

AI WEIWEI

Who Am I? 21 SETTEMBRE 2024
04 MAGGIO 2025

BOLOGNA PALAZZO FAVA



“AI WEIWEI. WHO AM I?”: THE EXHIBITION IN BOLOGNA

Palazzo Fava will be hosting an exhibition of work from the creative universe of this Chinese artist and activist from 21 September to 4 May, with major installations, sculptures, videos and photographs occupying the entire space of this historic palazzo in the heart of Bologna

The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, a long-time defender of human rights, is holding his first solo exhibition in Bologna entitled: “*Ai Weiwei. Who am I?*”. Promoted by Fondazione Carisbo as part of the Genus Bononiae cultural project and produced by Opera Laboratori in collaboration with Galleria Continua, the exhibition is curated by Arturo Galansino. As the title inspired by a conversation between the artist and artificial intelligence suggests, the exhibition at Palazzo Fava presents the artist through the lens of his creative universe, in constant tension between tradition and experimentation, preservation and destruction. Large installations, sculptures, videos and photographs testify to the versatility and depth of his research, with over fifty works of art occupying the entire space of this historic palazzo, from the grand staircase, through the monumental halls and rooms beneath frescoes painted by the Carracci and their school at the turn of the 16th century, right on up to the second floor.

The exhibition, the first part of a four-year project in which Fondazione Carisbo and Opera Laboratori will be working side by side to enhance and promote the city’s artistic and cultural heritage within the Genus Bononiae museum system, will be accompanied by a dedicated merchandising line and a catalogue published by Sillabe.

«We are grateful to Ai Weiwei, whose first solo exhibition in Bologna embodies the new boost that Fondazione Carisbo is eager to impart to the Genus Bononiae project – says **Fondazione Carisbo President Patrizia Pasini** –. Our long-term agreement with Opera Laboratori symbolises our wish to build a partnership that is something more than simply a traditional patron/manager relationship, promoting a new vision of the museum as a centre for the production of culture rather than just a place one visits. The agreement’s first result has been the production of this major international exhibition, which also offers a ground-breaking opportunity to conjugate the city’s cultural and historic value with a courageous commitment in defence of such basic issues as our collective human values».

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«Twenty years after the project first got off the ground – adds **Genus Bononiae Sole Director Renzo Servadei** – the choice of an expert partner such as Opera Laboratori will enable us to pursue a comprehensive and synergetic management of all the palazzi, along organisational guidelines designed to evaluate the impact of the initiatives promoted in our various museum complexes and to pursue the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the museum system as a whole, in ongoing interaction with the full programme of cultural opportunities already on offer in the Bologna area».

«Opera Laboratori – explains **Opera’s President and Managing Director Giuseppe Costa** – has conceived its mission from the outset as a desire to “work artfully for art”, our goal being to take the best possible care of visitors while simultaneously optimising Italy’s cultural, spiritual, territorial and museum heritage. Our intrinsic nature prompts us to live our experience to the full in the areas in which we operate, by getting to know and respecting what we are privileged to host. With these ideals and principles in mind, Fondazione Carisbo and Opera Laboratori have signed a four-year partnership to collaborate in the field of art and culture, with the aim of managing and enhancing four venues in the Genus Bononiae museum cluster, including the historic Palazzo Fava. It is a great honour for me to be able to launch this new cultural project in the city of Bologna with an exhibition of work by the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei».

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The exhibition offers visitors a unique opportunity to explore the work of one of the most influential artists of our time. The artworks on display, always striking a balance between China and the West, between the past and the present, address urgent issues of the importance of freedom of expression and information, human and civil rights, migration, geopolitical crises and climate change, prompting us to reflect on such universal themes as freedom, justice, memory and resilience.

The Greek and Roman mythological scenes in the palazzo’s celebrated Carracci fresco cycle interact with the fables and legends of Chinese culture. In a setting of stories of Jason and Medea or the adventures of Aeneas that adorn the rooms on the *piano nobile*, we encounter the artist’s kite sculptures depicting fantastic beasts from a bestiary known as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, China’s earliest mythological and geographical text, dating back to the 3rd century BC. Made of bamboo, rice paper and silk, these mythological creatures sway softly in the air, prompting a reflection on China’s history and its extremely ancient cultural identity, which was almost swept away by the Cultural Revolution, and triggering a comparison with today’s China which creates monsters to control the population.

