

For Immediate Release



Free Speech Pendant
Ai Weiwei's Limited Artist Edition
launched at the Vancouver Art Gallery

December 2, 2014 - VANCOUVER, BC - The Vancouver Art Gallery is pleased to announce the launch of a new Artist Edition by internationally acclaimed artist Ai Weiwei. This limited edition artwork, *Free Speech Pendant*, is created by Ai Weiwei specifically for the Vancouver Art Gallery's Artist Edition program in conjunction with his participation in the exhibition *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, currently on view at the Gallery until April 6, 2015. This edition is part of the Vancouver Art Gallery's growing Artist Edition program that has produced exclusive artworks with more than 10 Canadian and international artists.

In *Free Speech Pendant*, Ai Weiwei continues to explore the use of porcelain, a material that is traditionally regarded as the highest art form in China. In the 1990s, Ai Weiwei began collecting Chinese antiques and furniture and integrating them into his artistic practice as a means of addressing historical and cultural values in the context of art. *Free Speech Pendant* is Ai's reinterpretation of the traditional pendants carried by Chinese individuals as a marker of social status. This type of ornamentation originally began as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) as pendants intended to attract desirable qualities such as luck, wealth, rank and longevity. These charms eventually became a more direct reflection of the social hierarchy with their materials indicating their wearer's position—a wealthy, high-ranking individual might have their pendant made in jade or porcelain while a working-class person's ornament would be fashioned from a more common substance like wood. The writing or markings on traditional pieces would commonly refer to the owner's family or clan, but in *Free Speech Pendant* Ai has replaced this with text reading "Free Speech", a simple but powerful call to action.

"We are extremely proud to work with extraordinary artists, such as Ai Weiwei, to bring further depth and diversity to the Gallery's growing Artist Edition program, which provides an opportunity for emerging and experienced collectors to acquire artwork by leading contemporary artists from around the world," said Kathleen S. Bartels, Director of the Vancouver Art Gallery. "*Free Speech Pendant* is an exquisite and powerful work that alludes to one of the most important themes in Ai Weiwei's art practice."

Ai Weiwei is one of the participating artists in *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, an exhibition organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery that examines the influence of traditional aesthetics on visual culture in present-day China. His work in the exhibition, *Bang*, is a large-scale site-specific installation comprised of 886 antique wooden stools that was first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2013. Like many of his artworks, this expansive rhizomatic structure can be interpreted as a comment on the relationship between an individual and the excessive, rapidly developing and complex structures of contemporary society.

Artist Edition Details

Ai Weiwei, *Free Speech Pendant*, 2014

Double sided, hand-painted porcelain, edition of 60

5.5 x 4.0 x 0.8 cm,

\$ 2,750 CDN

Available for purchase exclusively at the Vancouver Art Gallery Store

Call 604.662.4706 or email gallerystore@vanartgallery.bc.ca.

More information available at: <http://shop.vanartgallery.bc.ca/collections/artists-edition/products/ai-weiwei-free-speech-pendant-2014>

About Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei is one of the most prolific international artists practicing today. Performance, photography and installation are equally associated in his visual repertoire. Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai 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, The Stars, in the late seventies. After living in New York City throughout the eighties, Ai returned to Beijing in 1993 to attend to his ailing father. Since the early 2000s, Ai has also maintained a high profile as a writer, artist, architect and activist with an interest in the political and cultural landscape of China. In April 2011 he was imprisoned for eighty-one days without reason. Since his release he has been stripped of his Chinese passport and the right to travel outside of China, yet he continues to make works and exhibit them in solo and group exhibitions outside of China. Ai Weiwei has held numerous solo exhibitions at major international institutions throughout Europe, Asia and North America, including those at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (2014), Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2013), Jeu de Paume, Paris (2012), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek (2011), Stiftung DKM, Duisburg (2010); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2009); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2009); Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Cambelltown Arts Center, Sydney (2008); and the Groninger Museum, Groningen (2008), and participated in the Venice Biennale in Italy (1999, 2008, 2010, 2013), the 29th Sao Paulo Biennial in Brazil (2010), Documenta 12 in Germany (2007), Busan Biennale in Korea (2006, 2012), and Guangzhou Triennale in China (2002, 2005). Ai Weiwei has also participated in many design collaborations, including working alongside Pritzker prize-winning architect firm Herzog & de Meuron for the National Stadium of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

About Vancouver Art Gallery's Artist Edition

Vancouver Art Gallery's Artist Editions program produces limited edition artworks by distinguished Canadian and international artists which are offered for sale exclusively through the Gallery Store. Earlier Artist Editions include works by Gabriela Albergaria, Sonny Assu, Douglas Coupland, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Scott McFarland, Kyohei Sakaguchi, Fiona Tan and O Zhang. The series has produced some enormously popular artworks, such as *Lego as Self-Portrait* (2014) by Douglas Coupland which was sold out within 3 hours after its launch. *Free Speech Pendant* by Ai Weiwei marks the Gallery's third Artist Edition by Chinese artists. Proceeds from the sale of Artist Editions are used to support Vancouver Art Gallery programs.

A full list of Artist Editions available from the Vancouver Art Gallery can be viewed on our website - http://projects.vanartgallery.bc.ca/artist_editions

To make a purchase of a work in the Artist Edition series, please call the Gallery Store at 604.662.4706 or email gallerystore@vanartgallery.bc.ca.

More information available at: <http://shop.vanartgallery.bc.ca/collections/artists-edition>

About the Vancouver Art Gallery

Founded in 1931, the Vancouver Art Gallery is recognized as one of the most respected and innovative visual arts institutions in Canada and is committed to strengthening ties between artists and diverse communities throughout the city, province, and beyond. As the largest public art museum in Western Canada, the Gallery features the work of ground-breaking contemporary artists from around the world and presents historical art of international significance, is committed to exploring the art of Asia, and provides a global platform for British Columbia's dynamic artistic community, including the work of First Nations artists. Its growing collection represents the most comprehensive resource for art in British Columbia and is the principal repository for visual art produced in the region, as well as related works by other notable Canadian and international artists. The Gallery also places an emphasis on advancing scholarship through major publications and presents a multitude of public programs that offer new ways to consider art for visitors who come from throughout the region and internationally.

In response to the significant growth in collections, exhibitions and attendance over the past decade, the Gallery announced in 2014 the selection of Herzog & de Meuron for the design of a new and expanded home in downtown Vancouver. The new facility will double the Gallery's current size and will be a vital catalyst to Vancouver, enhancing the city's cultural community and serving as a centre for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange in the visual arts. More information is available at <http://vanartgallery.bc.ca/future/>

The Vancouver Art Gallery is a not-for-profit organization supported by its members, individual donors, corporate funders, foundations, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

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Image: Ai Weiwei, *Free Speech Pendant*, 2014
Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery