

Exhibition

Ai Weiwei

Fan-Tan



Breaking of Two Blue and White Dragon Bowls [Briser deux bols du dragon bleu et blanc], 1996

Free publication

The art of rebirth

Mucem

20 June – 12 November 2018

Ai Weiwei's work is profoundly linked to China's family, political and cultural history. His art perpetually lays down challenges: higher, more innovative, more surprising, more political. His subjects are tragic, ironic, iconoclastic, controversial

Two artists against the oracle

To begin with, there was the family, wealthy landowners from Zhejiang province,¹ and the son, Ai Qing, who was born in 1910. The astrologer who was consulted in accordance with tradition predicted that he would be the cause of the household's demise. Shocked, Ai Qing's parents entrusted the child to a local peasant woman who, too poor, drowned her last-born so that she could breastfeed the baby she had been entrusted with. When Ai Qing's parents agreed to take the child back into their home on the express condition that he addressed them as "uncle" and "aunt", he was nine years old. A few years later, he entered the Hangzhou art school, where he studied under the pioneer of modern painting in China, Lin Fengmian. In 1929, following in his master's footsteps, he boarded the ocean liner *André Lebon* bound for Marseille, a busy port which he later wrote a beautiful poem about between 1933 and 1935. He continued his studies in Paris, where he associated with avant-garde artists and intellectuals while working in a lacquer workshop for Douglass lighters to make ends meet. Back in China in 1932, he settled in Shanghai and joined the League of Left-Wing Artists. Arrested by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists in July and sentenced to six years in prison, he began writing revolutionary poems that made it out of the prison and met with growing success.

In 1937, the prophecy was fulfilled: Japanese soldiers, on learning that they were passing near the village where the poet Ai Qing was born, set fire to the family home. He became a member of the Chinese Communist Party in 1941 and met Mao Zedong. The two men developed a friendship, and the poet, already famous, became his adviser on cultural matters and was entrusted with missions within the Party committees to supervise artistic life. In 1958, he was in turn a victim of the great anti-intellectual purge. Declared an enemy of the Party, the State and the country, he was sent to the countryside to atone for his "right-wing tendencies", accompanied by his wife and son, Weiwei, born the previous year. Moved from the northern Dongbei region near the Korean border to Xinjiang in the far west of the country, they were eventually abandoned on the edge of the Gobi desert and Ai Qing managed to get work cleaning toilets. In the evening, he came home exhausted, humiliated, sometimes hurt. Ai Weiwei remembers observing the care and intelligence his father displayed in his cleaning chores. It was a life lesson for him: if you can remain precise and sincere in what you do, even in the humblest, most degrading tasks, you can retain your dignity.²

Having lived in isolation since birth, Ai Weiwei quickly learnt to manage on his own, to make and repair all kinds of objects, and to work in the fields. School education was limited to memorizing Mao's words recorded in the Little Red Book. Although the family had had to burn all their books to protect themselves, every evening his father recounted Rome, the Republic and the Empire, Julius Caesar and Caligula, democracy and tyranny, Renoir's painting and Rodin's sculpture.

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The family returned to Beijing in 1976. Ai Weiwei, who was then nineteen years old, was able to study with his father's friends, literary men and artists. Translator Jian Sheng Yee

introduced him to Van Gogh, Degas, Manet and Jasper Johns. He was taught how to draw by former professors at the School of Fine Arts, who had been sacked with the closure of all the universities, and he spent months at Beijing station and the zoo in order to get free models; he began studying at the Beijing Film Academy – where he met the future filmmakers Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou – before giving up and founding the Xing Xing (Stars) collective with eleven other artists. In late 1976, a new mood swept over China with the death of the Great Helmsman, the exclusion of the Gang of Four, and the freedom of speech and display granted by the mayor of Beijing with the support of Deng Xiaoping's government. The Xing Xing artists' collective was one of the major events in the cultural

history of modern China. Its members met to discuss their course of action after the failure of revolutionary realism, the possibilities of exploring the *ziwo* – the ego or the I – whereas communism had theorized depersonalization and uniformity. As the journalist Barnaby Martin pointed out, they met to share their counter-revolutionary ideas: the need to encourage an individual approach, subjectivity and freedom of expression.³ But this wind of freedom proved short-lived. During the group's second exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in 1980, the authorities warned the group that its work would never be exhibited in China again and forced it to dissolve. The members of the collective faced exile, arrest and imprisonment, disappearance or, at best, the end of their artistic careers.

