



AI WEIWEI
CHILD'S PLAY
OCTOBER 24, 2024 - FEBRUARY 22, 2025

VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY
455 WEST 19TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY

Vito Schnabel Gallery is pleased to announce the opening of *Ai Weiwei: Child's Play*, the artist's second exhibition with the gallery. Opening October 24, 2024, the show highlights the artist's distinctive image practice using toy bricks. Five monumental art historical canvases, a series of iconic portraits, and political news images translated into the medium of play are exhibited across the gallery's two New York locations.

Ai Weiwei, *Ai Quadruplex in Dripping*, 2022, LEGO bricks mounted on aluminium, 89 3/4 x 89 3/4 inches (228 x 228 cm); © Ai Weiwei; Courtesy the artist

old as the antiquities that sometimes appear in his works. Toy bricks may seem counterintuitive within this oeuvre dotted with precious materials including porcelain, jade, gold, bronze pearl, and marble, but the logic is predictably innovative. Ai's art has always intersected the worlds of design and contemporary manufacture, where LEGO and Woma bricks dwell, and his practice is famously transparent about the processes of human labor, which are also evident in these sculptural canvases. Since first being deployed in his 2014 exhibition *@Large on Alcatraz*, toy bricks have evolved to play an outsized role in Ai's image practice. The increasing complexity and size of these works demonstrate his discriminating attention to detail and unparalleled commitment to craft.

Ai Weiwei is a New Yorker at heart. His nascent conceptual practice was shaped by Warhol, Duchamp, and within the ethos of the East Village in the Eighties – the last time he wielded a paintbrush was while living here. Decades later he replaces the hand of the artist with the smallest possible iteration of the ready-made, the toy brick. They are surprisingly versatile, and engage the full breadth of Ai's art historical thinking, with obvious similarities to both pixels in digital images and tesserae in Hellenistic mosaics. He has also cited the efficiency and precision of these modular bricks in rendering images as comparable to the expressive freedom that followed the Song dynasty innovation of moveable type, with the addition of a vast palette of industrial colors.

The medium encompasses many concepts central to Ai Weiwei's practice: appropriation, mass-production, and fragmentation. The images he chooses are conspicuously recognizable: some are photographs from newspapers, others vernacular art history; all are entangled with controversy. Each representation is altered slightly, personalized with self-reflexive details that illuminate his life, included here are cameos from some of his earliest NYC-era artworks. His own unsettling portrait from 2009, which documents a life-threatening assault by the Chinese authorities in Sichuan, is provocatively juxtaposed with the exhibition's titular canvas, a recreation of Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*.

Ai's inclination to work with materials in large quantities, in multiples, and in abundance is embodied in his adoption of toy bricks as medium. Evidenced in some of his most compelling works, such as *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) at the Tate, or the fields of millennia-old fractured porcelain teapots in *Spouts* (2015). These images, now obfuscated through pixelation, are splintered into hundreds of thousands of tiny individual parts that materialize the leitmotif of fragmentation. Stepping back, they cohere into an image, while close looking reveals the autonomy of each brick. Each unit, each individual, a metaphor for our contemporary social experience.

The toy brick works have a New York sensibility, not only in their relatable and provocative Warholian qualities, but in the wide scope of their appropriated images and Ai's bravely unconventional choice to embrace this universal medium. Ai's activism and humanist concerns underscore his interest in the equalization and democratization of images, which is achieved through the modest toy brick. Simultaneously engaging art history, media culture, and design, with his characteristic humor and ambiguity Ai delivers us that very specific pleasure in beholding these monumental images in tiny toy. When *Child's Play* is taken to this level, it demands we look harder to discover if this is satire or not.

–Lee Ambrozy

Ai Weiwei: Child's Play will be on view at Vito Schnabel Gallery's Chelsea location at 455 West 19th Street through February 22, 2025.

About the artist

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing, China. He attended the Beijing Film Academy, and upon moving to New York in the 1980s, continued his studies at the Parsons School of Design. The diversity of his artistic production includes installation, sculpture, photography, performance, documentary filmmaking, architecture, social media and public art projects. A staunch defender of human rights and the freedom of expression, his work taps into the human condition, addressing injustices and truth, advocating for humanity, and providing a critical lens through which to examine humanity's relationship to nature and the environment and confront systems of economic, political and societal power.

Ai Weiwei is a global citizen, a passionate social activist, creative visionary, and one of the most provocative artists of our time. He grew up as a refugee in his home country. As the son of one of China's most renowned poets, Ai Qing, his family was exiled to remote provinces along the Northern borders, where they lived and worked in labor camps during China's Cultural Revolution, before being allowed to return to Beijing in 1976. From 1981 to 1993, Ai Weiwei lived in New York where he absorbed the influences of Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns. He returned to China in 1993 and helped found the Beijing East Village, a community of experimental, avant-garde artists. In April 2011, he was secretly detained for 81 days by Chinese authorities without charge. In July 2015, the artist's passport was finally returned. Ai Weiwei emerged as a vocal commentator of China's authoritarian regime and more and continues to create art that transcends the matrix of Eastern and Western ideas.

Major solo exhibitions include Albertina Modern, Vienna, Austria (2022); Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK (2022); Serralves Museum, Porto, Portugal (2021); Cordoaria Nacional, Lisbon, Portugal (2021); Imperial War Museum, London, UK (2020); K20/K21, Düsseldorf, Germany (2019); OCA, São Paulo, Brazil (2018); Corpartes, Santiago, Chile (2018); Mucem, Marseille, France (2018); PROA, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2017); Sakip Sabanci, Museum, Istanbul, Turkey (2017); Public Art Fund, New York, NY, US (2017); Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2017); Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy (2016); 21er Haus, Vienna, Austria (2016); Helsinki Art Museum, Finland (2016); Royal Academy, London, UK (2015); Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (2014); Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN, US (2013); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., US (2012); Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan (2011); Tate Modern, London, UK (2010) and Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2009). In 2025, a retrospective of Ai's work will be presented at the Seattle Art Museum, Washington.

In 2022 Ai Weiwei was awarded with the Praemium Imperiale by the Japan Art Association. He won the lifetime achievement award from the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards in 2008 and was made an Honorary Academician at the Royal Academy of Arts, London in 2011. His role as an activist and champion for human rights has been recognized through the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent in 2012 and Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2015.

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