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## Provocative, honest, fierce: A review of Ai Weiwei's London exhibition

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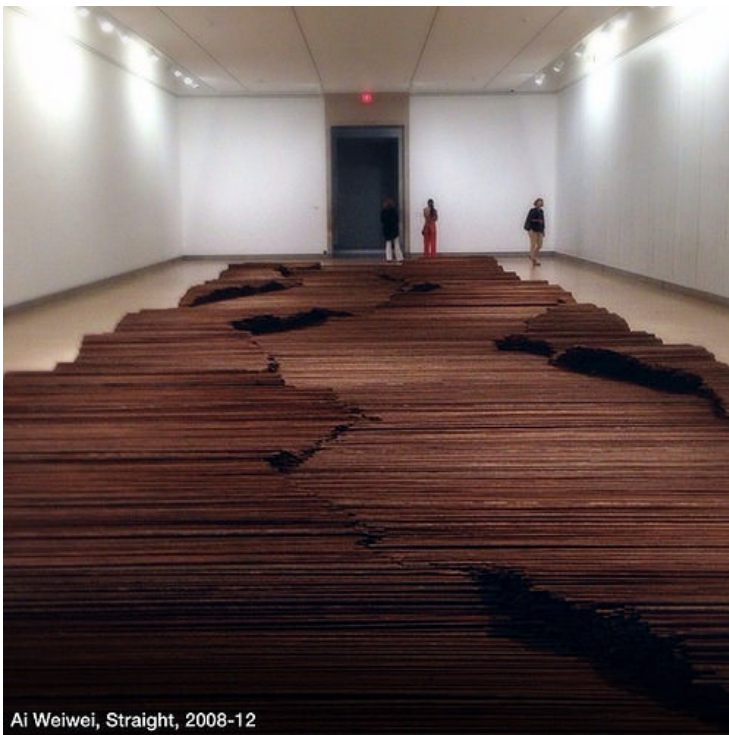
By Kim Nelson\*

Ai Weiwei's art situates itself within the cold reality of human rights in China. The very material used within his work is suggestive of the authorities' hold upon the political and economic freedom of its citizens. [In his recent exhibition at the Royal Academy](#) – the largest showing of his work in the UK – important issues have been raised relating to governance, human rights, and freedom of expression within his country.

Weiwei's art is derived from his own experience of China's political and cultural history. His father, Ai Qing (1910 – 1996) was a poet sent into exile during the [Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s](#), a time when the arts became the practice of a hidden and oppressed minority. Living within a 'Democratic' movement of artists from an early age, Weiwei became an important figure in preserving freedom of expression in China.

In the exhibition, Ai Weiwei presents a diverse collection of his work dating back to the early 1990s. His approach combines traditional practices in Chinese craftsmanship, alongside his own minimalist influences. Ai Weiwei is open to a variety of emerging mediums. As both an artist and activist he has embraced multimedia and has gained a vast and loyal following on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) (most recently, thousands of people offered to contribute [LEGO](#) for an upcoming exhibition in Melbourne, Australia). This is particularly significant in the face of China's crackdowns on [social media in 2009](#).

Though perhaps speaking from a West-centric perspective here, it seems the most emotive sculptures within the exhibition were those that spoke of real, and often deeply personal situations within the artist's home country. For instance, one of the most striking pieces in the exhibition, [Straight \(2008-2012\)](#), tells a story of the artist's response to a specific human rights issue in China. The sculpture is comprised of over 90 tonnes of straightened steel rebar – an otherwise simple building material – stretching across the floor, as one coherent and undulating form. Yet beyond its aesthetic quality, the story of this artwork becomes clear. This sculpture stands as a political monument.



