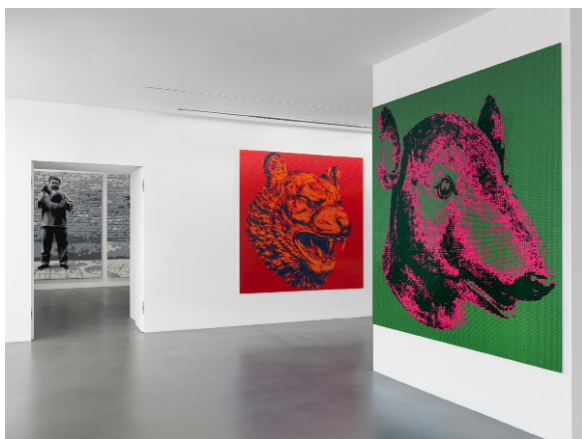


LE QUOTIDIEN DE L'ART

Ai Weiwei - 2000 years of history

by Jordane de Faij
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It took Ai Weiwei just a few seconds to destroy 2000 years of history. In 1995, in a landmark performance, he threw an urn from the Han dynasty to the ground. The only trace that remains of this historically charged object is the photographic triptych made during the subversive act, which questions the relationship between past and present, ancient and modern, original and copy, loss and preservation... But also the idea of authorship and lifespan of a work: where does Ai Weiwei's performance begin, if its sole purpose is the destruction of a 2,000-year-old object? Is he really the only author, and does it really mark the end of the life of this thousand-year-old urn? It is no coincidence that the medium he has chosen to capture these milliseconds of gravity is photography, whose ontology rests precisely on an inexhaustible reproducibility. This idea, which calls into question that of a unique creator, is an endless terrain for the artist.

In 2015, he recreated the triptych in Lego, creating a work (the Lego triptych) of a work (the photo triptych) of a work (the performance) of a work (the urn). These Lego portraits are potentially imitable by anyone, which does not bother Ai Weiwei, who explains that he is happy with the possible misappropriation and creation of false copies: "Lego destroys the idea of an 'original', which I like". The reproducibility of these cubes and their industrial conception as ready-to-use objects attest to the influence of his artistic predecessors Duchamp and Warhol, whose legacy he openly claims.

In the Vito Schnabel gallery space, twelve other plastic works are displayed, reminiscent of Warhol's silkscreen portraits. The series of two-toned and pop shaded large square format (190 x 190 cm) panels, presented to the public and offered for sale (450,000 euros each) for the first time since their conception in 2018, depicts the animals of the Chinese zodiac, inspired by the twelve original bronze heads of the YuanmingYuan Palace fountain, looted by Anglo-French soldiers during the Second Opium War and which Ai Weiwei has carefully reproduced in Lego, whose tiny shape invites the discreet remodeling or almost unnoticed theft of one part or another of the work.

Installation views of *Ai Weiwei: Zodiac*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz, January 27 - April 8, 2023; Artworks © Ai Weiwei; Photo by Stefan Altenburger; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery