

## NEITHER NOR

13.04.2024 - 15.09.2024

Opening Saturday 13 April 2024 | 4pm - 8.30pm

**Galleria Continua** is pleased to present **Neither Nor**, an exhibition that traces the creative career of one of the most important and influential contemporary artists, Ai Weiwei, from 1995 to today. The exhibition will see the entire cinema-theatre home of Galleria Continua completely transformed, featuring a large selection of new works made with LEGO bricks and historical works made from porcelain, wood, marble, bamboo, and assemblages of different materials.

Concerning the title of the exhibition, Ai Weiwei states: *"In the current era we find ourselves faced with a cultural panorama that tends towards extremes, where everything is reduced to a binary choice between black and white. This trend is deeply backward and troubling and is reminiscent of authoritarian periods in history, such as the first Soviet purges, the McCarthy era in the United States, the Cultural Revolution in China, and the rise of Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s. Times in which, not only were human rights seriously violated, but also the very essence of human nature and the collective beliefs of ordinary people were profoundly damaged. The title, "Neither Nor", is intended to convey that, in most cases, our thinking is not limited to absolute truths or single interpretations, but rather exists in a state of ambiguity that allows for greater possibilities and debate. It is within this state of ambiguity that human thought and culture, including art, finds the environment and space to thrive. As a result, it is often difficult to provide definitive yes or no answers; regardless of the answer, there is a strong sense of exclusivity and a lack of tolerance for alternative perspectives."*

Conceptual artist, sculptor, painter, performer, photographer, architect and urban planner, collector, director (of cinema, documentaries, theatre and opera), actor, musician (singer and lyricist), writer and editor, blogger, investigative journalist, activist for human rights and dissident - Ai Weiwei is an artist impossible to label; prolific, committed, open to any innovation, he wisely combines art, private life and political commitment. A profound connoisseur of the tradition of his native country, he interprets motifs, manufacturing processes and traditional materials in a playful and iconoclastic way, denouncing the contradictions between the individual and the community in the contemporary world.

On the first floor of the gallery, the exhibition offers, for the first time, a comprehensive survey of works created between 2019 and 2023 through the assembly of hundreds of toy bricks. Ai Weiwei explains, *"LEGOs are used to convey personal messages and contain stories related to me, my childhood and my upbringing. Pixels, digitisation, segmentation, fragmentation and disconnection provide a unique freedom for reproduction, enabling a qualitative and quantitative breakthrough in image formation that moves away from the widely used order, method and composition. It is similar to the use of ancient mosaics and the presentation of fabrics (silk, wool) and carpets, which have a lengthy history. Like the wooden movable type printing of the Song Dynasty (c. 1000 AD), the methods and means of production replaced manual control and this led to a high level of accuracy and precision of the completed images. This*

*is the linguistic advantage of computer technology and a figurative presentation of an intelligent logical system for the digital age. (...) The existence and logic of using LEGO as a structure are surprisingly consistent with the logic of my expression on social media, including tweets and Instagram images. Both include temporal and spatial factors, the flattening, fragmentation and expropriated continuity of media and reality, including existence itself, ideologies, politics and events, and linguistic approaches to culture and dreams."*

A journey through history that begins with the Renaissance, the first two rooms welcome us with "Sleeping Venus with Coat Hanger", a work based on the painting attributed to Giorgione in which Ai Weiwei inserts, next to the Roman goddess of fertility, a hanger in memory of brutal abortions self-induced before pregnancy termination became legal. In "The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus in Untitled (After Rubens)", the repetition of the individual Legos restore the colours, the vigour of the bodies and the power of the composition, to which the artist juxtaposes a panda, symbol of contemporary Chinese state power. "Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte" by Georges Seurat is reinterpreted with the image of a refugee as Ai Weiwei's response to the ban on the burkini in France. The image of the locust invasion that wiped out entire crops in the heart of Pakistan in 2020 overlaps with Van Gogh's "Le semailleur au soleil couchant". The impersonal language of the coloured bricks translates two of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous works, "La Gioconda" portrayed here smeared with cake after the action of environmental activists and "Last Supper" where the face of Ai Weiwei replaces that of Judas. The exhibition continues with works that give a voice to urgent, dramatic, and current issues such as war and gas leaks from gas pipelines. Among the previously unseen works, "Cloud" images that bring us back to the shooting down by a US fighter of a Chinese air balloon accused of spying on strategic sites, an incident that led to a drastic tightening of diplomatic relations between the two world powers.

