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So Sorry—Never Sorry. Ai Weiwei's Art between Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

Ai Weiwei's 艾未未 (b. 1957) artistic expression revolves around his use of traditional Chinese techniques to create new designs and forms, shaping traditional materials into contemporary configurations. In the face of obstruction from state officials and local politicians, Ai Weiwei exposes himself to considerable personal risk in order to continue his activities as an artist and stay loyal to his convictions. This paper examines the roots of Ai Weiwei's work in Chinese art history and looks at how the artist has deliberately adapted traditional motifs to bring about a sense of alienation. Ai Weiwei's unique stance between current trends in western art and the Chinese feeling for handicrafts is also explored.

Keywords: traditional Chinese materials, contemporary art, Chinese politics, re-contextualization of Chinese tradition

Izvleček

Umetniško izražanje Ai Weiweija (r. 1957) se vrti okrog uporabe tradicionalnih kitajskih tehnik, da bi ustvaril nove vzorce in oblike in oblikoval tradicionalne materiale v sodobne podobe. Da bi kljub oviram državnih uradnikov in lokalnih politikov nadaljeval svoje dejavnosti kot umetnik in ostal zvest svojim prepričanjem, izpostavlja samega sebe precejšnji tveganosti. Pričujoči članek proučuje korenine njegovega dela v kitajski umetnostni zgodovini in prikazuje, kako je umetnik namerno prilagodil tradicionalne motive, da bi dosegel občutek odtujenosti. Ravno tako je prikazan Ai Weiweijev edinstven

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položaj med trenutnimi tendencami v zahodni umetnosti in kitajskim občutkom za rokodelska dela.

Ključne besede: tradicionalni kitajski materiali, sodobna umetnost, kitajska politika, re-kontekstualizacija kitajske tradicije

1 A Year in the Life of Ai Weiwei

When in October 2009 *Haus der Kunst* in Munich opened the large retrospective exhibition of Ai Weiwei's 艾未未 works entitled *So Sorry*[1], nobody anticipated the extent to which the presentation of this artist's work become so politically controversial in the months that followed. In the run-up to the exhibition, Ai Weiwei was beaten by police in Chengdu and, as a direct result of the injuries he sustained, was later treated in a Munich hospital. Further conflicts with the authorities in Sichuan ensued (Osnos 2010), and he organized a demonstration in early 2010 in Beijing to draw attention to the plight of a group of artists threatened by local authorities with eviction (Lorenz 2010). On October 8, 2010 Ai described the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 (born 1955) both in his own blog and on *Twitter* as the happiest moment in the history of the People's Republic of China (Hahn 2010). And when he was prevented from leaving the country shortly before the award ceremony, this did not go unnoticed by the international press (BBC News 2010).

A highly provocative action directed at Chinese officialdom was the announcement by Ai Weiwei in November 2010 that he would mark the forced demolition of his Shanghai studio with a party at which river crabs would be served. The artist was promptly placed under house arrest for seven days in Beijing. His friends and supporters staged the party in Shanghai without him under the watchful eye of the secret police, the press, and onlookers round the world. Ai's recently built and costly art studio was bulldozed away shortly afterwards (ArtSchool Vets! 2011).

But it is not only in China that Ai Weiwei's art stirs considerable controversy, causing him a lot of problems and attracting much media attention. Like all unusual new ideas or attempts to confront the public with something different, something previously not seen, his works are an irritant to the pertinent authorities,

[1] *Ai Weiwei—So Sorry*, Oct 12, 2009–Jan 17, 2010, *Haus der Kunst*, Munich.

whether these are conservationists or public health agencies. Thus, after just four days on show in the *Turbine Hall* of London's *Tate Modern*[2], his *Sunflower Seeds* installation was roped off to visitors on health grounds. As a result, the interactive and hands-on character of the artwork was lost (Herzog 2011). Another case in point is Ai Weiwei's contribution to the *Regionale 10* festival in Austria: this involved the placement of a four-ton boulder from the earthquake region in Sichuan on the Dachstein, the highest peak in the Steiermark. The Austrian Alps Society protested sharply against the project on environmental grounds (Spiegler 2010).

Since his exhibition in Munich, then, much has happened to Ai Weiwei in terms both of his artistic production and his political activism. But if things had been quiet, that would be a clear indication that his art had missed its target.

