

IHT Rendezvous

The Weiwei Way on View in Paris

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Ai Weiwei

"Dropping an Urn from the Han Dynasty, 1995, a triptic."

PARIS — Four hours after Ai Weiwei's video streaming project [abruptly came to an end last week](#), [a tweet](#) by the artist, "Byebye to all the voyeurs," acted as a reminder that bearing witness to his own art is as much a part of the Ai Weiwei artistic experience as the art itself.

Alongside Ai Weiwei, Urs Stahel is co-curator of the artist's first major exhibition of photographs and videos, now on display at the Jeu de Paume in Paris after several months at the Winterthur Fotomuseum in Switzerland last year.

In an interview, Mr. Stahel pondered whether the attention of the media to Mr. Ai (and the Chinese government's sensitivities) might wane over the next couple of years, "so we can then look a bit more at his art than we do today."

In presenting visitors with a vast sample of Mr. Ai's photographic and video work over the years, the Jeu de Paume exhibition attempts to lessen if not fill that void.

The exhibition chronicles Ai Weiwei's evolution as a photographer and video-artist from the ten years he spent in New York in the 1980s and 1990s until the present day.

As Ed Wong wrote on the [Arts Beat blog](#) last week, Mr. Ai said police ordered him to shut down the Web site where he had been streaming live video from four cameras in his home. His self-surveillance project, at [weiweicam.com](#), lasted just 46 hours, he said, starting on the one-year anniversary of his 81-day detention.



In the Paris exhibit, Mr. Ai's acutely observant eye is ever-present, producing such a diverse and vast array of photographs that it seems as if he is seeking to photograph — and document — the entire world around him.

In the section called "Provisional Landscapes, 2002 to 2008," the individual photographic prints show the many humdrum, dirty and polluted cities of modern China. The gray sky towers over the tall ugly modern buildings. Yet somehow the prints of these photographs, stuck on the walls of the white exhibition space one next to the other, create a striking impression of clarity and light. In this way, Ai Weiwei's work is able to transcend the mere political or contemporary, in order to make something that "actually looks like art," says Urs Stahel.

In Shanghai Studio, a series of five photographic prints taken between 2010 and 2011, we see pictures of an Ai Weiwei-designed construction in various stages of completion and demolition — demolition, as the building, commissioned by the local Shanghai government, is immediately torn down upon construction after being declared illegal.

Somehow these photographic records, on display in a gallery, have transmuted the original design into a different art form: a kind of photographic *mise-en-abîme*, an image within an image.

Perhaps the same could be said of Ai Weiwei's use of Twitter last week: a modern means of preservation, a way of remembering a work of digital art that might otherwise have simply been switched off and lost.



Ai Weiwei

"Provisional landscapes, 2002-2008,"
color prints