

Installation view of *Ai Weiwei: Trace at Hirshhorn* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, featuring a portrait of the artist. Image courtesy the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.



International Artist **Ai Weiwei** Using Alpaca as a Symbol for Social Resistance

By Meyla Bianco Johnston



Artist. Resistor. Prisoner. Social Commentator.

Pushing back against the authoritarian Chinese government, Ai Weiwei's alpaca has taken on a new meaning for civil and human rights.

In late June, *The Washington Post* reported that Ai Weiwei had once again used an alpaca in his art as social commentary.

In this case, he created wallpaper incorporating a stylized line drawing of an alpaca with Chinese characters on its chest. The wallpaper is installed around an installation entitled “Trace” scheduled to be shown June 28 through January 1 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.

An alpaca, in Chinese culture, is the mythical creature referred to as the “grass mud horse,” a symbol for the fight for free speech in China. Since Chinese employs tone more than other languages, words can have different meanings based on inflections.

Depending on how it is spoken aloud, the innocent symbols for “grass mud horse” may sound like an insult that translates, in English, to something very derogatory.

Because of this double entendre, the alpaca has been known as a symbol for protest since it was first posted in 2009 on a list of imaginary beasts in an online Chinese encyclopedia.

In 2011, Weiwei was arrested and detained by the Chinese Government for organizing a public protest, the Art Citizens March in Hong Kong that included a life-sized model of an alpaca mounted on a platform and included in the parade as a sort of mascot. 

SOURCES:

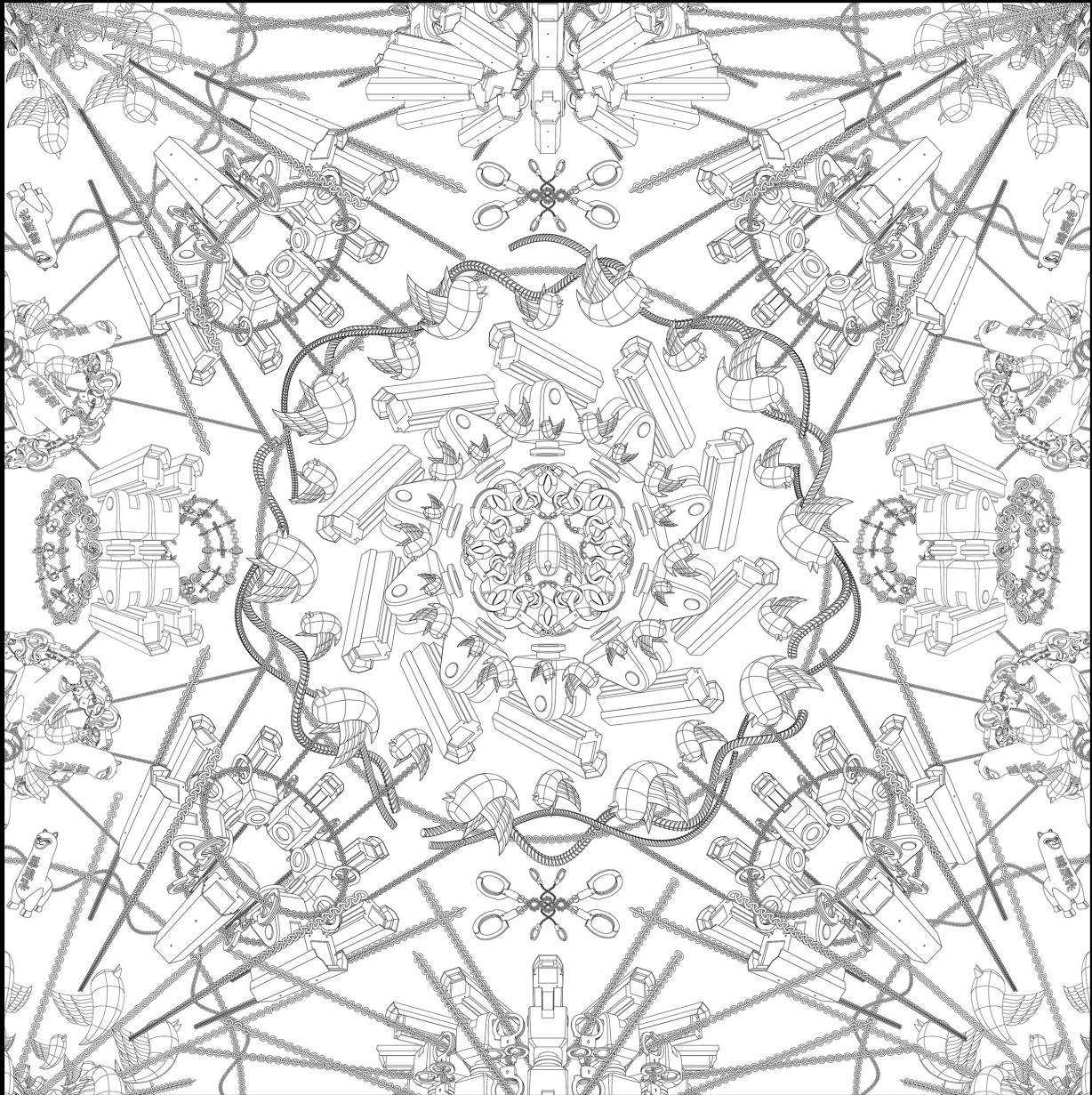
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- Wong, Kacey. “Grass Mud Horse 草泥馬.” *Kacey Wong*. Kacey Wong, 23 Apr. 2011. Web. 30 June 2017.
- <http://www.kaceywong.com/grass-mud-horse/>In late June, *The Washington Post* reported that Ai Weiwei had once again used an alpaca in his art as social commentary.

Top: The alpaca has been adopted by many Chinese as a symbol of resistance to draconian mainland Chinese human rights policies. Here, the detention of artist Ai Weiwei is being protested in the streets of Hong Kong. Image courtesy Kacey Wong.

Middle: The alpaca pictured here is an artwork in itself by Kacey Wong, made of wood, fur, leather and wheels. Artist Ai Weiwei is depicted on the banner. Image courtesy Kacey Wong.

Bottom: Police join hands in Hong Kong against possible unrest. “Mainland Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was arrested and detained by the Chinese Government. Art community members in Hong Kong felt this was not right so we organized a public protest,” Wong says. The April 2011 protest had around 2,000 participants. Image courtesy Kacey Wong.





Above: Ai Weiwei, detail view of *The Plain Version of the Animal That Looks Like a Llama but Is Really an Alpaca*, 2017. Look carefully at the edges of the image to spot the alpaca among other symbolic objects such as handcuffs and cameras. Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio.



Left: Detail from the wallpaper created by Ai Weiwei portraying an alpaca as a symbol of protest. Photo adapted from *The Washington Post*.

