

## **AI WEIWEI: AFTERSHOCK** MAXXI L'AQUILA | April 29 – September 6, 2026

April 28, 2026, 5 p.m. | Talk | Ai Weiwei speaks with Tim Marlow | live stream at:  
<https://bit.ly/AiWeiWeilive>

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L'Aquila, April 28, 2026 – From tomorrow, Wednesday, April 29, until September 6, MAXXI's L'Aquila branch will be hosting **AI WEIWEI: Aftershock** curated by **Tim Marlow**, director and CEO of the London Design Museum, and backed by the **City of L'Aquila**.

This solo show features the work of Chinese artist, architect and activist Ai Weiwei, a global pioneer in contemporary art. It also pays tribute to L'Aquila as the capital of Abruzzo and its recent history, marking the year of its being chosen as the Italian Capital of Culture.

**AI WEIWEI: Aftershock** is arranged as a dialogue between the artist and Palazzo Ardinghelli, the baroque palace housing the museum and one of the most successful examples of building restoration and repurposing after the 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila. The show features a series of powerful works created after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan and dedicated to the memory of its losses. One of these works is *Straight*, a seminal piece for Ai Weiwei that is being shown in L'Aquila for the first time in three different spaces. This sculpture, like the other works in the exhibition, underscores the lasting impact of natural catastrophes and human-generated conflicts, highlighting themes such as corruption and tragedy. It celebrates human resilience and the power of the drive to create.

The exhibition includes almost seventy works, some of them displayed for the first time in a museum, spanning Weiwei's entire artistic career: installations, videos, photographs, sculptures conceived as paintings and iconic subjects by artists like Munch, Van Gogh and Ed Ruscha re-interpreted using toy bricks to create complex, imaginative forms. Weiwei uses a variety of materials (from steel, porcelain and marble gathered from the rubble to everyday objects) and creative processes (from traditional techniques to carvings in precious materials and constructions) to transform traditional value systems. He experiments, connects, collects, recycles and invents in a way that is never just a pure exercise in form. Through variety and the subversion of traditional values, he encourages us to look at the world from different points of view. Weiwei's work is rooted in his personal experience, yet its significance is universal.

**Maria Emanuela Bruni**, Fondazione MAXXI President: "the exhibition *AI WEIWEI: Aftershock* marks a key moment in the young history of the museum, established in 2021 within the splendid late-Baroque setting of Palazzo Ardinghelli. As suggested by the exhibition title, Ai Weiwei's works prompt reflection on contemporary reality: in a time when human beings themselves are responsible for conflict, corruption, and natural disasters, the artist's works function as 'aftershocks' that stir consciences and raise ever-relevant questions".

**Pierluigi Biondi**, Mayor of L'Aquila: "Welcoming Ai Weiwei's Aftershock in the year in which we are Italy's Capital of Culture carries particularly profound significance: his work, marked by the experience of the Sichuan earthquake, engages in an authentic dialogue with the recent history of our city, transforming pain into memory and responsibility. Ai Weiwei's work, capable of traversing languages and disciplines, powerfully reminds us of the role of art as a tool for truth, remembrance, and civic engagement, in defense of human rights and freedom of expression. L'Aquila chose to rebuild through culture after the 2009 earthquake. Exhibitions such as this one strengthen our vocation for international dialogue and convey an important message, especially to younger generations: from wounds can emerge a new awareness and a more just, shared future. I would like to thank MAXXI for its invaluable work in making this exhibition possible, offering L'Aquila a cultural event of international significance".



**Tim Marlow**, exhibition curator: "All the works by Ai Weiwei challenges how we might look at the world in different ways, through different objects and materials. It is rooted in personal experience but has universal resonance and his ongoing fight for the rights of individuals to express themselves freely and not to be governed by the illegal dictates of authoritarian regimes all stems from his own struggles as well as his ongoing concern for those who are powerless to resist".

**TALK | Thursday, April 28, 5 p.m.**, at MAXXI L'Aquila, Ai Weiwei will speak with curator Tim Marlow about the themes of the exhibition. To live stream the talk, go to: <https://bit.ly/AiWeiWeilive>.

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## **AI WEIWEI: AFTERSHOCK** **Exhibition itinerary**

The dialogue between Weiwei and the baroque Palazzo Ardinghelli that hosts MAXXI L'Aquila begins right in the courtyard with a piece from the series *Camouflage Nets*, 2025. This playful reinterpretation of camouflage features cats, the innocent victims of human conflict, that appear and disappear within the weave. His 2025 installation made using LED lights, *Кому війна, кому мати рідна*, is inspired by the Ukrainian proverb: "For some, war is war. For others, war is a dear mother." This piece lights up the courtyard, offering a reflection on injustice and the many implications of conflict.

