

# ***Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art***



Sun Xun  
*Shan Shui—Cosmos*, 2012–present  
view of work in progress at the Vancouver Art Gallery  
ink mural and video installation  
Courtesy of the Artist and ShanghART Gallery

## **TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE SPRING 2015**

**Vancouver**  
Artgallery

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# Vancouver Art Gallery

## Teacher's Guide for School Programs

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The exhibition *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* presents a diverse selection of Chinese contemporary artists whose practices are infused with their cultural heritage. Reworking traditional aesthetics in multiple and imaginative ways, the artists use new forms and media—such as digital animation and site-specific installations—to provide the means to understand and examine tradition's influence on visual culture in present-day China.

### DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour of *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* has three main goals:

- to introduce students to contemporary Chinese artists working with traditional art forms,
- to consider the variety of art forms, materials and processes,
- to explore individual works within their contemporary and traditional contexts.

## BACKGROUND TO THE EXHIBITION

### *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*

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*Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* features thirty artworks made in the last ten years that reinvent, revive or draw from aspects of classical Chinese art and culture. The Chinese artists included here span three generations, and come from backgrounds immersed in both Western art history and Chinese tradition. Defining tradition as an evolving concept, the work examines and questions the influence of tradition on visual art and culture in China today.

The exhibition features a diverse range of artworks by ten artists working with a variety of materials and styles, but all start from or reference Chinese artistic tradition. At first sight, Yun-Fei Ji's detailed narrative scroll paintings look traditional, but they tell contemporary stories of ordinary people whose lives are deeply affected by political decisions. Two installations of ceramic pieces by the porcelain master Liu Jianhua fill an entire gallery. Ink animation videos by Sun Xun are only a small part of a work that the artist estimates will take another ten years to complete in its entirety—but the work already covers four walls layered with large ink murals, traditional Chinese painting and digital film. The large-scale site-specific installation *Bangi*, by the prominent artist and activist Ai Weiwei, was exhibited at the 2013 Venice Art Biennale before being reinstalled to fit its current space. Jennifer Wen Ma's massive inked plant chandelier takes over the whole of the Gallery's rotunda. Each work draws on and refers to layers of classical aesthetics overlaid with the personal visions of the individual artist.

*Unscrolled* is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Diana Freundl, Assistant Curator, and Carol Lu, Independent Curator, Beijing, with exhibition advisor Zheng Shengtian.

## BACKGROUND TO THE ARTISTS

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### Liu Jianhua



Liu Jianhua  
*Traces*, 2011  
porcelain  
Courtesy of the Artist



Liu Jianhua  
*Container*, 2011  
porcelain

Liu Jianhua spent over ten years working as an apprentice to his uncle in Jingdezhen, China's historical capital of ceramic production since the [Song dynasty](#) (960–1279), and has become extremely knowledgeable about porcelain making. Even as an established artist he still returns to Jingdezhen frequently for substantial periods of time, staying in touch with the latest developments in and deepening his understanding of this long-standing craft.

Liu's earlier work includes porcelain replicas of everyday objects that provide a commentary on the commoditization and homogenization of culture. In more recent works, including the *Container* series (2009), Liu acknowledges the heritage of Chinese ceramics by re-creating traditional ritual vessels alongside more contemporary shapes. Applied with a celadon glaze, these pieces echo the greenware pottery of the Song dynasty, including their use of red colouring to create the appearance of ox blood.

In *Traces* (2001), Liu has created a [site-specific installation](#) in the Gallery that covers three high walls with black porcelain sculptures of various shapes and sizes. Resembling black ink dripping down sheets of white paper, Liu's ceramic calligraphy is clearly a contemporary piece but refers to ancient traditions.

Born in Ji'an, Jiangxi province, in 1962, Liu graduated with a major in sculpture from the Fine Arts Department of the Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute. After graduation he became an instructor at the College of Fine Arts at Yunnan Arts Institute and then a professor in the Sculpture Department of the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University. His work has been exhibited in the Venice Biennale among others, and he has participated in exhibitions across Europe and North America.