Ai Weiwei, Straight, 2008-12

*'Straight', by Ai Weiwei. Creative Commons. Some rights reserved.*

The salvaged rebar that formed this sculpture were found in the rubble of the 2008 Earthquake in China's Sichuan province, which left over [80,000 people dead](#). In the face of such complete desolation, Ai Weiwei felt compelled to expose the corrupt, incompetent and clandestine nature of the Chinese authorities in response to such a humanitarian catastrophe. One [significant](#)

[criticism](#) launched at the government was the substandard foundations of the school buildings, which could have partly been to blame for the [deaths of 5000 school children](#). Responding to the refusal of the authorities to release any information, Ai Weiwei pursued his own [citizens investigation](#) to record and commemorate the deaths of the children who perished in the earthquake. This had a profound effect upon the artist. [In a recent interview](#), he recalls visiting the site and “physically shaking” with the knowledge that there were “so many students under those stones”. In the same exhibition room, a symbol of memorialisation spanned the walls; the name, age and school of each child were documented. Both pieces, displayed together in the same room, had an unsettling effect: the thousands of names on the wall surrounding the steel rebar sculpture indicated the overwhelming scale of the earthquake.

More broadly, Weiwei's art is both [“fearless and uncompromising”](#) in speaking out against the Chinese government. However, in doing so, Ai Weiwei has been subjected to continuous and intrusive surveillance of his daily life. The theme of surveillance is something that the artist also explores in his work. Walking into the seventh room of the exhibition, you can see the sculpture, [Marble Stroller \(2014\)](#), a solid marble replica of his son's pushchair. The sculpture is as absurd, as it is pointless. Yet, in its own right, is something worth celebrating. While in one sense completely redundant, [Marble Stroller](#) remains an object of exquisite beauty and profound implication. In fact, the artist designed this piece after discovering that undercover police were photographing him and his son during visits to the local park. [Despite surveillance cameras watching him and his studio twenty-four hours a day](#), Weiwei's art expresses both humour and defiance against China's panoptic power.

The fragility of human rights in China has a significant lineage. Even in the last few years, the number of government crackdowns on dissonant areas of civil society is notable, with [lawyers](#), [bloggers](#), and [journalists](#) facing arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Organisations such as [Human Rights Watch](#) have spoken of the significant risk of “police monitoring, detention, arrest, enforced disappearance, and torture” that many activists face.

In 2011, Weiwei was arrested and held in a detention facility for a total of eighty-one days. His piece [S.A.C.R.E.D \(2012\)](#) is a reference to this experience. The sculpture appears as six shoulder-height iron boxes – a product of the artist's minimalist influence – sitting starkly within the grandeur of the exhibition hall. As a viewer, you are able to look into the box through small apertures that reveal [model replicas](#) of the artist's time in prison. Although the replications are derived from the artist's own memory, each diorama remains meticulously detailed. As you gaze upon the uncomfortable scenes of Ai Weiwei showering, defecating and eating, you can notice the disturbing presence of two soldiers looming over him, watching and recording every move. The interactive element of this piece is in itself intrusive. The voyeuristic nature of the sculpture reinforces the theme of surveillance that is present throughout his practice.



*'S.A.C.R.E.D'. Two Chinese Prison Guards watch Weiwei continuously as he goes about his daily routine. Creative Commons.*

In Ai Weiwei's work, the relationship between art and politics becomes intrinsic. As the artist says: [“if we have to examine my art or my politics, I think the two are inseparable”](#). Of further interest has been the reaction that his work has generated in the UK. The claim by the [UK's Chinese Ambassador](#) that the success of Weiwei in Europe and America is the sole product of his political defiance to China, suggests that the voice of the Chinese state continues to discredit the artist's own political and professional integrity. However, this claim by the Ambassador remains an obtuse insight into how Western audiences perceive the apparent universality of human rights. Although the focus on China is unsurprising, Ai Weiwei's art and politics speaks more broadly of the values that all nation-states should adhere to. But this is all more challenging after the recent visit of China's President Xi Jinping to the UK, who was given a [royal welcome](#) by David Cameron with the hope of striking [important bilateral trade deals](#). Ai Weiwei [openly criticised](#) the UK government's willingness to “sacrifice very essential values for this short-sighted gain in business”.

In many ways, Ai Weiwei is a voice for people who continue to fight for human rights within their countries. His work stands as an important reminder of the fragility of these values in the face of such uninhibited and coercive state power.

The [exhibition](#) at the Royal Academy in London continues until 13 December 2015.

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