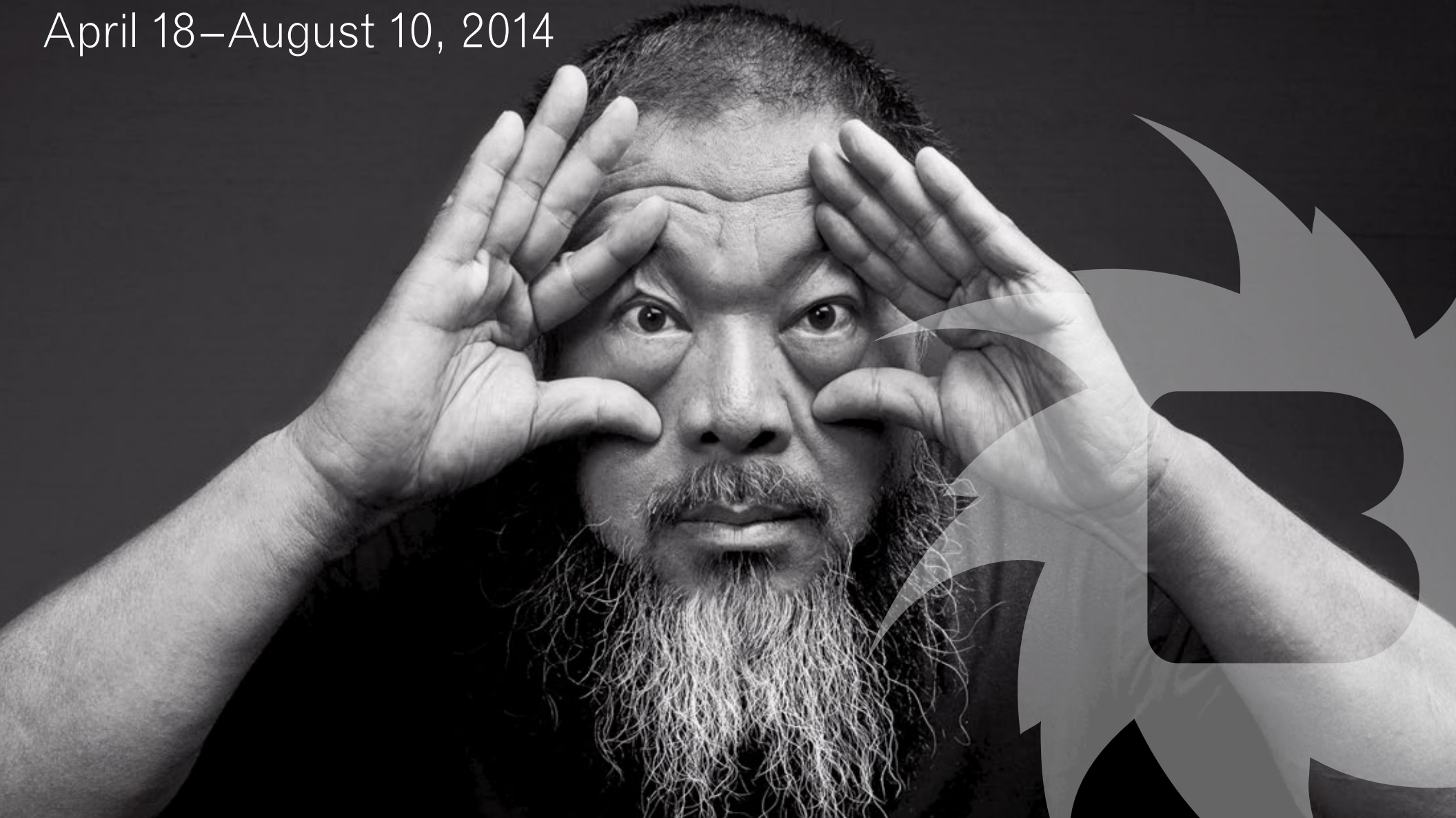


# Brooklyn Museum

## Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

*Ai Weiwei: According to What?*

April 18–August 10, 2014



# Ai Weiwei: According to What?

## About This Teaching Resource

This packet features three works of art from the special exhibition *Ai Weiwei: According to What?* It is intended as a tool to help you look at art with fifth- to twelfth-grade students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussion by reviewing the descriptions and background information provided. Then use the section “Questions for Viewing” to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Extend your investigations with one or more of the suggested activity ideas. Share your teaching stories with us! If you use these materials, *let us know*.

## About the Exhibition

*Ai Weiwei: According to What?* is the first major exhibition in the United States devoted to Ai. Showcasing the artist's remarkable interdisciplinary career as a photographer, sculptor, architect, and activist, it features over thirty of his works spanning more than twenty years. While exploring such universal topics as culture, history, politics, and tradition, the exhibition also examines the interrelation between art, society, and individual experience.



Many of the works on view use minimal forms and methods, while others manipulate traditional furniture, ancient pottery, and daily objects in ways that question cultural values and challenge political authority. *Bowls of Pearls*, for example (see left), appears to consist of two larger-than-life porcelain bowls filled with rice. The reference to Chinese culture is apparent: porcelain originated in China, and rice is a staple of the Chinese diet. The “grains of rice,” however, are actually pearls. By showcasing items synonymous with Chinese culture in unexpected ways, Ai invites viewers to consider such matters as the relative importance of the collective and the individual: Is each pearl less valuable because there are so many of them?

The exhibition also includes examples of Ai using new technology and social media to create artwork that documents and comments on his tumultuous relationship with the Chinese government. For instance, *Ai Weiwei in the Elevator When Taken into Custody by the Police* (see above) is a self-portrait taken with his camera phone.

## About the Artist

Ai Weiwei is one of China's most prolific and provocative contemporary artists. Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai was raised in a labor camp in China's remote northwestern region of Xinjiang after his father, Ai Qing (himself regarded as one of China's finest modern poets), was denounced as an enemy of the state and a rightist.<sup>1</sup> The family returned to Beijing in 1976 after the Maoist reforms associated with the Cultural Revolution came to an end. In 1978, Ai enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy and studied animation. That same year he co-founded an avant-garde group of untrained, experimental artists called the Stars that staged exhibitions around Beijing challenging the strict tenets of Chinese politics. From 1983 to 1993, Ai lived in New York, studying at Parsons School of Design, drawing street portraits, and working odd jobs, before returning to China to aid his ailing father.

Although Ai garnered international attention and acclaim for his collaboration with Swiss architects Herzog and De Meuron on the design of the stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, he distanced himself from the project even before the games began. Critical of "the whole political structure, the condition of civil rights . . . corruption, pollution, education, you name it," he posed the question: "Can a nation be celebrated and be so proud with this ignoring of its past?"<sup>2</sup>

On May 12, 2008, a powerful earthquake in the province of Sichuan caused massive devastation that led to approximately seventy thousand deaths, left about 4.8 million people homeless, and triggered the collapse of an estimated seven thousand schoolrooms. Ten days later, Ai led a team to survey and film the postquake conditions. In protest of the Chinese government's response to the disaster, including its lack of transparency in revealing the names of deceased schoolchildren, he began compiling the names of the victims, writing blogs about the issue, and creating related works of art. The government responded by shutting down his blogs, and in

2009 he was allegedly hit in the head by police and suffered a near fatal blood clot as a result.

In 2011, Ai was arrested and detained for eighty-one days on charges of tax evasion. Though the intention may have been to quiet the artist, he has become even more visible to international audiences. Unable to leave the country because the government revoked his passport, he currently lives and works in Beijing.

## Artist Statement

"I have lived with political struggle since birth. As a poet, my father tried to act as an individual, but he was treated as an enemy of the state. My detention was an extreme condition for any human to endure. Many, including my family and the people who know me and care about the incident, were frustrated by the lack of an explanation or reason. Some of my life experiences have been tragic and painful, but I value them all. Going through these events allowed me to rethink my art and the activities necessary for an artist. I re-evaluated different forms of expression and how considerations of aesthetics should relate to morality and philosophy. These reflections give new strength to my work. I am able naturally to conceive of works that confront the accepted ethical or aesthetic views. I've always believed it is essential for contemporary artists to question established assumptions and challenge beliefs. This has never changed."

—Ai Weiwei<sup>3</sup>



### **Description of the Artwork**

*Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* is a series of three life-sized black-and-white photographs. In each photograph, Ai Weiwei himself, wearing a sweatshirt, dark-colored pants, and loafers, stands in front of a brick wall looking directly at the camera. The first photograph in the series shows him with his arms raised to shoulder height balancing a clay vase in front of him between his thumb and index fingers. His facial expression is neutral, and his body language is relaxed. In the second photograph, he has let go of the vase and it is midway to the ground. In the final photograph, the vase lies broken on the ground. Ai's arms remain raised, and his fingers are spread apart. His facial expression and body language are unchanged from the first photograph.

### **About the Artwork**

Ai once said, "A historical property has morals and ethics of the society that created it and can be revived. What I mean is that we can discover new possibilities from the process of dismantling, transforming, and re-creating."<sup>4</sup> *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* depicts him actively engaged in this process, purposefully destroying a 2,000-year-old object from the Han dynasty, a highly revered period known as the golden age of Chinese history. China's largest ethnic group calls itself the "Han people," and Chinese script is known as "Han characters."

Scholars discuss *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* as a commentary about contemporary China, a country rapidly becoming industrialized. Ancient buildings and temples are being demolished to make way for modern buildings, a fact of which Ai is highly critical.

### **Questions for Viewing *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn***

What is going on in this artwork?

What is the same in each photo? What is different?

Why do you think the artist has the same facial expression in all three photographs?

Was the urn dropped on purpose or by accident? What evidence do you see to support your answer?

Two urns were used to create this artwork because the photographer working with the artist (the man in the photograph) did not manage to capture the first urn as it fell to the ground. Does this change your opinion? Explain your answer.

This artwork is called *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. The Han dynasty is the name of a period in Chinese history about two thousand years ago. How do you feel about Ai's decision to drop these ancient objects? Do you think he wanted you to feel that way? Why or why not?

The urns Ai used for this artwork belonged to him. They were his private property (belongings owned by a person or group and kept for their own use). In your opinion, do his actions represent freedom of expression or do they represent vandalism (willful or malicious destruction or defacement of public or private property)? Explain your answer.

Why do you think he chose to show us all three of these photographs instead of the fragments of the broken urn?





### Description of the Artwork

*Colored Vases* is a group of sixteen pots arranged on a platform. They all share the same basic anatomy of a narrow base, a triangular body, and a thick neck. The top and bottom of each pot is covered in a different color of bright paint; some of the paint has dripped down to overlap the other color. Small portions of the natural clay color and surface texture can be seen where the paint has not completely covered the surface.

### About the Artwork

*Colored Vases* explores the tension between traditional and contemporary art in China. Chinese antiques are highly valued by the Chinese government, but Ai believes that the government considers contemporary art to be “a product of degenerate Western ideology.”<sup>5</sup> Knowing that these vases from the Han dynasty are symbols of traditional Chinese culture and values, he chose to cover them in bright shades of industrial paint and lessen their cultural and economic “value.” Ai believes that “by changing the meaning of the object, shaking its foundation, we are also changing our own condition. We can question what we are.” While the pots may be regarded as rare and valuable artifacts from the past, in their own day they were most likely simple, functional objects used on a daily basis and probably produced in numbers that, for the time and technology, were comparable to those of manufactured goods made in factories in China today.



### Questions for Viewing *Han Dynasty Urn* and *Colored Vases*

What do these two works of art have in common? What makes them different?

*Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* is the documentation of a performance piece by the artist in which he destroyed an ancient object. Ai also altered the objects in *Colored Vases* but chose to exhibit the physical result of his actions rather than documentation of the act itself. In your opinion, which is more powerful? Why?

Ai wants us to think about what we value in our lives. How do you define value? What is valuable to you?

Some skeptics doubt that Ai used real pottery from the Han dynasty in these two artworks. Does it make a difference if the urns are real or fake? Why or why not?



### Description of the Artwork

*Straight* is a sculpture constructed from hundreds of sections of rusted rebar (reinforcing bars used in construction to strengthen and hold concrete) stacked on the floor in orderly rows of varying height. The outer ends of the rebar create the even edge of a large rectangle; the inner ends vary in length to create organic shapes that resemble a large crevice or a three-dimensional topographic map.