## Ai Weiwei



Ai Weiwei  
*Bang*, 2010–13  
Installation at the Venice Biennale, 2013  
886 antique stools  
Courtesy of the Artist

Ai Weiwei is one of the most prolific international artists of our time. His work includes performance, photography, installations, writing, publishing, curatorial work, design and architecture. After living in New York for a decade, he returned to Beijing in 1993 and developed a successful business collecting and dealing in antiques. He started using antiques in his artistic practice, addressing historical and cultural values in the context of art. Much of his work has focused on cultural traditions that were discarded during the Cultural Revolution.

*Bang* is a large-scale installation consisting of 886 wooden stools. Three-legged stools were often handed down through generations and could be found in nearly every Chinese home until the 1960s, when they were replaced by plastic. First exhibited in the 2013 Venice Art Biennale, *Bang* comprises components that are made and installed by traditional Chinese craftsmen. The layout of the installation is dependent on the space it inhabits. Like traditional furniture, *Bang* is detachable, connectable, reversible and modifiable, and has multiple entrances and exits. For Ai Weiwei, it represents the complex structures of contemporary society.

Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957 and spent his childhood in forced exile with his family. He entered the Beijing Film Academy in 1978 and was a member of one of the first avant-garde and politically active art collectives. He worked with many local and international art foundations, curating, collaborating and exhibiting work that ranges from commercial to contemporary to political within the local and global communities.

Since the early 2000s, he has been active as a writer, artist, architect and activist with an interest in the political and cultural landscape of China. He has held solo exhibitions at major institutions throughout Europe, Asia and North America. He collaborated on the design for the “Birds’ Nest” Stadium of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. In April 2011 he was imprisoned for eighty-seven days and later charged with tax evasion. Since his release he has been stripped of his Chinese passport and the right to travel outside China, yet he continues to make works and exhibit them in solo and group exhibitions worldwide.

## Jennifer Wen Ma



Jennifer Wen Ma  
*Hanging Garden in Ink*, 2012 (detail)  
Installation at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China, 2012  
live plants, China ink  
Courtesy of the Artist

Living between the United States and China, Jennifer Wen Ma is comfortable with both Western and Chinese art forms, history and literature. Early in her career Ma began to use the tradition of ink painting and calligraphy in her videos, which incorporated wall projections of hand-drawn animations.

Ink is now an essential part of Ma's work and she explores its potential and versatility as a contemporary medium from a historical traditional perspective. Her recent works include a series of sculptures in which ink is directly applied to live plants to create a blackened landscape. In classical Chinese painting, landscapes were often used to symbolize the passage of time by depicting the changing seasons; for example, cherry blossoms suggest the start of spring and plum flowers or snow-covered bamboo refer to winter. Ma's sculptures act as three-dimensional paintings that illustrate not only the seasons, but also a life cycle that manifests as green shoots begin to emerge from her works.

*Inked Chandelier* (2014) is a large-scale installation composed of more than 700 species of flora native to Canada's west coast. Completely covered with ink, the plants continue to grow as green buds sprout from the blackness. The site-specific work emphasizes time as an element of the composition: viewers observe the live sculpture as it transforms over the duration of the exhibition.

Born and raised in Beijing, Ma moved with her family to the United States at the age of twelve. She studied advertising and worked as an art director before studying to obtain a Master of Fine Arts. Her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States. Ma was the Chief Designer of Visual and Special Effects for the Opening Ceremony at the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

## Sun Xun



Sun Xun  
*Ancient Film*, 2012  
Installation at Liverpool Biennale, 2012  
ink mural and video installation  
Courtesy of the Artist and ShanghART Gallery

Sun Xun started out in printmaking, but early in his studies he started to experiment with different mediums to make films, using traditional materials and techniques alongside new digital technologies. The ancient Chinese techniques of printmaking, drawing and calligraphy are at the core of his illustrations and videos. His meticulous ink animations drawn on the pages of old newspapers and magazines, and intricate and time-consuming pastel canvases and woodcut prints, form layers of images.

