

The  Sun

## In Ai Weiwei's Newest Work, Political Dissent and Art History Intertwine

by David Hiroshi Jager  
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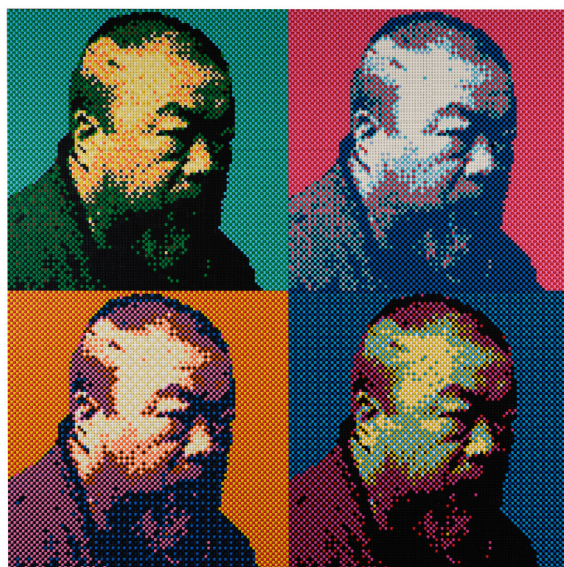
Ai Weiwei, *Christina's World*, 2023, toy bricks mounted on aluminum, 63 x 94.5 inches. Copyright Ai Weiwei; photo Argenis Apolinario; courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

Ai Weiwei, known for his witty and conceptual nose-thumbing at shibboleths both abroad and in his native Communist China, is one of the world's most enduring art stars. His consistent knack for cheeky, subversive, and frankly ingenious conceptual projects, as well as the political suffering he has endured for his activism, has catapulted him to international renown.

The show currently on display at Vito Schnabel's main gallery on West 19th Street – and in the auxiliary space at the Palazzo Chupi on West 11th Street – are dedicated to Mr. Weiwei's most recent works, iconic art masterpieces, and political imagery recreated from toy Lego and Woma bricks, China's cheaper answer to Lego.

They are reproductions and pixelated blowups, in other words, often with Mr. Weiwei's added ironic touches. Always innovative in his use of materials and processes, each brick is a pixel used to create works that have the sheen of digital imagery, but are nonetheless marvels of time consuming, painstaking craft.

Coming in from the West 19th street location we are treated to Mr. Weiwei's self-portrait, divided into four panels in the style of Warhol. Mr. Weiwei cut his teeth in the New York of the 1980s, part of a novel group of students allowed abroad from China. Living in the Lower East Side between 1983 and 1993, and participating in the local avant-garde scene, the influence of Warhol was inevitable. Past this first wall the show gives away to works that are dauntingly large. We are confronted with disparities of scale, from the tiny pixilation of individual bricks to the enormous surfaces of the images themselves. Mr. Weiwei is always intensely interested in reflecting how different systems and economies of scale – commercial, political, symbolic, personal – interact and fit together. As usual, his use of material is of a piece with his conceptual intentions.



Ai Weiwei, *Ai Quadruplex*, 2022, toy bricks mounted on aluminum, 63 x 63 inches. Copyright Ai Weiwei; photo Argenis Apolinario; courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

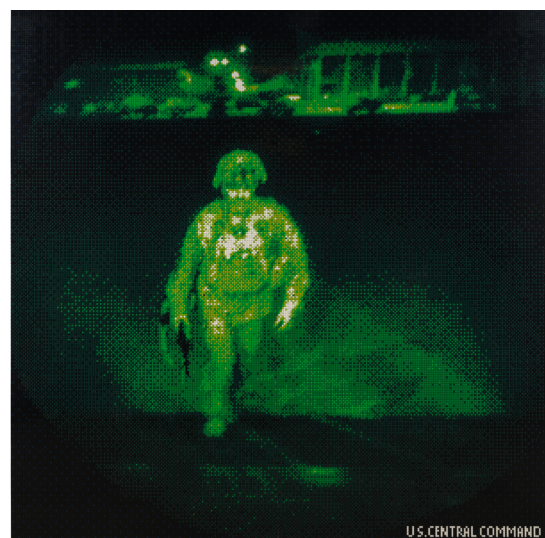
Feature, say, Mr. Weiwei's massive reproduction of Monet's *Water Lilies #1*, in a new iteration – there are at least five others. This new variation, rendered with touches of almost neon orange, also has an added quirk: a dark doorway visible on the far-right side of the painting. It is a reference to the forced political exile of Mr. Weiwei's father, the beloved Chinese poet Ai Qing, who was sent to labor on a farm in Northeast China. Political dissidence and art history intertwine.