Ai Weiwei's strong bond with tradition and the millenary Chinese culture - towards which the artist manifests a deferential respect, accompanied by an incredible ability to project himself into modernity - takes shape in a series of historical works, among these: "Treasure Box" (2014), a cube finely decorated with inlay designs and enriched by hexagonal openings that reveal the internal shelves, "Marble Cube" (2010) which combines the minimalist sculpture of the sixties and memorials made of marble, a material common to both Chinese and Western traditions, and "Porcelain Cube" (2009) created in the Qinghua

style (blue and white porcelain). The garden hosts two large installations "Pick Up Stick" (2006), a board game known throughout the world by different names, in Italy it is known as "Game of Sticks" or "Shanghai", in ancient China it was called "Chien Tung" and was used for oracular practice, and "Pillar" (2006) which consists of large porcelain vases, perfectly integrated with the environment, measuring two metres in height they explore the limits of the processing of this material that is traditionally considered the highest expression of Chinese art.

The installation located in the stalls area, "Stools", is made with approximately 3,000 stools dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties and the Republican era which, connected to each other, form a wooden surface that covers the floor of the room. Collected in the villages of northern China, with their solid and simple structure, they speak of a design that has remained unchanged for hundreds of years.

The exhibition concludes with "Huantou Guo" (2015), a floating mythological creature made of bamboo and silk. Starting in 2013, Ai Weiwei began creating works using the language of traditional Chinese kites and created a series of works inspired by the Shanhaijing (Classic of Mountains and Seas). The text, which dates back to the 4th century BC, is an important documentation of the mythology, geography, culture and social structure of the time. While most traditional kites are two-dimensional and intended for flight, the artist pushes craftsmen to explore the limits of what is possible with these familiar materials, resulting in large-scale works with more elaborate designs and three-dimensional form.

About the artist:

**Ai Weiwei** has been called the most influential artist of our time. After speaking out against government corruption and the lack of respect for human rights and freedom of speech in China, he was arrested, beaten, placed in solitary confinement and banned from travel. His activity as a dissident went hand in hand with his artistic career and he continued to produce works that testify to his political beliefs, while at the same time giving ample space to creativity and experimentation. His production over the last thirty years allows us to explore his ambivalent relationship with both Western culture and the culture of his country, torn between a deep sense of belonging and an equally strong impulse to rebellion. Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing. His father, the poet Ai Qing, was labelled a "rightist" in 1958, and Ai and his family were exiled, first to Heilongjiang, in northeast China, and then soon after to the deserts of Xinjiang, in

northern China. west China. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Ai Qing was rehabilitated and the family returned to Beijing. Ai would enroll in the Beijing Film Academy and was one of the members of the artist group "Stars". Ai moved to the United States in 1981, living in New York between 1983 and 1993. He studied briefly at Parsons School of Design. In New York, Ai will discover the works of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. Returning to China in 1993 to care for his ailing father, Ai helped create Beijing's East Village, a community of avant-garde artists. In 1997 he co-founded the China Art Archives & Warehouse (CAAW), one of the first independent art spaces in China. He began to be interested in architecture in 1999, designing his studio house in Caochangdi, in the north-eastern suburbs of Beijing. In 2000, he started his own architecture firm, FAKE Design. In 2007, as a participant in documenta 12, he brought 1001 Chinese citizens to Kassel as part of his Fairytale project. In 2008, together with the Swiss architecture team of Herzog and de Meuron, he designed the Beijing National Stadium. In 2010, he covered the floor of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall with 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds. In 2012, he received the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent from the Human Rights Foundation. In 2015, he received the Ambassador of Conscience Award, from Amnesty International, for his actions in support of the defense of human rights. In 2017, his epic cinematic journey "Human Flow" participated in the 74th Venice International Film Festival. The film offers a powerful glimpse into massive contemporary human migration. Captured over the course of an eventful year in 23 countries, "Human Flow" follows a chain of human stories that extends across the globe in countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, France, Greece, Germany, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Mexico and Turkey. In 2022 the Japan Art Association announced Ai Weiwei as the laureate of the 33rd Praemium Imperiale prize for sculpture. In 2024, "Zodiac: A Graphic Memoir" was released, a joint project with the cartoonist Gianluca Costantini (published by Ten Speed Graphic, with the screenplay by Elettra Stamboulis) which tells the life of Ai Weiwei starting from the twelve zodiac signs that make up the Chinese horoscope.

About the gallery:

Founded in 1990 in San Gimignano, Italy, GALLERIA CONTINUA has expanded its locations to Beijing, Les Moulins, Havana, São Paulo, Rome, Paris, and Dubai. GALLERIA CONTINUA represents a desire for continuity between times and a desire to write a current history. Thanks to its investment in forgotten and unconventional sites, the gallery has always chosen atypical locations, developing a strong identity and an original positioning in over thirty years of activity. The home of Galleria Continua, an ex-cinema, it has hosted many prolific exhibitions and

installations over the last 34 years. It is a unique and exciting space for artists and the gallery to have to consider when planning and executing exhibitions.

#### **Galleria Continua / San Gimignano**

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