Sun's animations explore themes of revolution, commercialization and urban development. References to Chinese legends, historical events and Western political ideologies are mixed with his own mythical fantasies to create complex narratives. His use of woodblock printing is pointed; the technique was critical to the Chinese government's ability to circulate propaganda throughout China before and during the Cultural Revolution.

In his latest and in-progress work, *Ancient Film* (2012–), Sun has covered the walls of the gallery with large ink murals overlaid with animation projections. Sun began working on the film in 2012 and he expects it will take ten more years to complete. Each drawing is conceived in the classical landscape painting style of the Song dynasty. Filming the drawings frame by frame and incorporating classical Chinese *guqin* music, Sun combines metaphors used in classical painting with his own inventive animation style.

Born in 1980 in Fuxin, China, Sun currently lives in Beijing. After studying printmaking at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, and later lecturing at the Academy, he founded Pi Animation studio in 2006. He has exhibited widely at international institutions, and participated in prestigious animation and film festivals worldwide.

## Yun-Fei Ji



Yun-Fei Ji  
*Sudden Wind in the Village Wen*, 2013  
mineral pigments and ink on rice paper and silk  
Courtesy of the Artist and James Cohan Gallery

Yun-Fei Ji is a storyteller who uses past events and the lives of ordinary people as the subjects of his paintings. He creates semi-fictional narratives in his works, telling stories of displacement, natural disasters and corruption in the villages. Using mineral pigments on mulberry paper, Ji employs traditional methods from China's classical past to tell of difficult social realities in China today. His paintings illustrate both his training in Chinese Socialist Realism, particularly propaganda painting, and his interest in traditional techniques from the Song dynasty (960–1279), in which mountain scenery overwhelms the human figures.

For *The Three Gorges Dam Migration* (2009) he collaborated with the oldest Chinese printmaking studio in Beijing, Rongbaozhai, utilizing the traditional medium of woodcut printmaking; the long scroll narrates the displacement of locals prior to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

His most recent works, *Move from the Village Wen* (2014) and *A Sudden Wind in Village Wen* (2013), show Ji's engagement with folk-art styles and the scroll form. The challenges villagers face unfold in a narrative on a ten-metre scroll. Villagers leave their homes for the city and are harassed by both corrupt officials and ghosts and demons.

Born in 1963 in Beijing, Ji moved as a young child with his family to a collective farm outside Hangzhou. At age ten he was sent to study with an officer who illustrated combat training manuals for the People's Liberation Army. He went on to study oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and in the late 1980s travelled to the United States, where he obtained his Master of Fine Arts. He then lived in New York, not returning to Beijing until 2010. He has had several solo exhibitions in both American and Chinese museums, and has participated in several major international exhibitions.

# PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: The Artists

## (all grades)

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### Objective:

Students read, research and share information about some of the artists represented in the exhibition *Unscrolled*.

### Materials:

- ❑ writing materials
- ❑ Internet. For general information:  
[www.artcyclopedia.com](http://www.artcyclopedia.com)  
[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)
- ❑ Artist Information Sheet and Student Worksheet (following 3 pages)

### Process:

1. Divide the students into five groups. Assign each group an artist from the Artist Information Sheet (primaries, page 11; intermediate/secondary students, page 12).
2. Give each group a copy of the Student Worksheet (page 13) and ask them to transfer the information about their artist to the appropriate box.
3. Ask students to determine what they need to know to complete the section on their artist, and search the Internet, either at home or at school. Older students can find more information; younger students, perhaps just one or two more facts.
4. Have each group present the information on their artist while the rest of the class adds the information to the worksheet.

### Conclusion:

#### Discuss:

- What were some of the most interesting things that students learned or discovered?
- Which artists and/or kinds of artwork made students curious about seeing the actual work in the exhibition?
- Are there any artists, ways of working or ideas that the students would like to find out more about?

