

# ORDRUPGAARD

PRESS RELEASE

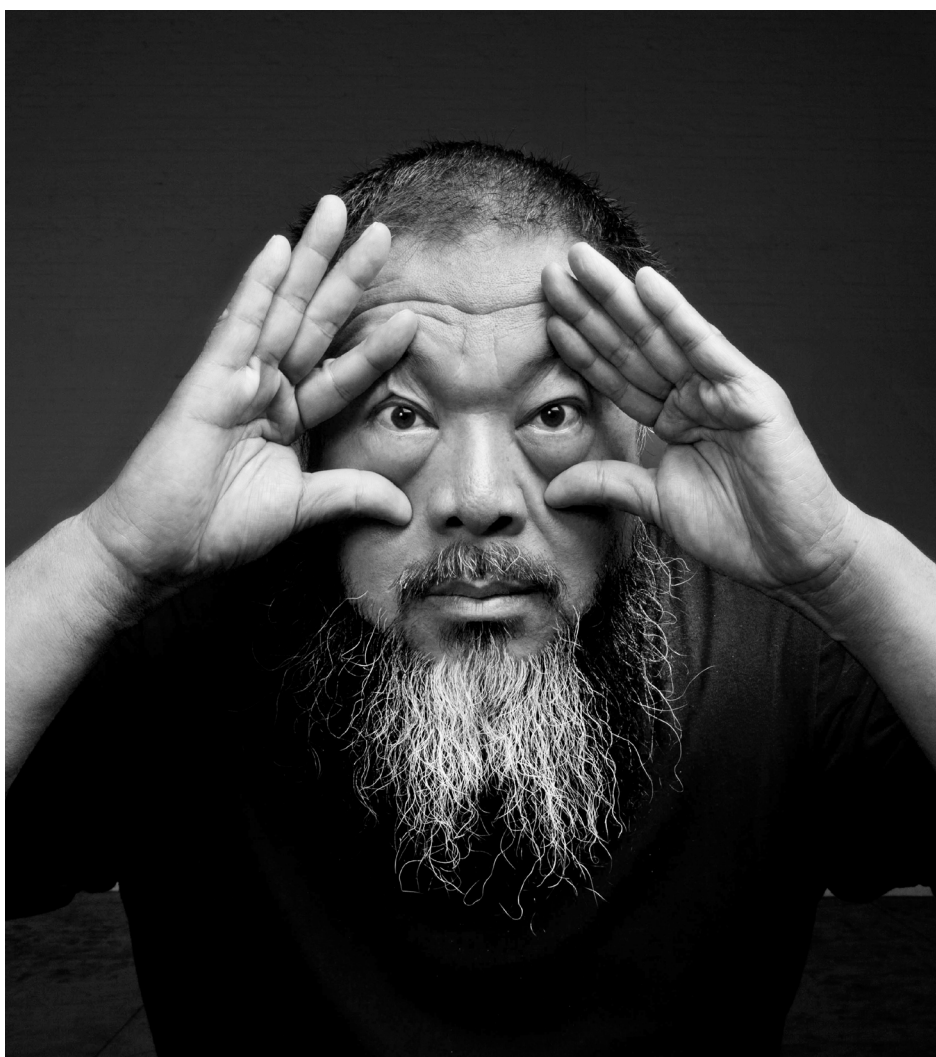
May 23 2024

**Period**

May 31 2024 - January 19 2025

**Press Meeting**

May 30, 3-5 pm



## AI WEIWEI - WATER LILIES #1

MAY 31 2024 - JANUARY 19  
2025

ORDRUPGAARD  
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At the end of this month, Ai Weiwei—one of the most significant voices in contemporary art—arrives at Ordrupgaard with the installation *Water Lilies #1* (2022). This spectacular piece comprises over 650,000 LEGO bricks; with its impressive 15-meter length, it is Ai Weiwei's largest LEGO work to date. The immense installation depicts water lilies, one of the most renowned motifs associated with Impressionism. Remarkably, it is none other than Claude Monet's iconic and similarly monumental three-panel painting, *Water Lilies* (1914–26), currently housed at MoMA in New York, that Ai Weiwei has reinterpreted. Beyond their thematic parallels and similarities in size, both works share a profound meditative allure. Yet while Claude Monet liberates colour and brush in a nearly otherworldly depiction of nature beyond time and place, Ai Weiwei's pixelated water lilies situate themselves in a contemporary context, referencing his own tumultuous upbringing during his father's exile. This exhibition marks yet another highlight in Ordrupgaard's celebration of the 150th anniversary of the dawn of Impressionism. Here we offer a contemporary artist's perspective on the groundbreaking Impressionist movement, which heralded the onset of modern European art.

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With *Water Lilies #1*, Ai Weiwei (born in Beijing in 1957) has crafted an enormous tableau of mass-produced LEGO bricks in 22 pre-defined vibrant colors. Whereas Claude Monet (1840–1926), when pursuing beauty through his water lily paintings, seemingly excludes all allusions to his own sorrowful life, Ai Weiwei opens the door to the narrative of his formative childhood years, with his father in a Chinese labor camp, by means of a black door embedded amidst the colourful water lilies. In this exhibition, Claude Monet's Impressionist painting intertwines with Ai Weiwei's poignant life story, emerging anew as a reaction against the suppression of freedom of expression that the artist, like his father before him, endured in body and soul in their homeland China.

