Ai Weiwei: According to What? Audio Tour Transcript

Track 1 – Welcome and Introduction

Matthew Teitelbaum: Hello, I’m Matthew Teitelbaum, the Art Gallery of Ontario’s director and CEO. Welcome to Ai Weiwei: According to What?, an exhibition profiling Ai Weiwei, China’s most prolific and provocative contemporary artist and one of the most significant artists at work in the world today. Ai Weiwei constantly pushes boundaries using a range of creative practices — including the power of digital communication — that characterizes contemporary art today, both in China and globally. His use of social media as an art form (he has more than 200,000 followers on Twitter) challenges the traditional definition of art and serves as a platform for his passionate advocacy for freedom of expression.

Mami Kataoka: Hello, my name is Mami Kataoka. I’m chief curator of Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. I first initiated this exhibition with Ai Weiwei in 2009 in Tokyo. The title of the exhibition is Ai Weiwei: According to What? This originally comes from the title of a work by Jasper Johns. It really questions us: where we are and why we are here, and where we came from, according to what?

Matthew Teitelbaum: We invite you to join the conversation here at your AGO where we strongly believe in exploring ideas through the lens of art.

I would like to thank Emmanuelle Gattuso & Allan Slaight and the Hal Jackman Foundation for their leadership gifts in support of this exhibition. I also wish to thank the Delaney Family Foundation; Donner Canadian Foundation; Partners in Art; and Francis and Eleanor Shen for their generous support as well as our media partner, the Globe and Mail. Contemporary programming at the AGO is generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts.

Track 2 – Ai Weiwei in the elevator when taken into custody by the police and Brain Inflation

Mami Kataoka: Two photographs: Ai Weiwei in the elevator when taken into custody by the police and also Brain Inflation. When Ai Weiwei was visiting Sichuan for a court case of his friend, he was taken by the local police in the middle of the night, so that he wouldn't be able to attend the court case. He's aware of every moment of his life. And every photograph becomes a memory of the moment. This photograph was taken in the elevator as he found a pop star being in the same elevator when he was taken to the police. The Brain Inflation photograph
shows his X-ray images when he had brain surgery in Germany. This tells you the true fact of what happened to him physically and makes all the stories something very actual.

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**Track 3 – Ai Weiwei**

*Ai Weiwei*: I think art has to deal with our daily experience, emotions and our aesthetic judgment, which of course relates to our morals and philosophy. All my work either directly or indirectly relates to my experience here.

Mainly I have no clear goal in my art. I let it be very loose; I let it happen spontaneously. But I have been so deeply involved with my condition or my socio-political understanding. I try to make the work which people who do or do not have the same experience would appreciate. Or even to challenge their sense of beauty or aesthetics.

Everybody who comes into this world should have a chance to develop themselves, to get their very basic rights, to exercise their will and to have a passion, imagination and the freedom to participate.

As an artist I’m more focused on freedom of speech. When you protect it, it’s essential, to get a real sense of private feelings and to share with others. And also I’m very interested in communication, to find a new way to communicate.
Track 4 – Ai Weiwei in the Context of China

Charlie Foran: I'm Charlie Foran, an author and the president of PEN Canada, a freedom of expression organization. I lived in China for five years, including two years in Beijing, and wrote a book about the lives of Beijing intellectuals in the wake of the June 4, 1989, massacre.

My interests in Ai Weiwei go back to his emergence in the wake of the Beijing Olympics, and I consider him by far the most important, interesting, stimulating, and original of contemporary Chinese artists.

Now, Ai Weiwei is a political artist, but he's not, I don't think, an innately dissident one. Rather, his dissent isn't grounded in any wholesale rejection of his culture's precepts or challenges to that self-conception. What makes him so unique and such trouble to officials is that his work, his thinking, even his life clearly and happily embrace a fundamental principle of Chinese society: the colossal.

His art is as big, as outsized as it needs to be to speak to his nation's deepest instincts. He is very, very Chinese in his approach to discussing politics and art. He embraces the gigantic but he also critiques it, revealing it to be — no surprise — a complex self-conception, full of contradiction and one that allows far too much dehumanization and cruelty.

Look around these rooms at these mostly huge artistic gestures and confrontations. By being so big as an artist, Ai Weiwei is both embodying the colossal as China's enduring reality and declaring that, as one Chinese citizen, at least, he won't abide to any binding terms of that reality, in particular with regards to the individual experience.