## Artist Information Sheet (primary students)

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### Ai Weiwei

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PueYywpkJW8>

- Born in Beijing in 1957, lived in New York for ten years
- Not allowed to leave China because he has spoken against the government
- Uses old traditions to make works with new meanings
- *Bang* is a very big installation made up of 886 wooden stools

### Jennifer Wen Ma

<http://www.littlemeat.net/pictures/pictures.htm>

- Born in Beijing, moved with her family to US, now lives in both countries
- Covers green plants in black ink; new green shoots grow from the black
- Gets ideas from old Chinese landscape painting
- *Inked Chandelier* is huge installation made of 700 native West Coast plants

### Yun-Fei Ji

<http://www.jamescohan.com/artists/yun-fei-ji>

- Born in 1963 in Beijing, moved to a collective farm with his family
- At age ten, sent away to study with an officer to learn to draw
- Paints scrolls that tell stories of the lives of ordinary people
- *Three Gorges Dam Migration* (2009) tells of people's everyday problems

### Sun Xun

<http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/asian/sun-xun-ink-art>

- Born in 1980 in Fuxin, China, lives in Beijing
- Uses traditional materials and new technology to make films
- Mixes old stories with imagined new stories and historical events
- *Ancient Film* (2012-) fills a room with ink drawings, paintings and films

### Liu Jianhua

<http://www.liujianhua.net/enbiographical.aspx>

- Born in Jiangxi province in 1962, is a ceramics professor
- Spent ten years learning ceramics from his uncle in Jingdezhen (the centre of ceramic making in China for 1200 years)
- Often returns to Jingdezhen to continue learning about ceramic making
- *Traces* (2001) covers three high walls with black porcelain sculptures that look like black ink dripping down sheets of white paper

## Artist Information Sheet (intermediate/secondary students)

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### Ai Weiwei

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PueYwpkJW8>

- Born in Beijing in 1957, lived in New York in the 1980s, now in Beijing
- Political activist, was in prison and now not allowed to leave China
- Had career as antique collector and dealer
- Works include performance, photography, installation, writing, publishing, curatorial work, design and architecture
- *Bang* is a large-scale installation made up of 886 wooden stools

### Jennifer Wen Ma

<http://www.littlemeat.net/pictures/pictures.htm>

- Born in Beijing, moved with family to US at age twelve, moves between both countries
- Chief Designer of visual and special effects for Opening Ceremony of Beijing Olympics
- Creates sculptures in which live plants are covered in ink
- Influenced by classical Chinese ink landscape painting with importance placed on passage of time and changing seasons
- *Inked Chandelier* is huge installation made of 700 native West Coast plants

### Yun-Fei Ji

<http://www.jamescohan.com/artists/yun-fei-ji>

- Born in 1963 in Beijing, as a young child moved to a collective farm with his family
- At age ten, sent to study with an officer who drew illustrations for the People's Liberation Army's combat training manuals
- Studied art in Beijing and in the United States, where he lived for over twenty years
- His painted scrolls tell stories of past events and the lives of ordinary people
- *Sudden Wind in Village Wen* (2013) shows villagers' problems
- *Three Gorges Dam Migration* (2009) uses traditional woodcut prints

### Sun Xun

<http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/asian/sun-xun-ink-art>

- Born in 1980 in Fuxin, China, lives in Beijing, widely exhibited in Europe
- Art includes printmaking, film animation, ink drawing, pastel canvases, calligraphy
- Uses traditional materials and digital technology in his films
- Chinese legends, historical events, Western politics mixed with mythical fantasies
- *Ancient Film* (2012-) is an installation of ink murals, films and drawings in classical painting style of Song dynasty landscapes

### Liu Jianhua

<http://www.liujianhua.net/enbiographical.aspx>

- Born in Jiangxi province in 1962, a professor, exhibits work worldwide
- Spent ten years working as apprentice to his uncle in Jingdezhen, China's historical centre of ceramic production since the Song dynasty (960-1279)
- returns to Jingdezhen frequently to continue learning about ceramic making
- *Container* series (2009) uses greenware pottery and red colouring of Song dynasty
- *Traces* (2001) is an installation that covers three high walls with black porcelain sculptures that look like black ink dripping down sheets of white paper

## Student Worksheet

	Background Information	How is the work traditional?	How is the work <u>contemporary</u> ?	Describe/Sketch one artwork
<b>Ai Weiwei</b>				
<b>Sun Xun</b>				
<b>Liu Jianhua</b>				
<b>Jennifer Wen Ma</b>				
<b>Yun-Fei Ji</b>				

## PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Scrolling (elementary and intermediate students)

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### Objective:

Students look at the tradition of scrolls in historical Chinese art and make their own contemporary handscroll.