The eradication of historic memory in China in the second half of the 20th century is also conjured up in an iconic photographic triptych entitled *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. The artwork is accompanied by a showcase containing the remains of the vase dating back some 2,000 years and

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the ready-made *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca Cola*, simultaneously alluding to Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp. «*Most of my work – explains Ai Weiwei – involves the updating and redefining of objects. I'd had this vase for some time and I admired its shape, but I didn't know what to do with it. It looked so bare, so empty, and I wanted to bring it up to date: for me, the Coca-Cola logo is a clear announcement of property and of cultural and political identity, but it's also a clear sign to stop thinking. It's full of ignorance, but it's also a redefinition*».

Ancient remains also make up the installation entitled *White Stones Axes* comprising hundreds of Neolithic axes, thus prompting visitors to reflect on what is meant by the advance of civilisation.

Left Right Studio Material is another denunciation of the persecution suffered by the artist in his home country. The blue carpet it showcases is made up of fragments of porcelain items, like *Bubble*, from the regime's demolition of Ai Weiwei's Left/Right studio in Beijing in 2018.

The exhibits on display include items recalling China's progress in recent decades, for example the series of installations entitled *Forever Bicycles*, made up of bicycles assembled into complex structures representing a reflection on social and urban change in China.

A substantial group of exhibits is devoted to the issue of migration in the Mediterranean. The artist's *Odissey* wallpaper, arranged in friezes recalling those on an Attic vase, depicts migrants' harrowing experiences and interacts ideally with the fresco cycles in Palazzo Fava. The parallel between the events narrated in the *Aeneid* and today's migrant crisis highlights the continuity, in man's history, of the themes of flight from war and the search for a new homeland. «*All my so-called works of art – says the artist – are a product of my thoughts and feelings. I don't regret having created them. They genuinely reflect my true feelings and the circumstances in which I found myself at the time, they're closely bound up with my experience and my education*».

A key role in the exhibition is played by the artworks made of LEGO® bricks, which recreate a number of major artworks in the Western painting tradition, but with certain ironic changes. In the context of his art, Ai Weiwei adopted this means of expression in 2014 to create a new style which, as Galansino explains, «*are based on pixels, digitalisation, segmentation, fragmentation and disconnection*». This approach enables the artist to «*express the rapport between culture, politics and the personal environment in a new language, combining current sensations and cultural memory and linking our understanding of the past to our modern expectations*».

In the exhibition, a number of masterpieces of Renaissance, Baroque and modern painting also undergo this irreverent transformation, for example Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden) to which Ai Weiwei adds a coathanger alluding to the self-induced abortions practised before abortion was legalised, or Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan) where the figure of Judas has the features of Ai Weiwei himself.

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His ironic revisitation of Guido Reni's *Atalanta and Hippomenes* (Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples), Raphael's *Ecstasy of St. Cecilia* (Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna) and a *Still-life* by Giorgio Morandi (Pinacoteca di Faenza), on the other hand, are directly inspired by the Bolognese school of painting and have been produced specifically for the exhibition in Palazzo Fava.

The series of photographs entitled *Study of Perspective* clearly shows us that the artist's interest lies in asking questions rather than in offering straightforward answers, in a determined effort to trigger debate and discussion.

«Through his art – adds the **Curator Arturo Galansino** in conclusion – *Ai Weiwei encourages us to look at the world with our eyes wide open rather than passively accepting the circumstances we live in, transforming the experience of art into a powerful tool for change and awareness. The commitment and constant search for the truth that prompted him to become an activist and a victim of political persecution and to address a far broader audience than the narrow world of contemporary art, together with his vast expressive range in the service of courageous and provocative ideas, have made Ai Weiwei one of the most influential artists of our time. At a difficult moment in history such as we are experiencing today, his work and his message continue to challenge and to inspire the public, underscoring the importance of creativity and critical thought*».

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