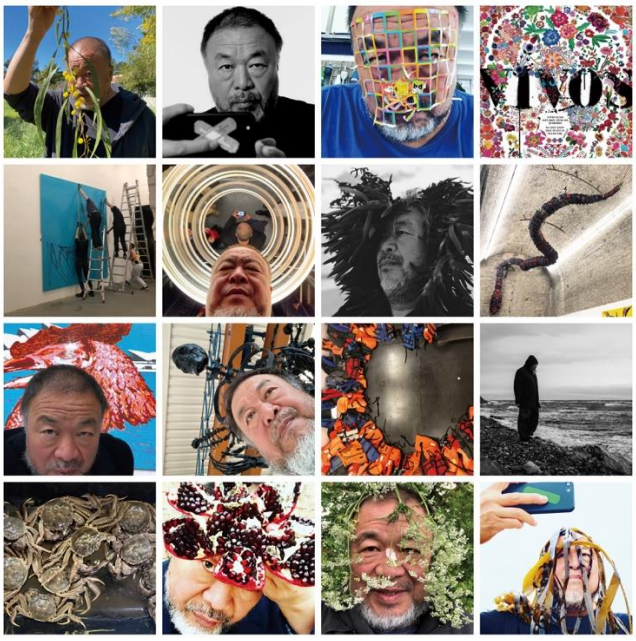
National Museum of
Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea



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2021.12.11.–2022.4.17. 국립현대미술관 서울 MMCA Seoul
Ai Weiwei Defend the Future

Ai Weiwei: Defend the Future

11 December 2021 – 14 April 2022

The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (**MMCA**, Director Youn Bummo) unveils ***Ai Weiwei: Defend the Future,*** a solo exhibition of works by Ai Weiwei, a globally-renowned artist, filmmaker, architect, and activist, from Saturday, December 11, through Sunday, April 17, 2022, at MMCA Seoul.

Ai Weiwei: Defend the Future is an exhibition of Ai Weiwei (born 1957) that is dedicated to the artist's numerous artworks on the themes of freedom of expression and the lives of refugees. The artist has been highly active in a wide range of areas, from painting and photography to film, installation, architecture, public art, ceramics, and publication. Ai is also highly praised as a leading artist for his active communication via various social media channels—including his blog, Twitter, and Instagram, among others—representing today's digital era.

The title of the exhibition, "Defend the Future," (which is literally translated as "The Future of Humans" in Korean) is a combination of "humans," a leading theme of Ai's artistic agenda, and "future," the artist's main artistic pursuit. In *Quotes* (2019), a collection of major comments made throughout human history on the theme of human rights, Socrates said, "I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world," Ai has deeply pondered his role as a global citizen and humanism (being human) in general. Ai's life and art express that it is important for us, as dignified humans, to enjoy freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of expression, in our generation and also in future generations.

His series of works on freedom of expression and resistance to oppression have demanded dignity and basic human rights from his perspective as an artist as well as a human being. Freedom of expression is the most basic right required for individuals in a society to live as "decent human beings." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, announced in 1948, stated, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Article 19). However, the right to freedom of expression is a right that has never actually been completely guaranteed in the real world. In Ai's art, "human" is simultaneously a value to pursue and an environment and condition in which art can be made sense of in that his art and life both pursue freedom of expression and challenge oppression and surveillance. Ai has been active in encouraging people to speak out about unfair situations, and his actions have made a difference in the real world. In other words, he thinks, dreams, and works to create a reality in which we can "live the best life possible."

The exhibition will showcase Ai's representative works that transcend the dualities of the East and West, including his photography series *Study of Perspectives, 1995-2011* (2014); *Study of Perspective in Glass* (2018) and *Black Chandelier* (2017-2021), both in Murano glass created in collaboration with the Berengo Studio on Murano Island, Venice; *Porcelain Pillar with Refugee Motif* (2017) and *Ruyi* (2012), made from ceramics from Jingdezhen, a place known for porcelain production in China. The exhibition is expected to take visitors on a journey into the artist's time and space, allowing them to browse through about 120 pieces of Ai's representative works that ranges from a 12-meter bamboo figure reminiscent of a jade burial suit from the Han Dynasty (ca. 2000 years ago), through a documentary about the Rohingyas (stateless Indo-Aryan ethnic group residing in Myanmar), to a Neolithic Vase with Coca-Cola Logo.

At the Museum Madang, a large-scale installation work titled *Tree* (2015) will greet visitors. It is assembled from the dead branches, roots, and trunks of trees such as camphor, cedar, and gingko that the artist gathered from the mountainous southern area of China.

One of most spectacular works in this exhibition is *Yuyi* (2015) in Gallery 6. It is a 12-meter-tall human figure made of bamboo. The title comes from the jade burial suits made as armor for entombed emperors of the Han Dynasty. Ai Weiwei used a traditional kite-making method with bamboo to create the figure. In this way, the artist brings into the world of contemporary art the magnificence of Chinese history and cultural heritage item; in addition to traditional kite-making, he also used Neolithic earthenware and ceramics of Jingdezhen, among others, as the medium of his art creation.

Gallery 7 mainly showcases the artists'works on refugees and human rights. *Laundromat* (2016) consists of clothes and shoes collected at the Idomeni makeshift refugee camp on the border between Greece and Macedonia. The camp gradually expanded after the Macedonian border crossing from Idomeni, known as the route to the Balkan Peninsula, was closed. At the end of May

2016, the Greek government emptied the Idomeni camp and began evicting the refugees residing there. Ai collected items that had been left behind, took them to his Berlin studio, thoroughly washed, repaired, and ironed them, and made a list of the items. They were items of clothing that had been worn by people of various ages, from children to adults, such as body suits for newborns, children's dresses that seem to have been for special occasions, and small pairs of pants with colorful dots. *Laundromat*, discomfortingly evokes the existence of people that are now absent.

In the Medialab, there are marble and jade sculptures such as *Marble Helmet* (2015) and *Marble Takeout Box* (2015) along with the famous ceramic work *He Xie* (2011). *He Xie,* meaning “river crab,” commemorates the feast that Ai Weiwei hosted to bring attention to the ordered demolition of his Shanghai studio by the Chinese authorities in 2010. River crabs are a delicacy in China, but have also come to represent a subversive element in contemporary culture. The term “he xie,” a homophone for “harmony,” a buzzword of the government, became slang for censorship carried out under the guise of ensuring stability.

Under six key terms—**Freedom of Expression; Art and Activism; Government, Power, and Making Moral Choices; The Digital World; History, the Historical Moment, and the Future; and Personal Reflection**—Ai Weiwei's videos, archives, and about 30 books about him and his oeuvre, including his recent memoir, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* (Crown, 2021), are showcased in the archive section. These six key terms have been extracted from *Weiwei-ism: Ai Weiwei* (Princeton University Press, 2012) a collection of Ai Weiwei's online and offline quotes edited by Larry Warsh. Photographs, videos, and books related to Ai's works are also on display, enabling visitors to delve deeper into the life and work of the artist.

An on-line artist talk is scheduled to take place on 2022. On December 10, following the exhibition at the MMCA, there will be a special screening of the film *Ai Weiwei* at COEX K-POP SQUARE MEDIA in Seoul, hosted by UK's CIRCA to mark International Human Rights Day.

MMCA Director Youn Bummo said that the exhibition is "one that displays the artist's world of art through which he expresses the social duty of art and his own aesthetic accomplishments." He also added, "It will present an opportunity for the viewer to ponder the value of life and human dignity as a global citizen, a concept proposed by Ai Weiwei."

Notes to editors
For high-resolution images of the museum, please follow the link: here

ID: mmcapr1
PW: 0987 (guest – Press Release)

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Ai Weiwei



Ai Weiwei. Photo: Ai Weiwei Studio. © Ai Weiwei Studio. Provided by MMCA

Ai Weiwei was born to poets Ai Qing and Gao Ying in Beijing, China, in 1957. He grew up in Xinjiang, located in the western part of China, as his father was forced by the Chinese communist government to work in political exile since the Anti-Rightist Campaign. He returned to Beijing in 1975, after his father was fully rehabilitated. He enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy, majoring in animation, in 1978. It was here that he became actively involved in Stars Art Group, one of China's earliest avantgarde art collectives, in 1979. He moved to New York in 1981, where he encountered works by Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Jasper Johns, among others, leading him to establish his own perspective on contemporary art. After returning to Beijing in 1993, he initiated the formation of the Caochangdi Art District, in the eastern part of Beijing, and served as the artistic consultant for the *Bird's Nest (*2007) stadium, designed by architects Herzog & de Meuron, for the Beijing Olympics.

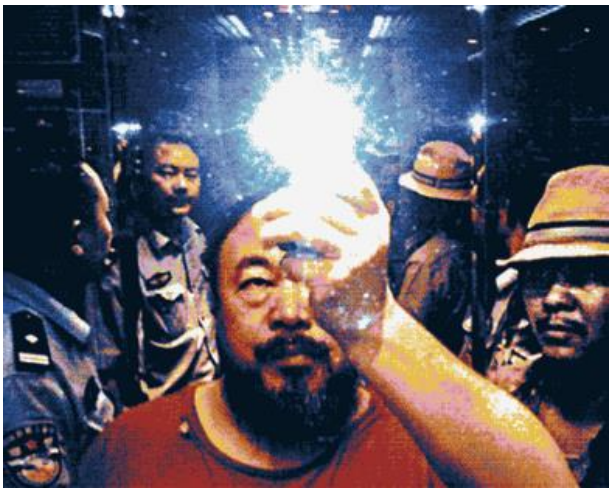
Following the collapse of poorly-constructed school buildings during the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, Ai recruited volunteers online and led a Citizens' Investigation team to document the total number of casualties and the names of the victims. Under the theme of "refugees," representing yet another humanitarian crisis, he has created a wide range of works since Ai himself was forced to leave China and settle in Europe in 2015. Ai Weiwei is uniquely positioned as a pioneering artist who is able to interact with people by fully utilizing media of the digital era, including blogs, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