### Discussion:

Many of the artists in *Unscrolled* have painted scrolls. While clearly well versed in the ancient traditions, they have made changes and updated their works to include contemporary ideas and materials. Yun-Fei Ji's painted scrolls tell stories of past events and the lives of ordinary people. Sun Xun uses Chinese legends, historical events, western politics and his own mythical fantasies in scroll paintings that are the backdrops for animated projections.

Some characteristics of traditional Chinese scrolls:

- Handscrolls are usually between 9 and 14 inches high and around 10 feet long. Only one portion (usually a shoulder's width) is viewed at a time, each section presenting a new surprise. Looking at a handscroll is an intimate experience, not unlike reading a book; both contain a beginning, a middle and an end. When not being viewed, the scroll remains rolled up.
- A hanging scroll displays an entire painting at one viewing and typically ranges in height from 2 to 6 feet.
- Scrolls could be either landscapes or figure paintings. They could present a pastoral scene (usually displaying the passing of time, change of seasons) or a narrative, often depicting a journey.
- Some artists used colour washes, some brilliant colours, others only black ink.
- Landscape painting has always been regarded as the highest form of Chinese painting. Different styles of landscape painting developed: some used strong black lines to depict towering mountains, while others displayed rolling hills and rivers in peaceful scenes with soft, rubbed brushwork.
- Scrolls often included calligraphy.

### Materials:

- ❑ paper and pencils
- ❑ kraft paper, cut in lengths of approximately 3 feet per student
- ❑ black paint and paintbrushes (or black markers)
- ❑ pieces of ribbon to tie up finished scrolls

### Process:

1. Introduce students to traditional Chinese scrolls using the information above and showing them examples from books or the Internet. For easy reference, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_painting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_painting)  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chhs/hd\\_chhs.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chhs/hd_chhs.htm)
2. Tell students that they are going to make a landscape handscroll. It will be about 3 feet across and will be kept rolled up except when being viewed, only a part at a time.
3. Tell them the scroll will be made using black paint (or black marker).
4. Have each student sketch out a landscape of their own choosing on a piece of kraft paper. The landscape can be a real or imaginary space. It might contain mountains, rivers, sea, skies, trees... and students may include figures if they wish.

5. After the sketches are complete, have each student practise different types of brushstrokes on a fresh piece of paper: thin and thick lines, light and hard pressure, small stipple strokes, long smooth ones...
6. Have students carefully unroll their scrolls and lay books or other heavy objects on the edges to keep them flat.
7. Have students make their images. Stress that this is an experiment—it takes years for a scroll-maker to perfect the craft. If a student makes a “mistake,” encourage him or her to be creative and turn it into something else.
8. When dry, the scroll can be rolled up again. Each student should write his/her name on an outside corner.
9. Have students look at each other’s work, gently unrolling and re-rolling the scrolls as needed.
10. Tie up each scroll with a piece of ribbon, making sure that all names are visible. Stack the scrolls in a container so that they can be removed and looked at.

**Conclusion:**

- What did students discover about painting scrolls?
- Was the activity challenging? Interesting? Fun? In what ways?
- Would students do it differently next time? How?
- Have students think about the format of the scroll. How is the experience of looking at it different from looking at an artwork hanging on a wall?

## PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Three Gorges (older students)

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### Objective:

Students learn about the Three Gorges Dam in China and the controversy surrounding its construction, and debate some of the issues.