Rebirth in New York

In 1981, Ai Weiwei chose exile. The artist told the exhibition curator Hans Ulrich Obrist that while on the way to the airport, his mother asked: "Are you sad because you don't speak English?" "What are you going to do there?" and Ai Weiwei answered: "I am going home."⁴

It was a second birth. He was twenty-four years old, learning English at the University of Pennsylvania and Berkeley. Thanks to a scholarship, he began studying art for a few months at the Parsons School of Design. But he didn't want to waste his time working hard just to pay school fees.⁵ He began a long quest under the influence of Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, and in contact with Allen Ginsberg and the poets Gu Cheng and Bei Dao, as well as American and Chinese filmmakers and artists, for whom Ai Weiwei's apartment in Brooklyn, then in Manhattan, on the Lower East Side, became a meeting place. In March 1988, under the title "Old Shoes, Safe Sex", he exhibited works at Ethan Cohen's Art Waves gallery in SoHo that were directly inspired by the Surrealist tendency.

It was only much later that Ai Weiwei revealed his feelings about this event: "I really liked this exhibition, but nobody was interested in it. I didn't give up art but I didn't make art anymore. These were the only works I have ever made."⁶ He wandered around, took photographs – amassing 10,000 negatives⁷ – collected everyday objects and paints, threw away most of his works each time he moved, did all sorts of odd jobs, including gardening, housework, carpentry, framing and printing.

A few works from his American stay escaped the trashcan, and were exhibited for the first time in France: *Violin* (1985), an assemblage of a violin and a pickaxe handle, *Hanging Man* (1985), a reconstruction of Duchamp's profile using a simple metal hanger, *Château Lafite* (1986), combining a bottle of French fine wine and two Chinese slippers, *One Man Shoe* (1987), made up of two shoes that made one, and *Safe Sex* (1988), a raincoat with a condom in the crotch. They were Dadaist works, in which everyday objects were transformed into works of art, explicitly referencing Duchamp, but they took on a different meaning in the

Chinese context: the mere fact of keeping an instrument as bourgeois as a violin at home could, at the time of the Cultural Revolution, land someone in a re-education camp; the working of the leather in the double shoe, which no longer had heels and pointed its toes in two opposite directions, referred both to the shoes that were repaired or sewed until they were extremely worn when he was a child, and also to a country that was becoming a gigantic textile factory.

Mao 1-3 (1989) enabled Ai Weiwei to turn his back on painting. His earliest paintings "were mostly about landscapes, in the fashion of Munch – or some were even in the fashion of Cézanne... Those were the last paintings I did. I did those Maos, and it was somehow like saying goodbye to the old times... and then I just gave up painting altogether."⁸

Return to China, the birth of the activist

Ai Weiwei, who was associated with the Human Rights Watch organization in New York, was deeply marked by the events in Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989, in response to which he went on hunger strike in front of the United Nations building. "Because back then I was naive, I said to myself I'm ready for that [prison]. Which is ridiculous."⁹ He returned to China in 1993 to take care of his ailing father. Once again settled in Beijing, he set about transforming the art scene in the Chinese capital. It was becoming increasingly active: since 1993, with the artists Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan, he helped set up the experimental artists' and performers' district "Beijing East Village", inspired by the artists' cooperatives of the East Village in New York (which the police closed the following year); with Zeng Xiaojun and Xu Bing, he produced three volumes on the new generation of Chinese artists, published by Feng Boyi; he set up a postgraduate course at Tsinghua University of Arts and Design in Beijing; he became an exhibition curator (in Shanghai, for example, in 2000, at the Eastlink Gallery, with "Fuck Off"); he built his own studio-house in the village of Caochangdi, on the north-eastern edge of Beijing – his first architectural project in the city. In 2003, during a sixteen-day bus ride, he filmed each street in Beijing in order to draw up a sort of topographical survey of the changes that were transforming the city.

He also produced works that were often mischievous and sometimes provocative, notably the series *Study of Perspective* (1995–ongoing), in which he presents himself giving the finger in front of emblematic places of power, works or monuments, from the White House to the Mona Lisa. He also produced "collective" works, the result of his close links with local artisans. For certain projects he used the services of thousands of people. This was the case for the *Sunflower Seeds* installation at Tate Modern in London (October 2010–May 2011), for example, whose 100 million hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds spread on the ground required the work of 1,600 artisans.¹⁰ The time, number of people and demands required by certain works were sometimes huge: at the documenta in Kassel, in 2007, *Fairytale* – with its thousand and one chairs from the Qing period and a monumental sculpture four metres high made up of a thousand and one doors and windows from the Ming and Qing dynasties (*Template*) – brought together a thousand and one Chinese citizens, who had to be transported, housed and fed on the spot. Although it was a logistical feat, what interested the artist were the changes in mentality and attitude brought about by the journey.¹¹

In parallel, Ai Weiwei became a veritable activist on social media. The trigger came following a proposal from the Chinese Internet portal, sina.com, which invited him to keep a blog. It was launched in 2005 and would quickly be followed, every day, by 100,000 people. He explained that his enthusiasm for this medium of communication was no doubt linked to the deprivation he experienced during his childhood of all forms of freedom of expression.¹² Each day he commented on Chinese art, architecture, society and politics, and he posted a hundred photographs taken during his travels and his everyday life. The 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which killed 90,000 people, marked a turning point in his commitment: Ai Weiwei used his blog to draw

attention to the flawed construction of school buildings whose collapse had killed more than 5,000 children. In March 2009, to counter the secrecy and inaction of the political authorities, he launched a vast online "Citizens' Investigation" to identify and draw up a list of child victims of the earthquake. Commentators regularly wondered whether his determination to take risks and comment on the facts in this compulsive way was linked to the humiliation he experienced in his childhood or else a product of egocentricity. Some suspected that he was trying to increase his popularity. His action incurred the wrath of the authorities, and on 28 May 2009 they shut down the blog. In August, in Chengdu, Ai Weiwei was severely beaten and prevented from testifying at the trial of a fellow activist, Tan Zuoren, also involved in the Sichuan disaster investigation. This resulted in an emergency operation a few months later in Germany, in which he was saved from a brain haemorrhage caused by blows to the head. In 2010, the studio he had built in Shanghai, in a district intended to become a new cultural site, was declared illegal and demolished a few months later. On 3 April 2011, he was arrested by the Chinese secret police at the Beijing Capital International Airport, and subjected to numerous interrogations, intimidation and all kinds of accusations. After 81 days in secret detention, he was released on 22 June, but placed under house arrest, with various prohibitions, including speaking to the press. Beijing Fake Cultural Development Ltd, for which he was a consultant, was ordered to pay a fine of 15.5 million yuan within two weeks for unpaid taxes and as a fine. After his release, he transformed certain objects used to watch over and confine him in prison into works of art by sculpting them in noble materials, examples of which include *Surveillance Camera with Plinth* (2015, marble) and *Handcuffs* (2015, jade).

On 22 July 2015, his passport was returned to him, and in October he moved to Berlin, where he was appointed guest professorship at the Universität der Künste.

The global artist

Let us try and capture Ai Weiwei's multiple facets using small brush strokes.

Ai Weiwei, publisher

As artistic director of a gallery and exhibition organizer, he published three major books in China, all clandestine, which disseminated images of contemporary art at a time when they were hard to access in China: *The Black Cover Book* (1994), *The White Cover Book* (1995) and *The Grey Cover Book* (1997). These works combine interviews and reproductions of works by contemporary Chinese artists, together with key texts by art historians and reproductions of works by Duchamp, Koons and Warhol. The purpose of these works was to enable readers to see and read "the spirit of the artists". "The main idea was to ask artists to write down what they had in mind rather than paint a canvas or make a sculpture." "Give me one sentence," I told them, "one word, providing it comes from you."¹³

Ai Weiwei, gallerist

He organized several exhibitions in China, in a very tense political context. The sculptor Wang Keping, a former member of the Xing Xing collective exiled in France, has recounted Ai Weiwei's extraordinary journey. In the 1990s, he wanted to create a private gallery first by using legal channels, then by setting up a gallery in order to circumvent obstacles of all kinds from the Office of Culture, the Office of Commercial Affairs and the Office of Public Security.¹⁴ Opened in 1998 China Art Archives and Warehouse was the first truly civil society art gallery since 1949.

Ai Weiwei, architect

As is often the case in his career, he has said he did not want to design architecture but merely a studio-house in the village of Caochangdi, on the road to the Beijing airport. This building, designed during a single afternoon and built in sixty days, was noticed by architect Shigeru Ban. In 2008, he worked as an artistic consultant for the Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron on the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, and again joined forces with them for the urban and architectural project built in honour of his father in Jinhua Park. Ai Weiwei explains what architecture means to him: "Maybe it's a form of poetry for me. You use your hands, you manage a volume, size and load to illustrate your understanding of art and the human condition."¹⁵ Beijing Fake Cultural Development Ltd., which he was a consultant for, has about fifty projects to its name, from urbanism to interior design. "Architecture is important for a time because it's a physical example of who we are, of how we look at ourselves, of how we want to identify with our time, so it's evidence of mankind at the time."¹⁶

Ai Weiwei, collector of antiques.

In China, Ai Weiwei lived partly from the sale of antiques and became a specialist in Neolithic pottery.¹⁷ He is interested in creating a dialogue between ancient art and contemporary art by reusing objects from the past – as in his *Colored Vases*, in which vases that were 4,000 years old were immersed in industrial paint (2016) – even if it meant breaking or fragmenting them on occasion (*Breaking of Two Blue-and-White Dragon Bowls*, 1996, or *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, first version in 1995, Lego version in 2015). For the artist, "Nothing is sacred, everything can be transformed."¹⁸ He explains: "It's full of ignorance and also a redefinition or reconsideration."¹⁹ By reusing, as in *Colored House* (2016), a wooden structure from the Zhejiang province at the beginning of the Qing dynasty, the artist bore witness to the countless destructions linked to the urbanization of China and the communist doctrine of a clean break from the past: dismantled temples, destroyed alleyways, harmonization of walls and doors, compulsory realism in painting. Ai Weiwei reintroduced a dialogue with the past by drawing on traditional Chinese art for his creations; *Table with Two Legs on the Wall* (1997) uses a traditional technique for manufacturing wooden furniture while changing its function; *Er Xi* (2016) draws on the *Shan Hai Jing* (The Classic of Mountains and Seas) and recreates animals with an ancestral technique using bamboo and silk. In his creations, Ai Weiwei uses materials such as jade, marble and porcelain – the noble materials of traditional art. This is no coincidence. For Bernard Fibicher, "It is because the object is indifferent that its destruction – or its diversion – is not a problem." The iconoclastic character of this destruction of antiquities was disturbing and controversial. Ai Weiwei denounced the way the past was forgotten in his country, and to do so he adopted a shocking, paradoxical method – that of destruction.

Ai Weiwei, activist on social media.

"At last a space where we can fuck with the Party!" Ai Weiwei told Wang Keping. The artist mocked everything and everyone, commented on events and waged a single-handed battle for the truth with the Chinese Party and the State. He intervened in the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 and defended the activist Tan Zuoren, who was investigating the collapse of schools and had been arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. He supported Yang Jia, sentenced to death for the murder of six Shanghai police officers, whose mother was interned in a psychiatric hospital under a false name after her son was executed. He got involved in the adulterated milk case. His strong stands forced the authorities to react in ever stronger ways: shutting down of the blog in May 2009, demolition of the studio in Shanghai in January 2011 and, finally, his arrest in April 2011. Above and beyond the power of protest that it conferred and the difficulty for the authorities of controlling his messages, perhaps the blog and later Twitter simply offered Ai Weiwei a very exciting opportunity to play with words. He explains that previously "Chairman Mao and the

Party had total control over this process [new words means new ideas]. They allowed only the words they wanted, the words they were masters of.”²⁰ Before leaving for the United States, he added, “We were restricted in our reality. Limited by our words, by our lack of vocabulary.” With Ai Weiwei, this reflection on words, old and new, which echoes his reflection on the past and the present, on the old and the contemporary, referred as always to the principle of reality, existing reality and reality to create.

Ai Weiwei, photographer and documenter

Taking photographs is second nature to Ai Weiwei: “Taking pictures is like breathing.” Although this medium allows a relationship to reality and a direct contact with daily life, the artist has said that, “It is also a way of developing one’s sensitivity to the world. It’s like an animal with a large number of antennae. Everyone tries to grasp reality in their own way.”²¹ He also made several documentaries, the most recent of which, *Human Flow*, which came out in 2017, dealt with the refugee crisis throughout the world.