He will not accept the supposed trade of social stability with individual rights. He will not allow state sponsored forgetting or coerced silence and he will name names — especially of children.

Ai Weiwei is 100 per cent Chinese, and 100 per cent loyal and 100 per cent suitably outsized in his opposition to many governing principles of his society.
**Track 5 – Map of China**

Charlie Foran: *Map of China* (2008) is, on the surface, a serene and gorgeous sculpture. By employing salvaged wood from dismantled Ching Dynasty temples and crafting such a deep, unified block from that discarded material, Ai Weiwei could simply be remarking on the great depth and unity of the Chinese experience, both historical and contemporary. He could be simply celebrating the monumental scale of his nation.

But look at the material again and think about the subject and the artist.

Ai Weiwei is a child of the Cultural Revolution. Now, every Chinese citizen who experienced the Cultural Revolution, no matter their age or circumstance, was profoundly shaped by it. The decade haunts a quarter billion lives, easily. His father, the poet Ai Ching, suffered terribly and predictably during the Cultural Revolution but at least survived. Ai Weiwei, a boy and then a teenager during the madness, came of age in a China where esteemed poets cleaned toilets and senior politicians were publicly humiliated and temples were destroyed, books burned, old culture devastated for no reason, for no obvious end. An artist raised in an era when young men and women called Red Guards, working on behalf, they believed, of supreme leader Mao Zedong did their best to obliterate that glorious history, to reduce it to rubble for later use — why not? — in a beautiful sculpture.

Is not the source of the wood for *Map of China* in equal parts lovely and distressing? Is the deeply physical representation of China as an imposing, impenetrable block, standing alone and aloof not open to other ways of being viewed?
Track 6 – Kippe

Mami Kataoka: I'm fond of all the works. One of the early pieces, Kippe, is a very charming piece. But Kippe comes from his childhood memories during the Cultural Revolution when he was small. At school there was only this parallel bar for gymnastics and one basketball goal. Those were the only things the school had, so kids needed to be very creative [about] how to play [with] limited resources.

Because he was living in the Xianjiang District, where it was very cold during winter, every house/family needed to prepare this pile of wood. The family of Ai had a beautiful way of piling up this wood, and then people passing by [would] say, "Oh, my god, this is so beautiful."

You can [get] the idea of how he had been having these creative thoughts in mind since his childhood.

Track 7 – Tea House

Mami Kataoka: The new Teahouse comes in three house-shaped sculptures, using Pu’er tea blocks, oxidized and fermented for several months and compressed into architectural bricks. It was derived from the conversation [about] how his interest in architecture at the time could be seen together with traditional ways of dealing with different materials.

By having loose tea around three houses, it creates a certain environmental presence and further explores the use of ordinary daily materials.

Track 8 – Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens’ Investigation

Sheng Xue: I came to Canada right after the Tiananmen Square massacre, 1989. I’m a writer and a poet. I have been banned from going back to my home to visit for 24 years.

It’s very important to read out the names of the [kids who died] during the earthquake in Wenchuan. An earthquake is a natural disaster. It could happen in a lot of places. But [it was] not really a natural disaster in China, especially during the Wenchuan earthquake. Thousands of
kids died during that earthquake because of the corruption. So that’s why people call those kind of buildings [that] collapsed “tofu” buildings.

Ai Weiwei was so brave, and he went there to collect the names of the [kids who died]. That [got] him in trouble. So when we read out their names here, we want to make their lives and stories to be remembered and to be respected.

Track 9 – Straight

Charlie Foran: Straight (2008-2012). Ai Weiwei’s embodiment of, commitment to and critique of the colossal in Chinese culture is made gloriously manifest in this astonishing piece. Think of the work first in terms of process. What an idea, to recover the actual steel rebar rods that were meant to keep those Sichuan schoolhouses standing during that terrible earthquake.

Most artists who had such a notion would have been content to use any rebar rods for the sculpture, but Ai Weiwei decided he needed to recover and restore the real rods that had really failed to keep those more than 5,000 real children from dying so senselessly.

As with the discarded temple wood in Map of China or the antique stools and grapes or the Han Dynasty vases painted and occasionally destroyed in different pieces, this is old material being
made new, and the faded, obscured, possibly suppressed past being made a vivid public present for conversation and for reconsideration.