The pointed political tone continues. Lamponing the affair of the Chinese spy balloon caught floating over America in 2023, Mr. Weiwei takes an iconic photograph of the balloon's debris being salvaged by an American Navy ship. However, he adds an American flag and the figure of President Biden, who is helping to tug sections of the balloon aboard. Further on, an imposing piece appears to be a blurry nebula at first, but is in fact a photo of the undersea Nord Stream pipeline at the moment it was sabotaged.

Yet a third image chronicles the last American soldier leaving Afghanistan, rendered in night-vision-goggle green, marking the end of another troubled geopolitical entanglement. The images are roughly pixilated, but their significance is compounded by their imposing scale and historical import.

When addressing other historical works in the show, Mr. Weiwei never fails to add his signature ironic tweaks. His reproduction of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World* replaces the distant farmhouse of the original with his recently constructed studio in Portugal. His take on Balthus' wildly controversial *Therese Dreaming* replaces a vase on the side table next to the young girl with a Chinese vase marked with the Coca Cola logo.

His meticulous reconstruction of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, which hangs in the exhibition space at Palazzo Chupi, adds a purple coat hanger in the foreground. It's a reference to a shift in both American and Chinese abortion laws – China recently moved to discourage gender-based abortions. It also once again references, like the Coca-Cola vase, his earlier work.



Ai Weiwei, *Last U.S. Soldier Leaving Afghanistan*, 2022, toy bricks mounted on aluminum, 94.5 x 94.5 inches. Copyright Ai Weiwei; photo Argenis Apolinario; courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery



AI WEIWEI

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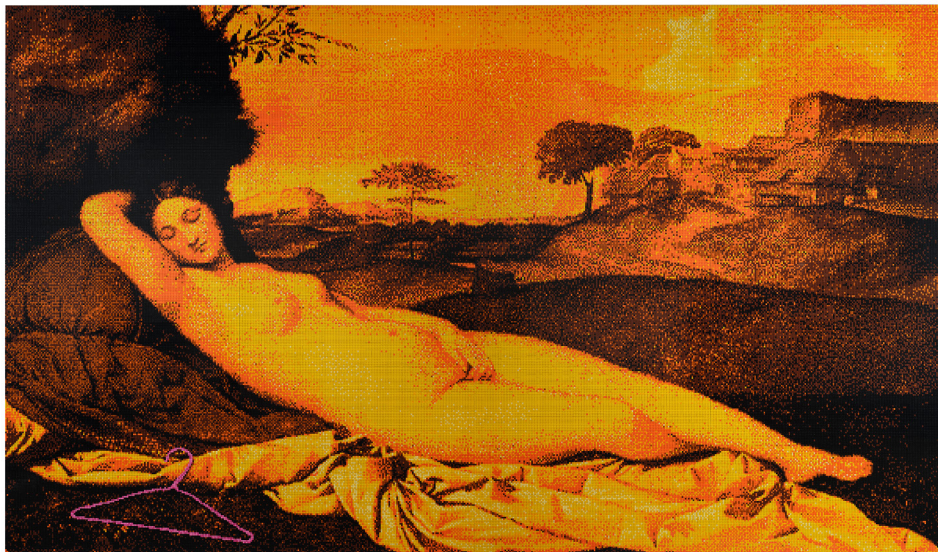
This extensive New York show crowns a career marked by many brushes with the Chinese government, some of them life threatening. In 2009, Mr. Weiwei was accosted and severely beaten by Chinese police, resulting in a brain injury requiring surgical intervention.

In 2011 he was detained 81 days for unspecified charges, leading many activists to believe he had been killed. After drawing attention to the shabby building codes that possibly led to the deaths of thousands of Chinese children in the devastating Sichuan province earthquake, Mr. Weiwei's studio at Beijing was reduced to rubble by the Chinese government.

"Free speech and free expression have simply never existed in China or in its artist communities," Mr. Weiwei said in an interview with NPR, shortly after the demolition. "Those who do not belong to the establishment, including artists, are always the first to be discriminated against and sacrificed."

Now stationed in England and at Berlin, Mr. Weiwei continues to provoke from outside his native China. In this new show, he appears to be telling us that tiny, mass-produced pieces of Chinese and American plastic are, in fact, the fundamental building blocks of our current political and cultural reality. Or that each of us are, in the eyes of our ambitious global masters, merely pixels in their vision of the future.

I wish I could say he was wrong, but his vision seems entirely compelling.



Ai Weiwei, *Sleeping Venus with Coat Hanger*, 2022, toy bricks mounted on aluminum 110.25 x 189 inches.  
Copyright Ai Weiwei; photo Argenis Apolinario; courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery