

Financial Times Weekend  
 Spence, Rachel: Playing to serious ends  
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# Playing to serious ends

**Installations** | Ai Weiwei's exhibition at the Royal Academy shows that dissident art doesn't have to sacrifice imagination. By Rachel Spence

Assembled from rusty steel poles that ripple across the floor like folds in an ancient landscape or a seabed, "Straight" is a solemn and exquisite sculpture even if you are ignorant of its inspiration. Only an artist with a great gift for material and proportion could have blessed those rigid elements with such organic fluidity.

But Ai Weiwei has never been one to shrink before apparently unassailable forces, as the story behind "Straight" reminds us. In May 2008, 90,000 people were killed when an earthquake hit the Sichuan province of south-western China. When the authorities refused to make public the identities of the dead, Ai created an online memorial. His blog was shut down by the government but his art was harder to make disappear. Assembled from the steel rebar which was all that remained of millions of edifices, "Straight" is both a homage to those who died and a mute accusation of corrupt officials who compromised building standards to line their pockets.

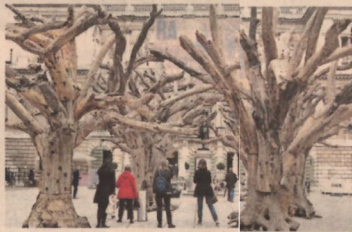
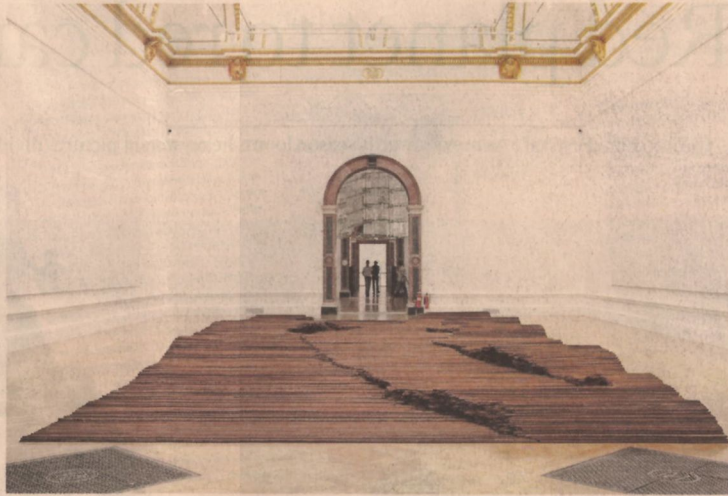
"Straight" is the centrepiece of a new exhibition devoted to the Chinese artist at London's Royal Academy. Hundreds of thousands of visitors can now hear for

themselves the events surrounding the earthquake, as well as encountering myriad other iniquities by the regime.

This show has two key virtues: first, Ai's gift for recounting history, both personal and political, through visual metaphors; second, a curatorial intelligence that allows the works to unfold through the RA's imposing volumes with the pace and clarity of a single installation.

The artist's skill at telling stories through physical substances is showcased from the start. In the centre of the courtyard, "Tree" (2009) is a triffid-like eruption whose stocky earthiness mocks the piazza's faux-classical pomp. In reality, it's the forest that's the fake. Assembled from dead trees from the mountains of southern China, "Tree" lends itself to many interpretations but, in the light of the artist's own story, it's impossible not to read it as a symbol of resurrection.

Born in Beijing in 1957 to two poets, Ai's youth was scarred by the Cultural Revolution. At one point, when his father was sentenced to hard labour, the family lived in a hole in the ground. When the cruelty slackened, he studied at the Beijing Film Academy, then at Parsons School of Design in New York before returning to Beijing in 1993. Blessed with



a critical eye from the start, his voyage to worldwide fame as artist and activist has seen his work censored, his body imprisoned, his studio-home demolished and his passport confiscated. Having received permission to travel just weeks before this show opened, he was — briefly but surreally — denied a full business visa by the British government. Yet as he potters through the exhibition with his family during a press preview, this week at least he is the picture of liberty.

This is the story of a country as much as of a man. In the first room, "Bed" (2004) resembles an undulating wooden mattress. Its ridges were born when Ai

asked carpenters to make a three-dimensional map of China out of timbers once used for Qing dynasty temples.

That predilection for recycling marks Ai out as heir to Marcel Duchamp. (Ai pays homage to the French artist here with "Hanging Man" (2009), a coat-hanger twisted into a profile of the king of the ready-made.) But unlike many jokers — Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Maurizio Cattelan — Ai has put Duchamp's playful means to deadly serious ends. In general, he prefers transformation to simple reclamation. The show includes surveillance cameras — Ai is monitored in his studio-home — cast in marble, handcuffs in jade, and bones, collected secretly from a work camp, in porcelain.

Yet sometimes reality is so surreal it requires no intervention. Displayed in a vitrine, a copy of the Chinese edition of *The Art Book*, which lists the most important artists in history, has been doctored to exclude Ai, with the Italian early Renaissance

sculptor Agostino di Duccio in his place. Despite this Orwellian world, an irrepressible wit bubbles through works such as "Coca-Cola Vase" (2014), a Han dynasty urn painted with the iconic logo. Nevertheless, you leave this show awed both by Ai's ordeal and the rigour of his response to it. A series of 1 sq metre cubes — referencing Chinese craftsmanship but also personal memories such as his father's gift of an ebony box — exemplify the minimalism that tempers his pop flamboyance.

In the RA's generous spaces, his architectural sensibility breathes freely. Little wonder the installation devoted to the destruction of his home and studio is so poignant. A meticulously layered wall of rubble that flows around an ornamental wooden frame, the stony silence of "Souvenir from Shanghai" (2012), which Ai built from the debris, is his response to this Kafkaesque saga. As

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a bold documentary including footage of the demolition reveals, the Shanghai authorities invited him to build the complex and then, at the time of his activities around the Sichuan earthquake, declared its construction illegal.

Dissident art often sacrifices imagination on the altar of politics. But rather than Ai's struggle justifying his work, the quality of his work justifies his struggle. Watching the bulldozers crash into those pristine walls, some lines by John Berger came to mind. "To the underprivileged, home is represented, not by a house, but by a practice . . . These practices, chosen and not imposed, offer in their repetition, transient as they may be in themselves, more permanence, more shelter than any lodging. Home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived."

Fortunately, the nature of Ai's practice means that he can tell the story too.



'Ai Weiwei', Royal Academy of Arts, London, to December 13. [royalacademy.org.uk](http://royalacademy.org.uk)

Clockwise from main: 'Straight' (2008-12); 'Coca-Cola Vase' (2014); 'Tree' (2009) in the courtyard of the Royal Academy; 'Souvenir from Shanghai' (2012), all by Ai Weiwei  
 Photos: Camera Press, Capital Pictures