

## WHO IS AI WEIWEI?

Artist and activist Ai Weiwei is among the most inspiring and influential cultural figures in the world today. In the last few years, his image and images of his work have been featured on the cover of every major art publication and most magazines and newspapers across the globe. In recent months, his exhibitions have shattered attendance records in London, Paris, Helsinki and San Francisco. In 2017, his work is coming to Grand Rapids in a highly unique exhibition designed especially for Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park. But, one might ask, who is Ai Weiwei?

One of China's most recognizable citizens, Ai Weiwei has celebrated both the art and people of his native country, and has criticized the government over the suppression of human rights and freedom of speech. Such concerns have not been limited to China, as he advocates for the dignity and equality of all people through his art, his actions and his active social media presence. Although the type of work he creates may vary greatly from project to project, his meaning and message are always meant to engage and enlighten his audience. Antique furniture, backpacks, kites and even *Iron Tree*, from our permanent collection, form a significant part of his repertoire and his messages to the world.

Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957. His father was the highly regarded and influential poet Ai Qing. When he was still an infant, the government suppressed thousands of free thinking intellectuals like his father and the family was exiled to a remote labor camp in northwest China. Once among the nation's most highly regarded cultural figures, Ai Qing was forced to scrub toilets for nearly 20 years. Young Ai Weiwei and his brother grew up far beyond the developing boundaries of modern and industrial China yet grew attached to the longstanding traditions and artisan efforts of rural China.

The family returned to Beijing in 1976 following the death of Chairman Mao and the brief relaxation of government restrictions that ensued. Two years later, Ai Weiwei entered the Beijing Film Academy and became a central figure of that city's youthful avant-garde. In 1981, he obtained a visa and came to the United States, eventually settling in New York for nearly a decade. Although he briefly studied art, the importance of the American experience for the artist developed through photography and his observations of the freedoms Americans enjoyed, as well as the creative diversity of the art world centered in that city.

It was during this period that Ai Weiwei began to understand and undertake a more conceptual, idea-based approach to his art. Influenced by iconic masters like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, Ai Weiwei realized that any object found could be transformed into a work of art, and that the very act of creating was sometimes as powerful as the work itself. In 1993, at a time when his career was unfolding in New York, he received word that his illustrious father was gravely ill and made the decision to return to China.

During Ai Weiwei's American sojourn, Beijing and much of China had rapidly changed. As an artist, filmmaker, photographer, architect and activist, he found himself at the center of the capital's art world. In 2005, he began blogging as an integral part of his artistic practice. Later, he turned to Twitter and Instagram, where he still posts daily. In 2008, he collaborated on the design of the famed "Bird's Nest" stadium for the Beijing Olympics, yet later that year, the infamous Sichuan earthquake became a focal point of his energy in criticizing the government for shoddy construction that led to the deaths of thousands. In the following years, Ai Weiwei came under surveillance and was beaten, hospitalized and denied the right to travel. In 2011, he was arrested and mysteriously detained for 81 days, to the shock of the international cultural community.

Throughout this entire period, Ai Weiwei continued to create a broad and diverse body of work. In the tradition of Duchamp and Warhol, anything could become the basis for a work of art: bicycles could be transformed as a means to discuss population; children's backpacks could be assembled to illustrate the loss of innocent lives; works made of antiques, pottery or jade might be a vehicle to examine China's past and present. Even our own *Iron Tree* in the Sculpture Park was based on dozens of found tree elements brought together as a way of discussing visual and cultural individuality and unity.

In July 2015, Ai Weiwei's passport was returned and he was able to travel once again. Today, he divides his time between Beijing and Berlin, where he maintains studios. He works tirelessly on new projects and installations that allow him to experiment with materials and ideas, while still focusing on issues of human rights and freedom. Among his top priorities is a large exhibition under development for Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park.

Essay by Joseph Antenucci Becherer, Chief Curator and Vice President