On the first floor, the first three rooms, the most spacious and ornate, feature *Straight*, one of the most powerful commemorative monuments in contemporary art. This is Weiwei's most important piece on the devastating earthquake (measuring an 8 on the Richter scale) that shook Sichuan in southwest China on May 12, 2008, claiming over 90,000 victims. Of these victims, 5,197 were schoolchildren who died when their school buildings collapsed. Weiwei made the piece between 2009 and 2012 using 150 tons of steel rebar secretly collected from the collapsed school buildings. It has been installed here for the first time over three different spaces and also features a list of the schoolchildren who lost their lives when their school buildings caved in. The list was compiled after Weiwei initiated a Citizens' Investigation which resulted in great personal consequences for him. In the commemorative sculptures *Rebar and Case* (2014), he denounces the inadequacy of the Sichuan school buildings to endure the impact of the earthquake, evoking a sense of mourning and tragedy.

After this, we come to a room dedicated to destruction, reconstruction and cultural heritage. Scattered over the floor are the broken pieces of old porcelain sculptures smashed by the Chinese government in 2018 in his studio. These fragments bear witness of Weiwei's repression and process it in an act of remembrance and transformation in *Left Right Studio Material*. This installation dialogues with a reworking of the 1995 photographic series *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. Then with *FUCK 'EM ALL* (2024), he references American artist Ed Ruscha, subverting this imagery in a clear act of defiance. Both of the works were made using toy bricks, a material with great expressive potential that can resemble both pixels and digital images as well as fabrics and mosaic, making it easy to work with. The exhibition also features several wall sculptures created using this technique.

Up next are a series of display cases like the ones found in museums and luxury boutiques showcasing objects that overturn conventional value systems: *Marble Toilet Paper* features a marble sculpture of a roll of toilet paper, an ironic anti-monument to the COVID-19 pandemic; sex toys and handcuffs made of jade, a symbol of purity in Chinese culture, empty this material of its traditional value; a coat hanger made of glass, wood and stainless steel references the artist's 2011 secret detention and is a symbol of oppression.

In the corridor, spontaneous, rarely posed snapshots taken between 1983 and 1993 portray the people and places of New York City, Weiwei's home for over a decade. Further ahead are his films: *Floating* (2016), addressing the migrant and refugee drama; *Laziz* (2017), denouncing the precarious conditions of a tiger in the Gaza zoo, an innocent victim of the conflicts; and *Dumbass* (2013), a very impactful parody of a heavy metal music video and political satire recreating the artist's experience of being secretly detained in 2011.

Moving on, another two videos from 2005 show the great transformation of Beijing in the early 2000s in *Beijing: The Second Ring* and *Beijing: The Third Ring*.

The subsequent pieces reflect on the military: *Last U.S. Soldier Leaving Afghanistan*, 2022, is a toy-brick reconstruction of a photograph of this soldier walking across the tarmac at the Kabul airport; and a white, porcelain military helmet entitled *Combat Vases* (2023) symbolizes the West's response to the war in Ukraine, which the artist deemed inadequate. In front of these is *U.S. Flag in Black* made using thousands of black and white buttons and referencing Jasper Johns, one of Ai Weiwei's artistic influences.

The rooms that follow host a series of toy-brick wall sculptures of iconic images from Western art: *Scream*, a reworking of Edvard Munch's masterpiece *The Scream*; and *Untitled (After Van Gogh)*, combining the 1888 Dutch post-Impressionist painting *Sower at Sunset* with a photograph of the 2020 locust plague in Pakistan. These works dialogue with *Small black chandelier*, a piece decorated with unsettling figures that absorb light rather than reflect it, evoking a situation of crisis. Next, we find a reproduction of the painting *Atalanta and Hippomenes* by Guido Reni, which Weiwei learned about from his father's books on European art.

At this point in the exhibition, we come across a range of mythological and symbolic creatures: *Yu-Niao*, a flying mouse from ancient Chinese texts that assumes the three-dimensional form of a kite; on the ground, shards of blue Murano glass form *Twitter Bird* (2017), evoking the now fallen social media icon that Ai Weiwei used to exchange information after he was kicked off the Chinese platforms, an almost mythological contemporary symbol. On the wall, *St. George and the Dragon* (2022) reinterprets a piece by Carpaccio using toy bricks, whereas a six-taloned dragon is an almost perfect replica of a Ming vase, questioning the very concept of authenticity.