### Discussion:

Yun-Fei Ji's *Three Gorges Dam Migration* is a 10-foot-long scroll that depicts the flooding and social upheaval caused by the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric engineering project, located on the Yangtze River in China. This colossal project was designed to stop the seasonal flooding of China's largest river and to provide hydroelectric power for the country's rapidly growing population and manufacturing industries. However, the social and environmental consequences of China's controversial \$180 billion Three Gorges project have been unimaginable. This immense project uprooted 1.3 million people and flooded more than a hundred cities, towns and villages.



Yun-Fei Ji  
Three Gorges Dam Migration  
*Looking for Work in the City*, 2013  
mineral pigments and ink on mulberry paper  
Courtesy of the Artist and James Cohan Gallery

### Materials:

- ❑ pens and paper
- ❑ Internet. Useful sites include:
  - <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/greatwall/story.html>
  - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Gorges\\_Dam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Gorges_Dam)
  - <http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/hubei/yichang/three-gorges-dam.htm>

### Process:

1. Familiarize students with the Three Gorges Dam Project. The websites above will provide background information.
2. Draw two columns on the board, headed "Pros" and "Cons."
3. Brainstorm potential benefits and drawbacks of the dam. Write the students' responses on the board.
  - Benefits may include:
    - flood control, electricity, renewable power that replaces coal, reliable water supply, tourist attraction, improved economy.
  - Drawbacks may include:
    - loss of homes and farmland, environmental problems, impact on cultural and geographical resources from the past, rise in waterborne diseases, loss of fish.

4. Ask the students to list all the jobs they can think of that might be affected by the construction of the dam; e.g., farmers, construction workers, financial advisors, engineers, archaeologists, environmentalists, government officials, tourism employees, etc.
5. Set up an informal debate. Have some students assume the roles of people affected by the dam construction and prepare to present their viewpoints, for and against. Other students will participate as audience members, determining which side presents the stronger arguments.
6. Roles might include the following:  
**For:**
  - The Chinese government
  - Shipping companies
  - Dam builders
  - Hydroelectric power companies
  - People who have lost loved ones due to past flooding
  - Clean energy advocates  
**Against:**
  - Farmers forced to relocate
  - Environmentalists
  - Archaeologists
  - Geologists
  - The Yangtze River dolphin (now extinct)
7. Each student assigned a role works with one or two other students to prepare their roles and develop arguments to support their viewpoints.
8. Inform all speakers of the following guidelines:
  - The Pro speakers present first, then the Con speakers.
  - Each student stands to identify his/her role, then to present point of view and arguments.
  - One person speaks at a time.
  - Audience listens respectfully.
9. When all the role players have presented their views, encourage questions from the audience. Presenters should respond to questions in their assigned roles.

**Conclusion:**

- What new facts did students learn about water ecology and dams?
  - How have their perceptions changed?
  - Was the activity challenging? Interesting? Fun?
  - Have any students seen a dam before? Where?
- Draw students' attention to the existence of the Cleveland Dam at the head of the Capilano River in North Vancouver.

**Follow-up:**

Have students research the impact of the Cleveland Dam on the environment and local community.

## PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Ai Weiwei—Changing the World, One Artwork at a Time (intermediate and secondary students)

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### Objective:

Students learn about Ai Weiwei's work and then design an artwork that addresses a political or social issue that they feel strongly about.

### Discussion:

*Ai Weiwei has used his art to address both the corruption of the Chinese communist government and its outright neglect of human rights, particularly in the realm of the freedom of speech and thought.*

*All art is political in the sense that all art takes place in the public arena and engages within already existing ideology. Yet there are times when art becomes dangerously political for both the artist and the viewers who engage with that art.*

<http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/ai-weiwei-and-the-politics-of-dissent.html>

### Materials:

- large sheets of paper
- pencil crayons or markers
- Student Worksheet: Ai Weiwei's Artworks (page 21)
- Internet, books, images of Ai Weiwei's work