Ai Weiwei, an influential artist

His aim, above and beyond his art, is to influence society. His work is often referred to as “social sculpture”, a concept invented by Joseph Beuys. What interests the artist is reality, the way things are seen. He explains that he “loves the expression ‘producing reality,’” and that, “We are a productive reality. We are reality, but being part of reality means producing another reality . . . I see myself more as someone who triggers or initiates things.”²² Of course, in everything he does, Ai Weiwei introduces a dose of irony. Reality and irony, but without a prior plan. He says that he “just does things without thinking about before and after”. Perhaps the risk inherent in anticipation and prediction would make action too frightening. Barnaby Martin also insists on this aspect: “He often says he has no idea where his work will go next. Like the direction of a cat’s next step, he says, he is powerless to predict such things and what is more, he does not want to. He is free, and makes a virtue out of uncertainty.”

Contemporary artist, exhibition curator, architect, urban planner, antiques dealer, collector, publisher, photographer, activist – why such eclecticism, such frenetic activity? The artist explains: “Every time I start to feel comfortable, I try to step back and escape”; and Barnaby Martin notes that his “experience had given him an almost evangelical zeal; he wanted to change China by changing its ideas about art.”

Juliette Sanson

Translation Bernard Wooding

1 – All the biographical information about Ai Weiwei’s father is taken from Barnaby Martin’s book *Hanging Man, the Arrest of Ai Weiwei*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

2 – Ibid., chapter 1.

3 – Ibid., chapter 2.

4 – *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist*, Penguin, 2016.

5 – See Barnaby Martin, op. cit., chapter 9.

6 – Ibid., chapter 9.

7 – Roger M. Buerger, in *Ai Weiwei*, Taschen, 2016.

8 – Uli Sigg, in *Ai Weiwei*, Taschen, 2016.

9 – Barnaby Martin, op. cit., chapter 4.

10 – Uli Sigg, op. cit.

11 – Ibid., chapter 3.

12 – *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist*, op. cit.

13 – Ibid.

14 – Preface by Wang Keping, in Barnaby Martin, op. cit.

15 – *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist*, op. cit.

16 – Ibid.

17 – Preface by Wang Keping, in Barnaby Martin, op. cit.

18 – Barnaby Martin, *ibid.*, chapter 4.

19 – *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist*, op. cit.

20 – Barnaby Martin, op. cit.,

chapter 9.

21 – *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist*, op. cit.

22 – Ibid.

Exhibition curator

Judith Benhamou-Huet is an exhibition curator, journalist and art critic for *Le Point*, *Les Échos* and *Judith Benhamou-Huet Reports*. She studied law and political sciences. She was the curator of the “Warhol TV exhibitions” at the Maison Rouge in Paris, and then in Portugal and Brazil, as well as “Mapplethorpe Rodin” at the Musée Rodin in Paris. She has written several books, including *Dans la Vie noire et blanche de Robert Mapplethorpe* (Grasset, 2014), *Les Artistes ont toujours aimé l'argent* (Grasset, 2012) and more recently *Aleijadinho, le Brésil est un sculpteur baroque* (Les Presses du Réel, 2017).

Ai Weiwei, Fan-Tan catalogue

The bilingual catalogue accompanying the exhibition “Ai Weiwei, Fan-tan” will be available in July 2018. It explores both the life and poetry of Ai Weiwei’s father, Ai Qing, Franco-Chinese relations during that period and the development of the artist’s works, with in particular an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. This richly illustrated volume also presents two works specific to the exhibition in Marseille.

Co-edition by Éditions du Mucem and Manuella Éditions
A bilingual book in French and English,
€30, 128 pages
Published in July 2018

Exhibition-related events

Migrations

Round-table, screenings
From 26 to 30 September 2018

More than 65 million people throughout the world have been forced to leave their country behind as they flee famine, climate change or war: this is the biggest flow of migrants since 1945. In his documentary *Human Flow*, Ai Weiwei looks at the catastrophic scale of the migrant crisis, particularly in the Mediterranean, with his characteristic sense of solidarity as a citizen and his humanist vision. In a similar spirit, the Mucem, which is hosting the exhibition “Ai Weiwei, Fan-Tan”, is offering a range of related resources, from talks and forums to performances and screenings. The aim is to help us imagine, together, solutions on a human scale that will enable each of us to respond to the issues raised by the migration phenomenon in Europe today, and all over the world tomorrow.

In partnership with the Syndicat National des Journalistes, the Musée d’Histoire de Marseille, SOS Méditerranée, La Cimade and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees

The Mucem is open daily except Tuesday, 1 May and 25 December.
Open 7 days a week in August 2018.