Artworks



Black Chandelier, 2017–2021, Murano glass, Ø185×240cm. Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio, Lisson Gallery and neugerriemschneider, Berlin
Produced in Murano by Berengo Studio
Photograph by Ai Weiwei Studio ©Ai Weiwei Studio

Black Chandelier is an artwork produced by Berengo Studio in Murano, Venice. Murano is an area where glass craft has thrived since the 13th century. However, the reputation of Murano glass crafts has been tarnished by the abundance of cheap counterfeits and a decline in artisans to inherit the glass craft techniques, which require a high level of skill.
While an ordinary chandelier is a colorful decoration that reflects light, Ai's chandelier is completely black, which absorbs light. It is made from pieces of glass in the shape of all the parts of a human skeleton, including the skull. Having overturned stereotypes visually and conceptually, Ai has now overturned the concept of a chandelier with Black Chandelier.



Illumination, 2009, wallpaper installation, color prints, dimensions variable, Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio, Lisson Gallery and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.
Photograph by Ai Weiwei Studio ©Ai Weiwei Studio

After the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, Ai formed a Citizens' Investigation team to interview the victim's families, public officials, and laborers, wrote the names and number of dead children on his blog, and distributed video clips he had filmed to people free of charge. His blog was forced to shut down in May 2009, but he continued engaging in such acts on Twitter and YouTube. *Ilumination* is a photograph that Ai took on his phone; when he went to Chengdu to testify at the trial of the social activist, Tan Zuoren, on August 12, 2009, the musician Zuoxiao Zuzhou and Ai were surrounded by two police in a hotel elevator at 5 a.m.



The Animal That Looks Like a Llama But is Really an Alpaca, 2015, Wallpaper installation, color prints, dimensions variable.Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio, Lisson Gallery and neugerriemschneider, Berlin
Photograph by Ai Weiwei Studio ©Ai Weiwei Studio

The Animal That Looks Like a Llama But is Really an Alpaca is an image that Ai Weiwei created by combining a bird, the symbol of Twitter, surveillance cameras and handcuffs.
Surveillance cameras have now been installed in many places, including large shopping malls, subways, and elevators, but we often forget that they are there. Surveillance cameras installed to promote safety do their job well, but they excessively infringe on our daily lives. The glowing space with beautiful and colorful golden patterns looks like a prison surrounded by numerous cameras.



Vivos, 2020, single-channel video, color, sound, 1 h 52 min, Still from Vivos, Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio
Photograph by Ai Weiwei Studio ©Ai Weiwei Studio

Vivos is a documentary work directed by Ai based on an incident where 43 students were kidnapped in Mexico City, never to be seen again. Families petitioned and protested to find their missing children, but the students never returned. Criticizing the response to the incident, Ai said, "If it has been four years since your neighbors' children were unable to return and the government has yet to resolve the case, what kind of government is that? What kind of society is that?" He also said that he created the documentary as a human being, not as an artist. Although this is a story from the other side of the world, it feels familiar to Koreans, because it reminds us of the Sewol Ferry disaster of 2014, which claimed the lives of many young students.



Beijing 2003, 2003, single-channel video, color, sound, 150 h, Still from Beijing 2003,
Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio. Photograph by Ai Weiwei Studio ©Ai Weiwei Studio

Beijing 2003 is a video work comprised of a total of 150 hours of footage recorded by Ai. He recorded it while traveling with students by car throughout Beijing, which he divided into 16 districts, as he was invited to teach students in the Academy of Arts & Design at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government planned and promoted massive urban innovation projects. Old buildings and cities were destroyed, and new buildings were built. The artist recorded detailed video footage while traveling to various regions, except for hutong (胡同, alleys formed by lines of *siheyuan*, traditional courtyard residences), which are not accessible by car.



Life Vest Snake, 2019,
140 life vests, 65×2,250×85cm, Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio,
Lisson Gallery and neugerriemschneider, Berlin
Photograph by MMCA © MMCA

Life Vest Snake is an artwork for which Ai gathered life vests that refugees took off upon arriving on Lesbos Island and connected them together. Some of the former owners of the life vests may have begun a new life somewhere else, while many refugees have lost their lives during the crossing.
The artwork invites us to reflect upon the greater geopolitical and social contexts behind these disasters.
Ai Weiwei exhibited the life vests left on the shore, like the shed skin of a snake. He reminds us not to forget these people even though we do not know their names or faces.