### Process:

1. Give students one of the quotes above and talk about when and how art might be considered political. Discuss the ways in which art can engage people in social change. In what ways could students use art to take a stand on something they believe or care about, in a way that makes a difference?
2. Divide the class into five groups, assigning each group one of Ai Weiwei's works (see next pages). Give each group the appropriate extracts to use as a starting point, before searching the Internet to find additional information.
3. Have students fill in the Student Worksheet (page 21) and then share information with the class. They should also provide some imagery: still images or YouTube clips.
4. Brainstorm issues in Vancouver that students are aware of, that they perceive as problematic in some way and needing public attention.
5. What kind of artwork would fit the message? How does one go about engaging in social change using art? The appropriate form could be free-standing sculpture on the beach, flyers to be handed out at a supermarket, chalk on a sidewalk, Facebook presence, computer-generated images, hand-drawn posters around the school...
6. In small groups, ask students to design such an artwork. Work out specifics: materials, message, space, etc.
7. Have students present their ideas, with notes and diagrams, to the class.

### Conclusion:

Discuss:

- What did students discover?
- What are some of the most effective ways to engage people and effect change through art?

### Follow-up:

Watch: *Ai Weiwei, Never Sorry* (available on Netflix)

## Information Sheet: Ai Weiwei's Artworks

The following information is taken directly from the websites shown below each section.

### *Remembering*

In his retrospective show *So Sorry* (October 2009 to January 2010, Munich, Germany), Ai Weiwei created the installation *Remembering* on the façade of the Haus der Kunst. It was constructed from nine thousand children's backpacks. They spelled out the sentence "She lived happily for seven years in this world" in Chinese characters (this was a quote from a mother whose child died in the earthquake). Regarding this work, Weiwei said,

The idea to use backpacks came from my visit to Sichuan after the earthquake in May 2008. During the earthquake many schools collapsed. Thousands of young students lost their lives, and you could see bags and study material everywhere. Then you realize individual life, media, and the lives of the students are serving very different purposes. The lives of the students disappeared within the state propaganda, and very soon everybody will forget everything.

<http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/ai-weiwei-and-the-politics-of-dissent.html>

### *Sunflower Seeds*

Sunflower Seeds is made up of millions of small works, each apparently identical, but actually unique. However realistic they may seem, these life-sized sunflower seed husks are in fact intricately hand-crafted in porcelain.

Each seed has been individually sculpted and painted by specialists working in small-scale workshops in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen. Far from being industrially produced, they are the effort of hundreds of skilled hands. Poured into the interior of the Turbine Hall's vast industrial space, the 100 million seeds form a seemingly infinite landscape.

Porcelain is almost synonymous with China and, to make this work, Ai Weiwei has manipulated traditional methods of crafting what has historically been one of China's most prized exports. Sunflower Seeds invites us to look more closely at the "Made in China" phenomenon and the geopolitics of cultural and economic exchange today.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>

### *Time Magazine Cover*

Time magazine revealed the cover of its latest issue, done by artist and activist Ai Weiwei, on Thursday.

Editor Rick Stengel unveiled the cover on "Morning Joe," saying, "I actually think it's the most beautiful cover we've ever done in our history." Weiwei designed the image using the Chinese art of papercutting.

The cover accompanies Hannah Beech's story "How China Views the World." "The image represents Ai's acknowledgment of the country's centrality in the world, while at the same time challenging China's leaders to make the future a freer and more democratic one."

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/06/time-ai-weiwei-cover\\_n\\_3396616.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/06/time-ai-weiwei-cover_n_3396616.html)

### *Gangnam Style Parody*

From the *New Yorker*:

Ai Weiwei's version of "Gangnam Style" is as stupid-silly as any other, and more poorly made—it is the ultimate "shanzhai," a cheap imitation made by splicing footage from the original video with footage of himself dancing around in a pink T-shirt and, in one scene, waving handcuffs—but it's also an ingenious response to the attitude toward creativity put forth in the Chinese media. Ai called his video "Grass Mud Horse Style," after a made-up creature, invented in 2009, that has become a symbol of anti-censorship in China and, by embedding it in otherwise harmless content, it has become a way for dissenters in China to give the finger to government censors.