In *Water Lilies #1*, Ai Weiwei has inserted a disturbingly dark void amidst the colorful water lilies, representing the doorway to the underground dugout where he spent five years of his childhood without of light and water alongside his father, the renowned poet Ai Qing. The father had been exiled since the Anti-Rightist Campaign during Mao Zedong's Communist regime, a campaign that targeted hundreds of thousands of intellectuals critical of the Communist Party. During his exile, he and the Ai-family were relocated several times and in that specific period, Ai Weiwei was living with his father in the remote desert of Xinjiang, known as "Little Siberia". Reflecting on this childhood "black hole" within the paradisiacal garden, Ai Weiwei remarks: "*All my works are connected to my personal history. I would never create a work solely for the sake of beauty. For me, beauty arises from personal struggles.*" In the installation, Ai Weiwei draws further parallels between his father's imprisonment in the 1930s and his own confinement in 2011, where he spent 81 days in what he describes as a "black hole," without formal charges.

Ai Weiwei plays deliberately with the pixelated expression and democratic qualities of LEGO bricks, inasmuch as theoretically, with a template, anyone could recreate the work. The pixelated expression mirrors today's hyper-digitized world, where art and news are increasingly disseminated through digital channels. For Ai Weiwei himself, the internet has provided access to a large audience that transcends national borders. Over the years, Ai Weiwei has actively used social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (now X); he has long been fascinated by the power and freedom that these platforms potentially offer individuals. In this context, the symbol #, commonly known as a hashtag, may refer in the title of the work to social media and online communication, where language is often abbreviated, fragmented, and recombined.

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The exhibition is part of the 150th anniversary of the First Impressionist Exhibition at Paris in 1874, which Ordrupgaard is celebrating throughout 2024. The anniversary year began with the group exhibition Impressionism and its Overlooked Women, which runs until May 20th. Starting on September 19th, Ai Weiwei will be joined by the young British artist Flora Yukhnovich, whose works will be displayed in the adjoining galleries. The three exhibitions each shed light on the museum's classical collection of French Impressionists, which ranks among the largest and most significant collection in Northern Europe. Ordrupgaard is the sole museum in the Nordic region to mark this great anniversary year of Impressionism with a series of thematic exhibitions.

**This exhibition is generously supported by:**

Ny Carlsbergfondet  
Jørgen Krygers og Anne Ammitzbølls Fond  
Beckett-Fonden  
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Dansk Tennis Fond

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