The next piece on display is *After the death of Marat*, a clear reference to the tiny body of Alan Kurdi face-down in the sand. Kurdi was a small, Syrian boy who drowned on the shores of Lesbos in 2015 while fleeing his native country. Weiwei portrays himself in the same position as the boy in a toy-brick wall sculpture. This reflection on the refugee crisis is brought to a touching close in *Lotus* (2016), made using the adult life vests worn by refugees in the sea which Weiwei collected in Lesbos.

Weiwei explores the classical Western idea of painting as a portal or mirror in a toy-brick installation of the painting *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938) by Balthus referencing works by Weiwei himself: *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca Cola Logo*, a series from 1994, and *Stool* from 1997 where he joins two stools, alternating their function. Both sculptures have been installed in the same room to enhance their unsettling effect.

After visiting the front in Ukraine, Ai Weiwei produced works exploring memory and history and how they relate to conflict, here exhibited for the first time. Some examples of this are: *Whitewashed Remnants of History of the State of Emerging Future Works* (2025) using Qing dynasty chairs and other objects – a Neolithic vase, a life vest used by refugees and a camouflage military uniform. He has painted all of them white to erase the traces of their original use and attribute them with new meaning relating to conflict. We see this same technique used in two works on the wall made using camouflage vests arranged in a circle, one painted white and the other covered in buttons.

*F.U.C.K.* (2024), Weiwei's first piece using buttons, dominates the last room. Here, four World War II stretchers serve as supports for a handsewn composition that is simple yet deliberately provocative. The work recalls the 2000 Fuck Off show in Shanghai and offers critical reflection on the radical polarization of today's world, both in political discourse and in social dynamics.

**Thanks to Galleria Continua.**

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Pierluigi Biondi  
*Mayor of L'Aquila*

It is a source of great pride for the administration and for the entire community of L'Aquila, in the year of its designation as Italian Capital of Culture, to welcome the exhibition *Aftershock* by Ai Weiwei, hosted at MAXXI L'Aquila and curated by Tim Marlow, Director and CEO of the Design Museum in London.

This is an exhibition of great cultural and civic significance. The artist embodies the universal value of art as a critical conscience of our time: his work moves across languages and disciplines to defend human rights, denounce injustice, and affirm freedom of expression. His voice—courageous and at times uncomfortable—resonates far beyond the boundaries of art, becoming a symbol of resistance and responsibility.

The title *Aftershock* inevitably evokes a dimension that our territory knows intimately. The experience of the Sichuan earthquake, which profoundly shaped Ai Weiwei's human and artistic journey, finds a powerful resonance in the recent history of L'Aquila. In both cases, the earthquake was not only a natural disaster but also a moment of truth, capable of revealing responsibilities and fragilities. Ai Weiwei's works transform pain into testimony and denunciation, thus entering into dialogue with the lived experience of our city.

As a municipal administration, we have chosen to rebuild by investing in culture as a fundamental driver of renewal. The recognition of L'Aquila as Italian Capital of Culture 2026 represents the outcome of a shared path, encapsulated in the claim "Un territorio, mille capitali" ("One Territory, a Thousand Capitals"): a vision that enhances the strength of a broad and cohesive network made up of institutions, places, communities, and territories that together contribute to building a single, widespread cultural identity. It is within this collective dimension that the most authentic meaning of our candidacy and our vision takes shape.

Welcoming an internationally renowned artist means offering the city and the nation an extraordinary opportunity to engage with a leading figure in contemporary art, and reaffirming L'Aquila's role as a place of dialogue—capable of transforming fragility into strength and memory into vision. Above all, this exhibition leaves a legacy for younger generations: a clear message that from wounds a new awareness can arise, and that through culture it is possible to build a more just, free, and shared future.

Maria Emanuela Bruni  
*President, Fondazione MAXXI*

In this significant year for L'Aquila—2026, when the city holds the title of Italian Capital of Culture—the exhibition *AI WEIWEI: Aftershock* marks a key moment in the young history of the museum, established in 2021 within the splendid late-Baroque setting of Palazzo Ardinghelli.

As suggested by the exhibition title, Ai Weiwei's works prompt reflection on contemporary reality: in a time when human beings themselves are responsible for conflict, corruption, and natural disasters, the artist's works function as "aftershocks" that stir consciences and raise ever-relevant questions.

During his visit to the city, Ai Weiwei—one of the most internationally renowned and acclaimed contemporary artists—had the opportunity to explore the area and was particularly struck by the lingering effects of the earthquake still visible in parts of the city. Among these is the square where the museum stands, where the contrast is evident between the restored Palazzo Ardinghelli and the Church of Santa Maria in Paganica, with its scars from the 2009 earthquake.