2 The Artist as Political Activist

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 as the son of Ai Qing 艾青 (1910–1996), one of the most renowned communist poets in the early years of the People's Republic of China. After his father was banished to the provinces in 1958, he was raised in Manchuria and Xinjiang. He enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy at the age of 21. His fellow-students included Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 (b. 1952) and Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 (b. 1951), who later became prominent film makers. Between 1981 and 1993 he lived and worked in New York, where he immersed himself in contemporary Western art forms and encountered performance, photography and conceptual art. When his father fell ill, Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing in 1993. "So sorry" said the authorities when they rehabilitated his father in 1979. "So sorry", that's all, for 20 years in exile. These two words have become a kind of *leitmotif* in Ai's art, they are a constant incentive for his outrage at the actions of the Chinese regime: its *pro forma* apologies, or its failure to apologize, its cover-up of tragedies or of institutional or human misconduct, and its refusal to provide proper information and to take personal responsibility. All of this fuels Ai Weiwei's actions and initiatives in which he exposes the lack of political integrity of this great and increasingly confident political power. According to Ai, as long as the government persists in its present policies and as long as there is unwillingness to

[2] *Sunflower Seeds*, Oct 12, 2010–May 2, 2011, *Turbine Hall, Tate Modern*, London.

accept responsibility, it will not be possible to build a genuine civil, democratic society (Dercon and Lorz 2009, 8).

In an interview with former CNN correspondent Christian Amanpour, Ai Weiwei said, when asked about his father's intellectual legacy:

> From being very young it was clear in my mind that this (Chinese) society has no humanity for people who disagree with it and that it cracks down hard on them (CNN 2010).

It is precisely this society without humanity that he denounces both in his political actions and in his art. Ai Weiwei's life, his thinking and his artistic actions are an ongoing dialogue with China's political practices. Art and politics cannot be separated from one another in his work, because in everything that surrounds him and makes up his own identity, his own body and organs, he sees a political dimension. "Art is life and life is art" (Dercon and Lorz 2009, 9) is Ai's maxim. The two are inextricably interlinked, clearly present in every aspect of their interaction and, because of this, perhaps invulnerable. Ai Weiwei takes high personal risks and, despite interference by the political authorities and administration, he remains true to the incorruptible, truth-seeking driving force behind his art and social activism.

Thus, his campaign in Sichuan directly after the serious earthquake in 2008 was aimed at telling the truth to the people whom it had affected. A disproportionate number of children died in the school buildings that collapsed one after another because building and safety regulations had been violated. When Ai Weiwei asked the planning and licensing authorities some unpleasant and critical questions, he received no reply. He then began to make his own investigations, with the help of hundreds of volunteers. They gathered facts, figures, and evidence, traced the names of over 5000 children who had lost their lives in the so-called "tofu schools" and established their age, date of birth, the exact place where they had died and the construction errors that had caused their school to collapse. When at the beginning of August 2009, shortly before the opening of his exhibition in Munich and after his efforts to investigate the Sichuan earthquake, Ai Weiwei was to testify in court in defence of his fellow-campaigner, author and activist Tan Zuoren 谭作人 (b. 1954), the police raided his hotel room and held him and his volunteers for eleven hours—until the trial was over (Ai 2009, 8). A photograph that was taken during this incident and immediately published on the internet was circulated very quickly and became an iconic symbol of political repression and

human rights violations in present-day China. When his hotel room was stormed, Ai Weiwei received a severe blow on the head, which later resulted in a life-threatening brain haemorrhage. He posted the following commentary on his blog:

> They beat me so hard that I may easily have suffered lasting damage…I can afford the treatment, but thousands of my fellow Chinese who are abused by the police every year cannot (Bork 2009).

Ai Weiwei used the internet to talk about the consequences of this abuse, his subsequent admission to a hospital in Munich, and the brain surgery that followed. He posted photographs of his CT scan, his catheter, his hospital bed and his room on various web sites as a kind of logbook. With these postings, he was taking a clear stand against the suppression of free speech and directly denouncing the brutal assault by the security forces for which there had been no legal basis.

But thanks to this altercation the "Sichuan Earthquake Victims" project became more and more of a political issue. The subject was featured prominently on the façade of *Haus der Kunst* during the retrospective of Ai's works in 2009/2010: The artist installed 9000 red, green, blue and yellow children's backpacks along the length of the 100 metre long façade of the building, arranging them in a kind of mosaic to form the Chinese characters: "她在这个世界上开心地生活过七年". These are the words of a mother who neither asked for nor wanted financial compensation for the loss of her daughter in one of the schools that collapsed in the earthquake. She simply wanted her to be remembered, because "she lived happily for seven years in this world". (*Remembering* 2009)

3 "For a Harmonious Society, Eat River Crabs!"