### About the Artwork

*Straight* is one of Ai's many projects that refer to the earthquake in Sichuan and critique the response by the Chinese government. When Ai noticed that most of the 5,355 children who lost their lives were at school during the quake, that reporters were not referring to any of the young victims by name, and that the government did not initiate an investigation into the cause of the high number of casualties, he decided to travel to Sichuan and launch his own investigation. He documented the destruction, spoke with family members of victims, and created a Citizens' Investigation, seeking to learn the names of all of the children who died in the earthquake and provide a way for each individual to be remembered. This investigation concluded that poor construction was responsible for many of the casualties: schoolhouses collapsed, while other government buildings nearby remained standing.

The rebar used for *Straight* was recovered from these destroyed schoolhouses when it was sold as scrap metal. Ai purchased

the mangled beams and had them straightened with a hammer, a process that took about four years. In returning the bars to their original condition, he draws attention to society's ability to return to normal after a disaster. *Straight* can also be interpreted as evidence of the government's ineptitude and its neglect of the shoddy schoolhouse construction. According to Ai, the government has still not acknowledged wrongdoing and no one has been held accountable for what he believes to have been preventable deaths.

The monumental scale of *Straight* (which weighs nearly seventy tons) also calls to mind the enormity of the devastation and the massive loss of life. The crack running through the center of the rectangular form looks like a fault line, a visual reminder of the earthquake itself.

### Questions for Viewing *Straight*

What do you notice?

What material do you think this work of art is made of? How would it feel to touch? To pick up?

How did the artist arrange the materials? Does it remind you of anything? What do you see that makes you say that?

The rebar used for this artwork was reclaimed from schoolhouses that collapsed during an earthquake. After the quake, the artist arranged to have all of the twisted and mangled bars straightened out. Why do you think he chose to do this?

Ai feels strongly that the Chinese government was responsible for the number of children who died in the earthquake because their school buildings were poorly built. How is *Straight* an example of his stance as an activist?

## Classroom Activities

### Visual Arts

Ai uses art to generate discussion about the value we assign to objects, traditions, and histories. To create *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Colored Vases*, Ai intentionally damaged several objects people often treasure because of their age and link to history. By destroying these “treasures” he wants us to question how valuable they really are. The artwork *Straight* turns scrap metal into a monumental work of art, which results in an increase in the value of the material.

As a society, how do we determine the worth of an object? What does it mean if something is worth more than it would cost to buy? Find an object that you consider to have very little value. What makes your object less valuable? Use paint, paper, glue, and scissors to create a new purpose for it (for example, an old sneaker could be painted to become a running trophy.) Does transforming your object make it any more valuable? Why or why not?

### Social Media

The Internet and social media are important tools Ai uses to create new works of art, raise awareness of issues, and share his new projects with people around the world. He also encourages others to use social media to fight for social change.

Create a social media campaign for an issue that you care about. Like Ai, gather a team for your campaign who share your concerns. Research the issue. How can you help? Develop a list of goals for your campaign: Are you going to raise a specific amount of money? Recommend important changes? Go to [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) and create a Twitter handle for your campaign. Compose tweets that provide information about your issue and develop a hashtag so you can connect with peers and others can join the conversation. What did your campaign accomplish? How did social media help you to achieve your goals? What would you have done differently?

## Social Studies

Ai uses his position as an artist and activist to challenge what we think we know. For example, dissatisfied with the Chinese government's report about the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, he traveled to Sichuan and began his own investigation. To ensure he provided a well-rounded and compelling account of the story, he gathered information from multiple sources.

Create a Citizens' Investigation of your own. Choose a natural disaster from the past ten years, such as Hurricane Katrina, Superstorm Sandy, Typhoon Haiyan, and the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. Find at least three sources (newspaper clippings, online articles, video clips, interviews with victims) that address the issue. Examine each source. What was the government's response to disaster? What is the opinion of the author? Do the sources contradict one another? Based on the evidence you gather, write a report to share your findings. How might your opinion be different if you only consulted one source?



## Resources for Teachers

Ai, Weiwei. *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006–2009*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011.