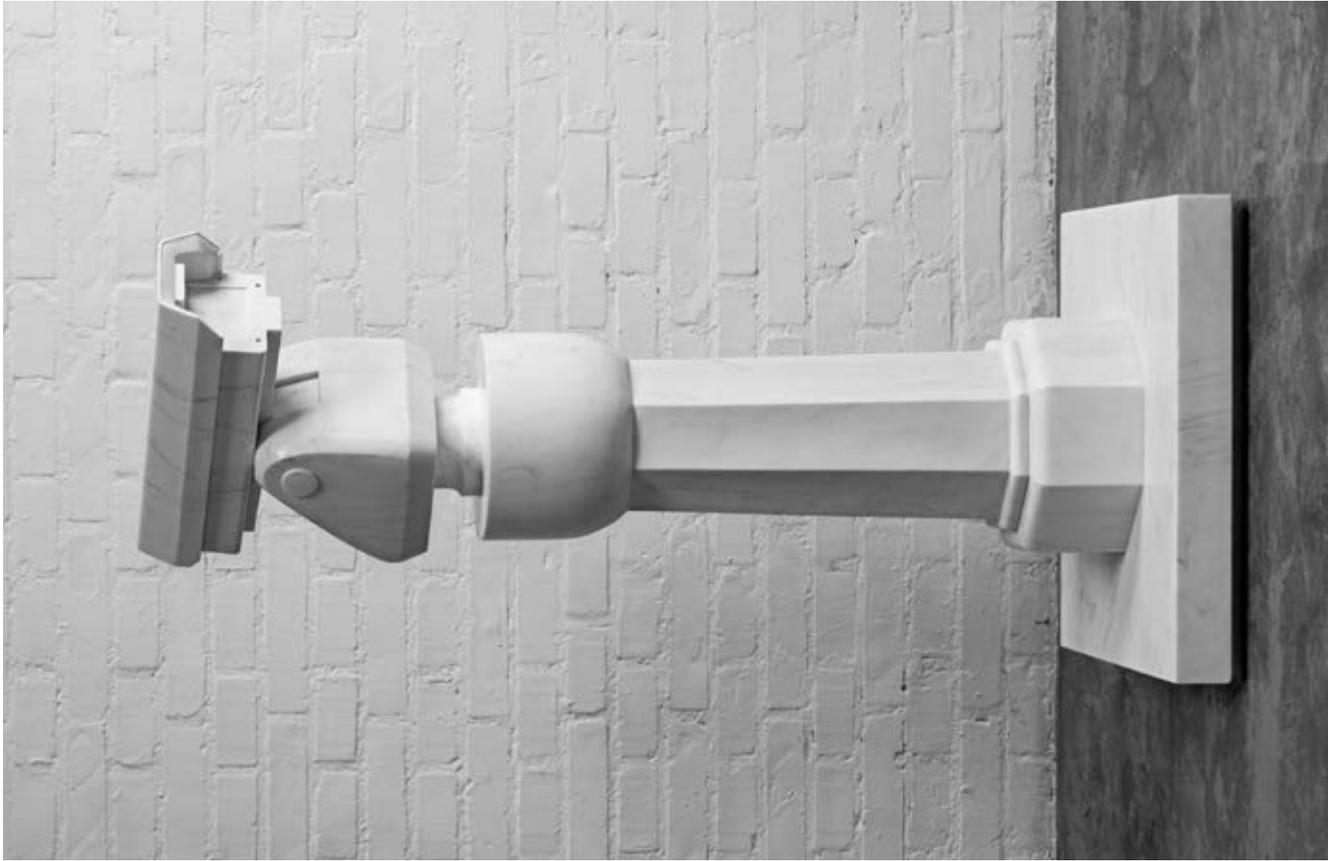
Reservations and information
Tel 04 84 35 1313 from 9am to 6pm
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Remains [Restes], 2014, porcelaine



Surveillance Camera with Plinth [Caméra de surveillance avec socle], 2015, marbre



