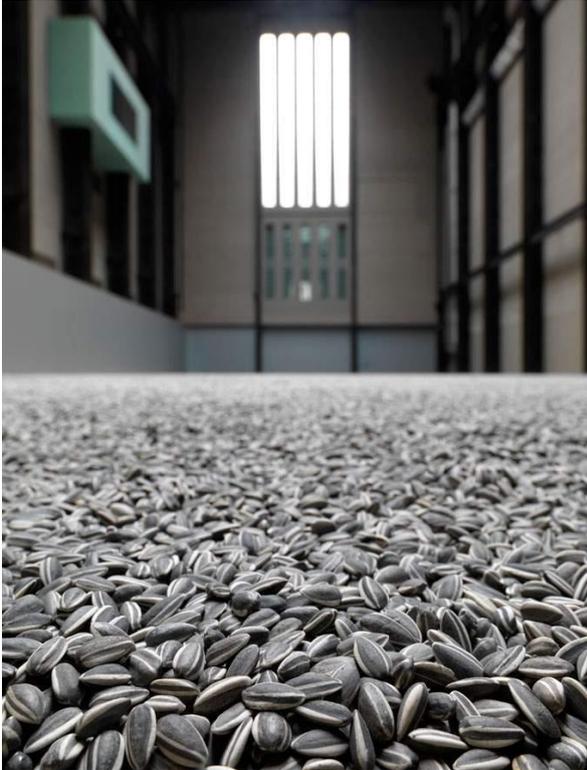


## Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010



The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, installation in the Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, hand painted porcelain, 152 x 23m. Digital image courtesy of Ai Weiwei and Fake Studio / Photo © Tate

### Key facts:

- Size: 100 million handmade seeds
- Location: Turbine Hall, Tate Modern
- Length: 500 x 75 ft (152 x 23m approx.)
- Medium: hand-painted porcelain
- Installation art
- Date: 2010

### Art historical terms and concepts

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is a socio-political activist producing a range of conceptual installation and performative works. *Sunflower Seeds* is a very large-scale installation consisting of 100 million hand-crafted seeds. The seeds look real when in fact each seed is painstakingly hand-painted to simulate nature.

## 1. Cultural, social, technological and political factors

Ai Weiwei is deeply interested in the social aspects of society, particularly the need for individuals to express themselves freely and be participant in society. Ai Weiwei has been highly critical of the Chinese government, particularly the government's position on issues of democracy and human rights. Ai Weiwei was the first generation to study abroad following the 'Opening Up' policy in the 1970s. The liberal-minded artist was detained in prison for 81 days in 2011 by the Chinese authorities for political dissent. He also had his passport confiscated to prevent him from leaving the country.

Ai Weiwei's position on the need for individuals to feel a part of and be able to contribute to society as a whole may be why each sunflower seed looks the same but each one of the hundred million seeds is unique – like us. The seeds create a sea of diversity.

Iconographically, Ai Weiwei's sunflower seeds are associated not only with their mass consumption on the streets of his native China, but also relate to Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Under Chairman Mao's brutal regime, individuals were stripped of their freedom of expression and intellectuals like Ai's father were exiled and humiliated in rural labour camps. Propaganda images of Chairman Mao showed him as the sun and the masses became the sunflowers turning towards him in collective worship. Sunflower seeds should be a healthy staple shared among friends during hardship, the kind of hardship which characterised the Cultural Revolution era. The individuality of the seeds forces a number of questions about individuality per se, and individual social responsibility. These have been described as 'seeds of hope'; they are seeds of change, perhaps. This work may be interpreted as the power of individuals consciously uniting into an overwhelming mass – an ocean.

Porcelain is one of China's most famous and lucrative exports. Ai Weiwei had the sunflower seeds produced by more than 1,600 artisans in the city of Jingdezhen, made famous by its production of Imperial porcelain dating back over 1,000 years. The combination of the seeds' mass production with their hand-made process brings us to question the 'Made in China' phenomenon.

The fact that each porcelain seed was made in a mould and hand-painted evokes complex associations with Chinese history and culture. Like Ai Weiwei's *Ton of Tea*, *Sunflower Seeds* is made from a substance – porcelain – which is historically associated with export trade to support the Chinese economy. The very labour-intensive process involved in making the seeds has illuminated the mass-manufacturing practices in China that have been little understood by the West until recently. In fact, no real thought or concern has been aimed at the bottom of the production chain.

Surprisingly, much is still made by hand in China where machines are expensive and labour is relatively cheap. Ai Weiwei draws the audience's attention to this socio-political issue.

*The sunflower is an important Chinese communist symbol. Chairman Mao compared himself to the sun and his people to sunflowers. In Beijing, sunflower seeds are sold by urban street vendors. For Ai, a Beijing native, they evoked happy memories of wandering the city with friends. By 2010, however, due to a series of fines, arrests, and brutal beatings, he was essentially a prisoner in his own city. In this light, his seeds, cast on the ground, evoke an oppressed, downtrodden society, far from the ideal that Mao described.*

Tate Modern, London (theartstory)

Ai Weiwei says 'Seeds grow...The crowd will have its way, eventually.'

## **2. Developments in materials, techniques and processes**

The seeds are made in porcelain with 3-4 strokes of hand-painted black slip (liquid clay). Ai Weiwei used slip without glaze; an unusual choice because porcelain is characteristically glazed. The porcelain of the seeds has been treated more like stoneware. The materials, techniques and processes represent an ocean, around 4 inches (10 cm) deep, of human labour. The 'made in China' idea is ever present.

The process of making this work was elaborate and incredibly time consuming. There were 30 stages to the process (see YouTube clip below). Ai Weiwei tends to have very little involvement in the production of his work in recent years. Other people implement his ideas.

## **3. Ways it has been used and interpreted by past and present societies**

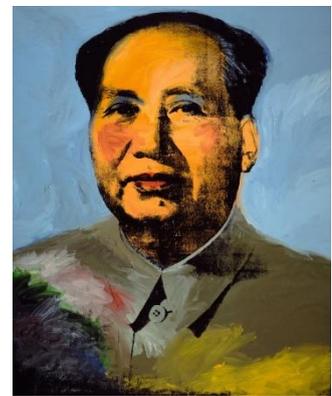
### **Artists who have influenced Ai Weiwei:**

We could understand Ai Weiwei as part of a continuum of artists who have used the medium of the era to communicate effectively. Ai Weiwei is one of the first generation of artists to use social media to capture the zeitgeist.

- Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917). This notorious readymade challenged prevailing authorities and the artist's legacy is evident in much of Ai Weiwei's work.
- Richard Serra, *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1986), lead antimony, four plates, each plate 48 x 48 x 1 inches (122 x 122 x 2.5 cm). Using simple geometric forms and industrial materials often associated with Minimalism, its propped nature makes it look precarious.

Serra was interested in the physical interaction that takes place between viewer and art work. Serra's public work often encouraged the participatory, as does Ai Weiwei's.

- Andy Warhol, *Mao* (1973). Paint and silkscreen image of Chinese totalitarian ruler Mao challenged President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. This image related to the propagandistic representations of Mao displayed throughout China during the Cultural Revolution. Senior curator at the National Gallery in Victoria, Max Delany, states that Andy Warhol was an influence, particularly in relation to producing images for mass consumption. "Warhol understood the power of an image – the way they circulate and proliferate. How they create meaning and cultivate desire" (limelight magazine). The mass-produced product 1. smacks of the capitalism antithetical to communism.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz at the 291 Art Gallery following the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit, the backdrop is *The Warriors* by Marsden Hartley. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Richard Serra, *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969 (refabricated 1986), lead antimony, four plates, each plate 122 x 122 x 2.5 cm. Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art (286.1986.a-d). Digital image © 2025 Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Andy Warhol, *Mao*, 1972, acrylic, silkscreen ink, and pencil on linen, 448.3 x 346.7 cm. Collection The Art Institute of Chicago (1974.230). Digital image courtesy of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

#### Further reading/links:

- Royal Academy of Art, Exhibition Catalogue: *Ai Weiwei*, 2015
- Exhibition Catalogue, *On The Table: Ai Weiwei*, 2015, La Fabrica

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_Y-u53bWuw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_Y-u53bWuw)

- Maxim Boon on December 9, 2015 (December 9, 2015):  
<http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/features/andy-warhol-ai-weiwei-same-different#sthash.1gfnDj7i.dpuf>
- <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-ai-weiwei.htm>
- <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>