Once you know where those rebars come from and what was involved in putting them to use, the sculpture opens up to multiple resonances and meanings. It is, first of all, beautiful in a sleek, minimal way. It is also suggestive, both of the ground fissure caused by the earthquake and of the gulf between, perhaps, official and unofficial, inhuman social engineering and actual human experiences of their lives and places.

The act of creating it — the exertion, expense, determination and above all the implicit point in carrying out such a monumental exercise — begin almost to vibrate those steel rods, to unsettle what is, to say the least, a very sedentary piece of art.

The sculpture is a heartfelt memorial to the dead, a scathing critique of the living, an audacious embodiment of how Ai Weiwei thinks about the colossal in China and about himself as an artist and citizen. Public art doesn't get any more political or confrontational than *Straight*.

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**Track 10 – Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn**

**Charlie Foran**: What does it mean for Ai Weiwei to smash a valuable Han Dynasty vase? The visual of it is very striking and is open to easy and, I think, satisfactory interpretation as the artist smashing the old to bring in the new. He does talk a lot about new conversations, and he means it.

But for a Chinese artist, particularly a Chinese artist raised during the culture revolution when smashing old culture was cynical, disastrous political dictate, smashing a valuable vase must mean something more.

It means you are commenting on the self-destructive impulses in your society. You're commenting on the fragility of culture in your society. You're commenting on the ways in which power destroys things, particularly when power is exercised in an autocratic or authoritarian
manner. Perhaps you're even commenting a little on the way you must position yourself in that conversation, destroyer and creator both.

**Track 11 – Forever**

**Mami Kataoka:** *Forever* could be interpreted in many ways. From a structural point of view, it is again the way of destructing normal use and creating new values by reconstruction. And art-historically speaking, the father of contemporary art, Marcel Duchamp, made one of his first ready-made sculptures using existing products in 1913, about 100 years ago, with wooden stools and a wheel of a bicycle, which opened up so many possibilities for the artists in coming generations, including Ai Weiwei.

Socially speaking, the bicycle has been a major means of transportation among Chinese people for a long time, until their economic power grew and everyone shifted to the car. “Forever” was the national brand of the bicycle and everyone wanted a Forever bicycle not so long ago.

**Track 12 – He Xie**

**Charlie Foran:** Ai Weiwei, as the AGO show makes so apparent, thinks in terms of numbers, usually very big ones. China does that to a person: always the reality is of staggering, numbing statistics and of individuals struggling to be, in effect, anything other than just another number and a very small one. But 3,000 river crabs in this funny, semi-whimsical piece are foremost a straightforward and quite daring critique of the Chinese government’s ferocious determination
to restrict freedom of expression. *He Xie* doesn't only literally mean “river crab,” it's a also a word that sounds like the word that both means “harmonious” to the Communist Party and is the informal term among netizens for the censorship going on on the net.

China monitors and censors its net activity more aggressively than just about any country on the planet. These river crabs are indeed everywhere and climbing all over each other in this permanently confined space. And their pincers are sharp and at perpetual work suppressing free speech.

Consider the material used to make those censoring crabs: porcelain. The history of Chinese porcelain is bound up in inextricably with the history of dynastic China, deep and rich and characterized from time immemorial by aesthetic fragility and, by-the-by, absolutist rule.

And while those river crabs may be busy-busy, crawling and snapping, what is their ultimate fate within that constricted space? To be eaten, just like everybody else, including their victims. Just as Chinese citizens, whether the coercers or the coerced, the victimizers or the victims, generally end up the same: in the proverbial pot.

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**Track 13 – Moon Chests**

*Mami Kataoka*: The design of *Moon Chest* is derived from traditional Ming Dynasty chests, but with those holes on the doors, it has become a functionless sculpture. And due to the scale and the way of presentation, it also gives us the sense of architectural structure. Each *Moon Chest* has holes on both the front and back sides. Looking through the holes, you can appreciate the different shapes of waxing and waning of the moon.

The Chinese calendar is based on the movement of the moon, not the sun, like the Western calendar system. So the sun and the moon are always in combination somehow, but to look at the moon is also to look at the shadow of the sun.
Track 14 – New York Photographs

Mami Kataoka: New York Photographs 1983-1993 introduces not only Ai Weiwei's everyday activities in the '80s when we was living in New York, but also reveals the social conditions and some of the incidents on the streets. This series of photographs also reveals his friends and acquaintances around that time, as well as his experiences of visiting museums in New York and seeing Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns, among others.

You can find the direct influence from Marcel Duchamp and then you see how he developed his artistic practice after he left New York and went back to Beijing.