The Grass Mud Horse has been a recurring theme in Ai's work—he recorded a video of himself singing along to the singing children video, and shot a nude photo of himself with a Grass Mud Horse. This time, by including the anti-censorship trope in his "shanzhai" version of Psy's video, itself a symbol in China of the power of cultural ferment, he exposes the absurdity of the Chinese government seeking to promote creativity while maintaining its strict censorship laws. By this afternoon, Ai's video had been viewed three hundred and fifty thousand times, but most of those views were not from within China: authorities reportedly removed his video from Chinese Web sites within several hours of its release.

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/ai-weiweis-gangnam-style-knockoff>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n281GWfT1E8>

### *Summer Pavilion*

Embedded in the pristine front lawn of London's Serpentine Gallery, lies its latest creation, a large circular structure made of muted steel and earth-colored cork, the work of architects Herzog & de Meuron and Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who were asked to design the structure as part of an annual summer series.

The circular structure features two levels, a dull steel roof with a shallow layer of water to reflect the sky and an abstract myriad of shapes that represent each footprint of the former pavilions laid to rest.

The lower level, which is coated entirely in earth-color cork, emits a strong smell and round stools resembling button mushrooms are dotted about the place, for visitors to sit and interact during the pavilion's three month duration at the gallery.

Design duo Herzog & de Meuron and Ai have previously collaborated on Beijing's Bird Nest National Stadium and met 10 years ago in 2002 when Uli Sigg, the former Swiss ambassador in Beijing, introduced them.

The architects and Ai communicated through Skype to collaborate on this project, a method that worked smoothly for both parties.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturevideo/artvideo/9304165/Serpentine-Gallery-unveils-Ai-Weiwei-summer-pavilion.html>

## Student Worksheet: Ai Weiwei's Artworks

	How is it made?	In what way is it traditional?	In what way is it contemporary?	What makes it important?
<i>Remembering</i>				
<i>Sunflower Seeds</i>				
<i>Time Magazine Cover</i>				
<i>Gangnam Style Parody</i>				
<i>Summer Pavilion</i>				

## VOCABULARY

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**character:** a written Chinese sign that can denote a sound, syllable or whole word. There are thousands of different characters that in traditional calligraphy are created with brush and ink, a process considered an art form.

**contemporary art:** created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists. Challenging traditional boundaries, many contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today's world. Contemporary art defies easy categorization in its rejection of historical definitions of what constitutes art.

**curator:** the person who is responsible for an exhibition—including selecting and displaying works, writing labels and organizing support materials.

**installation:** art that is created from a wide range of materials and installed in a specific environment. An installation may be temporary or permanent.

**landscape:** artwork in which the subject is a view of the exterior physical world. Traditionally, landscapes have been paintings or drawings depicting natural scenes and are often concerned with light, space and setting.

**performance art:** works in any of a variety of media that are performed before a live audience. The performance itself, rather than a specific object, constitutes the artwork. Documentation is often an important part of the performance.

**site-specific:** created for a specific site or venue; often the work is destroyed by the process of dismantling it.

**Song dynasty:** dynasty that ruled China from 960 to 1279. Often perceived as the most culturally brilliant era in later imperial Chinese history, it was a time of great social and economic change. This dynasty had such a powerful effect on the intellectual and political climate of China that its impact is still felt in the present.

## RESOURCES

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- Hung, Wu. *Contemporary Chinese Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2014.
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- Peng, Lu. *A History of Art in 20th Century China*. Milan: Charta, 2010.
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- Sullivan, Michael. *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*. Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1996.
- Tsao, Hsingyuan, and Roger Ames, eds. *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical*. Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2011.

### Film:

- Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*. Alison Klayman, Director, Producer, Cinematographer, 2012.

### Online:

General Information:

[www.artcyclopedia.com](http://www.artcyclopedia.com)

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

Three Gorges Dam:

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/greatwall/story.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Gorges\\_Dam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Gorges_Dam)

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/hubei/yichang/three-gorges-dam.htm>

Traditional Scrolls:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_painting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_painting)

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chhs/hd\\_chhs.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chhs/hd_chhs.htm)

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