where artworks are produced.² Time and again, it becomes an artwork in its own right. His studios acquire symbolic lives that extend far beyond their practical purpose, embodying memory, political resistance, architectural experimentation, and personal history.

It is significant that the studio in Montemor-o-Novo, and consequently the nine sectional models derived from it, refer to the architectural form of Ai Weiwei's previous studio in Malu,

Left page:

Ai Weiwei in his studio in Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal









cat. 54: *Montemor-o-Novo Studio Models*, 2025
Wood, set of 9, 54 × 100 × 100 cm each

Left page: detail of cat. 54

Following spread: installation views of cat. 54





Biography of Ai Weiwei

Alessio Palmeri

Born on 18 May 1957, in Beijing, Ai Weiwei is one of the most influential contemporary artists and activists of his generation. He is the son of the renowned Chinese poet Ai Qing and Gao Ying. A victim of political persecution during the Communist regime, his father was denounced and sent to a labor camp. In 1958, when Ai Weiwei was only one year old, his family was deported to a camp in Heilongjiang before being exiled in 1961 to Shihezi in Northern Xinjiang, where they lived for sixteen years. After Mao Zedong's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the family returned to Beijing in 1976.

In 1978, Ai Weiwei enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy, studying animation as part of the first class admitted after the Cultural Revolution. In 1981, he left China for the United States. He lived in New York from 1983 to 1993, briefly studied at the Parsons School of Design, and attended the Art Students League of New York from 1983 to 1986. This period proved decisive for his artistic development; he discovered the works of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, which deeply influenced his practice.

In 1993, he returned to Beijing to care for his ailing father. Back in China, he participated in the creation of Beijing East Village, an avant-garde artist community, and began collecting antique art objects, including jade and historical artifacts. In 1997, he co-founded the China Art Archives & Warehouse (CAAW), one of the country's first independent art spaces. From 1999 onward, he turned to architecture and designed his own studio in Caochangdi, northeast Beijing. In 2000, he co-organized the exhibition *Fuck Off* in Shanghai with curator Feng Boyi. He also founded his architecture studio, FAKE Design.

Ai Weiwei's international recognition accelerated in the 2000s. In 2007, as part of Documenta 12 in Kassel, he created the project *Fairytale*, which brought 1,001 Chinese citizens to Germany. In 2008, he collaborated with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron on the design of the Beijing National Stadium, known as the "Bird's Nest," built for the Olympic Games. In 2010, he presented the monumental installation *Sunflower Seeds* at Tate Modern in London, consisting of one hundred million hand-crafted porcelain sunflower seeds.

Alongside his artistic work, Ai Weiwei has an unwavering commitment to human rights and freedom of expression. Highly critical of the Chinese government, he investigated corruption and the cover-ups following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which led to the collapse of many poorly constructed school buildings. This activism led to severe reprisals. Following Ai Weiwei's house arrest in November 2010, his Shanghai studio was demolished by the authorities in January 2011. On April 3, 2011, he was arrested for alleged tax fraud, detained for 81 days, and then released. His passport was confiscated and only returned in 2015. This period of detention continues to resonate in his artistic practice. Most recently, *Sewing a Button* (2026), presented at Manchester's Factory International, offered a condensed, 24-hour re-enactment of the 81 days he spent in detention following a series of public statements and interventions in which he criticized the Chinese Communist Party and its governance.

After regaining freedom of movement, he settled in Berlin, where he opened a large studio in a former brewery.

In 2017, the documentary *Human Flow* premiered at the 74th Venice International Film Festival. Filmed across 23 countries, it explores the global refugee crisis through testimonies and images collected around the world. In 2021, he published his memoir *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, blending family history, artistic creation, and political reflection. In *On Censorship*, published in 2026, he reflects on censorship, surveillance, freedom of expression, and the relationship between art and political power. Drawing on his own experiences, he argues that censorship is not exclusive to authoritarian regimes but also manifests itself, often in less visible ways, within democratic societies, including in the West. In 2025, he travelled to the front lines of Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion, during and after the opening of his exhibition at Pavilion 13 in Kyiv, reaffirming his commitment to addressing contemporary conflicts and humanitarian crises through art (cat. 89).

Since the pandemic, Ai Weiwei has been living between Montemor-o-Novo, Berlin, and Cambridge. There, he established a vast new studio, conceived as a space without any purpose, on the town's outskirts. Designed according to principles inspired by traditional Chinese architecture and construction techniques, the complex combines contemporary functionality with elements of Chinese craftsmanship. He still maintains ties with Cambridge, where his son attends school, as well

as a studio in Berlin. In 2025–2026, he briefly returned to China to visit his mother without facing new persecution.

Today, Ai Weiwei continues to produce politically engaged work that blends art, memory, and critique. Through his installations, films, and public statements, he has established himself as a major figure in contemporary art, placing freedom of expression and human rights at the center of his artistic practice.



Ai Weiwei with Ai Qing in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China, November 1959



cat. 90: *Oak Leaves*, 2022
Etching on paper, 60 × 73 cm



cat. 91: *Parrot Feathers*, 2022
Etching on paper, 54 × 67 cm

Colophon

This book was published on the occasion of the exhibitions

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19 September–14 November 2026

Ai Weiwei: Life – Revolt – Poetry
Emile Verhaeren Museum, Sint-Amands, Belgium
21 September–13 December 2026

Ai Weiwei Studio
Yun-hua Chen, Cui Xing, Gui Nuo, Li Dongxu,
Li Jing, Jennifer Ng, Juan Sebastian Pérez,
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Ai Weiwei in Red, 2022 (cat. 38)

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