Manifestos and immodest proposals from China's most famous artist and activist, culled from his popular blog, shut down by Chinese authorities in 2009.

*Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*. Director, Alison Klayman. 2012.

This film from first-time director Alison Klayman provides a nuanced exploration of both contemporary China and Ai Weiwei, one of the country's most compelling public figures. The accompanying website, [www.aiweiweineversorry.com](http://www.aiweiweineversorry.com), features helpful "Frequently Asked Questions" and "Take Action" sections.

Brougher, Kerry, Mami Kataoka, and Charles Merewether. *Ai Weiwei: According to What?* Munich: Prestel USA, 2012. Published in conjunction with the first U.S. retrospective of Ai's career, this volume offers a valuable introduction to the full spectrum of his work.

*China's Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province*. Directors Jon Alpert and Matthew O'Neill. 2009.

This documentary explores the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and its aftermath as told in the words of the grieving victims. HBO's website, [www.hbo.com/documentaries/chinas-unnatural-disaster-tears-of-sichuan-province#/](http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/chinas-unnatural-disaster-tears-of-sichuan-province#/), includes the feature "Join the Conversation."



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**Page 1: Ai Weiwei, 2012. Photo by Gao Yuan**

**Page 2 (left): Ai Weiwei (Chinese, b. 1957). *Bowls of Pearls*, 2006. Two porcelain bowls filled with freshwater pearls; each bowl 14<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 38<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (38 x 98 cm).**

**Page 2 (right): Ai Weiwei (Chinese, b. 1957). *Ai Weiwei in the Elevator When Taken into Custody by the Police*, 2009. Inkjet print, 55<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 41<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (140 x 105 cm). Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio. © Ai Weiwei**

**Pages 4 and 10: Ai Weiwei (Chinese, b. 1957). *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. Triptych. Lambda prints, each 75<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 70<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (191.5 x 180 cm). Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio. © Ai Weiwei**

**Pages 5 (left) and 11: Ai Weiwei (Chinese, b. 1957). *Colored Vases*, 2007–10. Han dynasty vases and industrial paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio**

**Page 5 (right): Ai Weiwei making *Colored Vases*. Photograph © Ai Weiwei**

**Pages 6, 8 (detail), and 13: Ai Weiwei (Chinese, b. 1957). *Straight*, 2008–12. Steel reinforcing bars, dimensions variable. © Ai Weiwei**

**Page 12: *Ai Weiwei: According to What?* on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., 2012. Top: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. Bottom: *Colored Vases*, 2007–10. Photo by Cathy Carver**

## Notes

1. "Chinese architect slams Olympic 'pretend smile'". CNN. August 13, 2007. Accessed February 7, 2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/08/13/china.olympics.reut/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Brougher, Kerry, Mami Kataoka, and Charles Merewether. *Ai Weiwei: According to What?* (Munich: Prestel USA, 2012), p. 39.
4. Label text. *Ai Weiwei: According to What?* Brooklyn Museum.
5. Ai, Weiwei. *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006–2009*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), p. 14.
6. "Curator's Statement," Museum of Arts and Design Collection Database. Retrieved February 7, 2014. [http://collections.madmuseum.org/code|emuseum.asp?emu\\_action=searchrequest&moduleid=1&profile=objects&currentrecord=1&style=single&rawsearch=id|,|is|,|5497|,|false|,|true|](http://collections.madmuseum.org/code|emuseum.asp?emu_action=searchrequest&moduleid=1&profile=objects&currentrecord=1&style=single&rawsearch=id|,|is|,|5497|,|false|,|true|).

*Ai Weiwei: According to What?* is organized by the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. It is curated by Mami Kataoka, Mori Art Museum Chief Curator, and the Brooklyn presentation is organized by Sharon Matt Atkins, Managing Curator of Exhibitions, Brooklyn Museum.

This exhibition in Brooklyn has been made possible by Lisson Gallery, Mary Boone Gallery, the Andrew J. and Christine C. Hall Foundation, the May and Samuel Rudin Family Foundation, Galerie Urs Meile, and the Martha A. and Robert S. Rubin Exhibition Fund. Additional support is provided by the American Chai Trust for education and public programs.

Print media sponsor:

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