Within this context, the exhibition's central work, *Straight*, is presented — described by curator Tim Marlow, Director of the Design Museum in London, as "one of the most powerful commemorative monuments in contemporary art." The work bears witness to the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, in southwestern China, which claimed more than 90,000 lives, including over 5,000 students. In the installation created specifically for the spaces of the L'Aquila museum, rusted steel rebar recovered from the collapsed schools—reworked in the artist's studio between 2008 and 2012—are arranged in parallel lines running through the rooms of the piano nobile of the Palazzo, evoking the flow of complex geological strata, like silent witnesses to a human tragedy.

The experience of the work is made even more evocative by its installation within Palazzo Ardinghelli: from the windows overlooking the square, visitors can glimpse the marks of a city that has undergone profound transformation. The exhibition brings together works spanning the artist's entire career: installations, videos, photographs, and sculptures conceived as paintings. Iconic subjects by artists such as Munch, Van Gogh, and Ed Ruscha are reinterpreted by Ai Weiwei using toy bricks—materials associated with children's imaginative and complex constructions.

Francesco Stocchi  
*Artistic Director  
and MAXXI Art  
Interim Director*

The exhibition *Aftershock* showcases the work of Ai Weiwei, creating an intimate dialogue with the local context and the historical memory pervading it. MAXXI L'Aquila is deeply rooted into a city scarred by trauma, where past destruction and reconstruction coexist in an ongoing tension. Here, Ai Weiwei's work is not just pertinent. It is necessary.

The exhibition spans over forty years of Weiwei's artistic career, offering a reflection on the persistence of consequences: what remains after the event, after the violence, after the loss. From the tragedy of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake – which the artist transformed into a radical exploration of truth and responsibility – to more contemporary conflicts, the works featured in *Aftershock* question the relationship between memory, power and testimony.

For Ai Weiwei, art is a tool for criticism and knowledge. Using a variety of materials – from steel collected from the ruins to porcelain, marble, everyday objects – he builds a language that questions cultural hierarchies and value systems. At MAXXI L'Aquila these works create meaningful dialogue with the architecture of Palazzo Ardinghelli, with its layers of history and the scars left by the 2009 earthquake. The fact that works like *Straight* have been installed in the restored spaces shows how art can be both a place of commemoration and a tool for collective consciousness. It is not about portraying trauma but about highlighting its complexity, its human and political implications.

*Aftershock* is an exhibition on what comes “afterward,” on what remains and what can still be built. Ai Weiwei's work is a powerful reminder of the responsibility inherent in every visionary act, an invitation to look beyond the immediate impact of images to critically question the present.

Tim Marlow  
*Exhibition curator*

This exhibition is conceived as a cultural dialogue between the Chinese-born artist, architect and activist Ai Weiwei and MAXXI L'Aquila. It includes films, videos, photographs, sculptures and installations spanning five decades of Ai's career, from work made in New York in the 1980's right up to new sculptures created in Ukraine in 2025.

At the core of the exhibition is a series of major works by Ai Weiwei triggered by the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 and now installed in the Baroque spaces of Palazzo Ardinghelli, a building restored after being severely damaged by the earthquake that hit the city in 2009. His quest for truth and the desire to record the names of 5,197 children killed in the tragedy in Sichuan Province triggered the beginnings of an ongoing conflict with the Chinese authorities that ultimately led to his arrest. His blog was closed down. He was prevented from testifying and suffered a brain haemorrhage after being beaten by the Chinese police. In 2011 he was secretly detained without charge for 81 days. His response was to produce some of the most powerful works of art of the last few decades memorialising loss including *Straight*, a pivotal sculpture installed in L'Aquila for the first time across three separate spaces. Here and throughout the rest of the exhibition the ongoing impact of natural disaster and man-made conflict, corruption and tragedy is explored alongside the power of human resilience.

Ai Weiwei's work stems from intensive engagement and research. He travels frequently to experience and understand at first hand what is happening in the world. He collects extensively, from exquisite jade antiques and ancient porcelain to junk furniture and mass-produced buttons. These objects subsequently appear in his work as an extension of the Duchampian idea of the found object but always with underlying cultural and political meaning. Likewise, his fascination for numerous materials and processes, from ancient marble and wood carving to contemporary plastic toy bricks, gives range and variety to his work but the results are never merely formal or philosophical exercises in an expanded definition of what constitutes an artwork. All his work challenges how we might look at the world in different ways, through different objects and materials. It is rooted in personal experience but has universal resonance and his ongoing fight for the rights of individuals to express themselves freely and not to be governed by the illegal dictates of authoritarian regimes all stems from his own struggles as well as his ongoing concern for those who are powerless to resist. "Art is life itself, akin to breathing, a fundamental act of existence" according to Ai, and also a way of questioning and arguing, a means of provocation and subversion, an interrogation of what is authentic and what is fake.