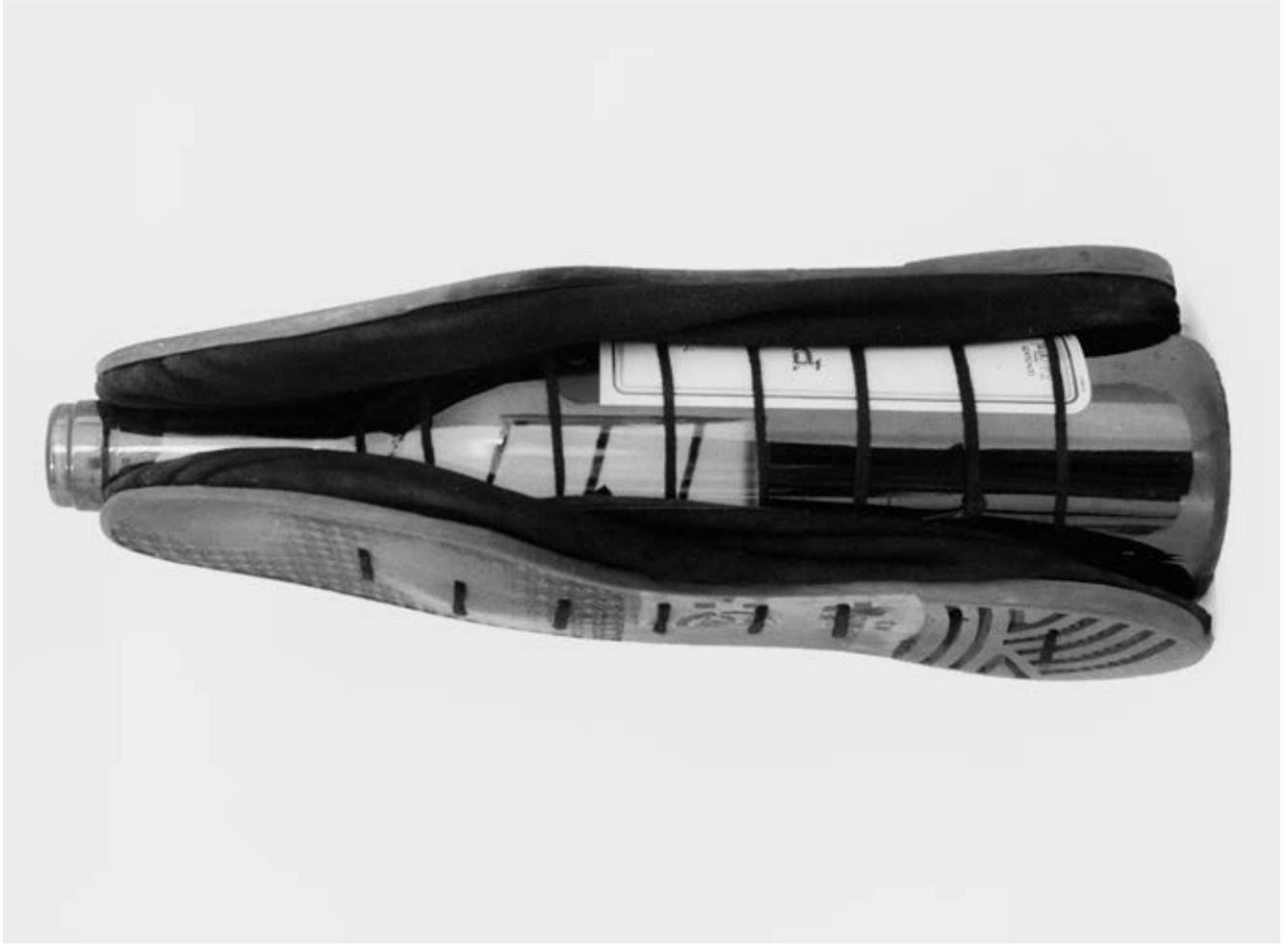
Circle of Animals [Cercle d'animaux], 2012, bronze, patine dorée et supports en bois, 12 pièces



Colored House [Maison colorée], 2015, bois, peinture industrielle, cristal



Table with two legs on the wall [Table avec deux pieds sur le mur], 1997, bois



Château Lafite, 1986, chaussons chinois et bouteille de vin vide



Violin [Violon], 1985, manche de pelle et violon



Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn [Laisser tomber une urne de la dynastie Han], 2015, briques de Lego



Handcuffs [Menottes], 2015, jade



One Man Shoe [Chaussure pour un homme], 1987, cuir et bois



Study of Perspective [Étude de perspective], 1995-2011; *The Eiffel Tower* [La tour Eiffel], Paris, 1999



Safe Sex [Sexe protégé], 1988, imperméable, cintre, préservatif