"Down with the Confucian shop!" was the enraged battle-cry of the Beijing students who staged protests on May 4, 1919 and who saw Confucius as the root of the malaise in the Chinese state. "From whatever angle you look at it, Confucius is disgusting!" says Ai Weiwei 90 years later in his *Tweeter* and claims that Confucius is the root of the malaise in the Chinese state today (Custer 2010). But his anger is directed primarily at the Confucian-influenced notion of harmony (*he* 和), and thus at associated catchwords such as "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), the slogan that has officially represented China's political course since October 2004, since the 4th plenum of the Central Committee elected

by the 16th Party Conference (Wacker and Kaiser 2008, 7). The Chinese leadership also propagates the concept of harmony, of peaceful co-existence, on the level of international politics: For example, when Chinese President Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 addressed the UN General Assembly in September 2005, he spoke of a "harmonious world" (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界), without further comment (Wacker and Kaiser 2008, 9f.). Harmony in politics and society, in the microcosm and the macrocosm, has become a fixed term in the official political ideology. In Zhang Yimou's dazzling opening ceremony at the Olympic Games in 2008 "harmony" (*he* 和) was the *leitmotif* of the ostentatious choreography. The China's attitude towards religions, too, is changing in line with the political re-orientation: They are no longer viewed as the "opium of the people" but rather as a positive force that can contribute to building a "harmonious society" (Wacker and Kaiser 2008, 10). It is also clear, however, that for the regime to achieve this "harmonious society", in spite of resistance from divergent and disruptive elements, it has to deploy such instruments of power which are diametrically opposed to the term "harmony": censorship, surveillance, arrest, and arbitrary prison sentences.

Since the new slogan was introduced, Communist propaganda has plastered the country with so much "harmony" that the political exploitation of the term is all too obvious and the political objective has been defeated. "I've been 'harmonized'" write China's internet activists and bloggers, when yet again one of their commentaries on the web has been censored or one of their websites shut down. But as a rule they use the character for "river crab" (*hexie* 河蟹), because the word "harmony" itself is increasingly falling victim to censorship. Thus, the word "harmony" has evolved into a "river crab" and has become synonymous with censorship (Bork 2010).

Taking up this wordplay with bitter irony and artistic creativity, Ai Weiwei organized a party to mark the forced demolition of his newly built studio in Shanghai, where guests would be served river crabs. The artist's reaction to his own powerlessness in a situation where no reasons were given for the demolition of his studio, a situation that was a blatant example of political repression, reveals a subversive sense of humour and a kind of creativity which must strike officialdom as suspicious and objectionable. The action gave further momentum to the open criticism of the Chinese authorities: By eating river crabs, his guests would be symbolically devouring the abused notion of "harmony", which itself was threatening to devour them through the authoritarian control and censorship

they encountered every day. The party went ahead without the artist, because Ai was put under house arrest in Beijing for seven days. Despite this, some 800 guests came to Shanghai from all over China and protested with the traditional, but this time symbolic, river crab feast against censorship and repression. Many of them held the crabs up in the air like trophies and shouted: "For a harmonious society, eat river crabs!" (Freyeisen 2010).

4 Tradition is Dead—Long Live Tradition!

Like so much of Ai Weiwei's work, this action is somewhere between a concrete political statement and an artistic expression. His art is inconceivable without China's specific history and culture. He deconstructs tradition, and in this critical process he discovers a deep-rooted bond with tradition, both in his work and within himself. Essentially, Ai Weiwei deconstructs tradition, estranges or defamiliarizes it, re-interprets it and, finally, reassembles it. Traditional motifs can be found in almost every artefact that the artist makes or defamiliarizes. But, according to Ai Weiwei, it is only by breaking with the past and creatively defamiliarizing it in the present that a liberated future can be created, a future that is free of historical baggage. The main source of all creativity can only be found by taking this approach: "Creativity is the ability to reject the past, to change the *status quo* and to look for new potential." (Ai and Siemons 2009, 9)

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995), a series of photographs that documents the art performance of the same name, is probably the best known example of Ai's de-contextualizing traditional objects and was made in his iconoclastic phase in the mid-1990s. The dropping of an ancient pot is the close-up documentation of an act of destruction, which happens within fractions of a second. It is a perfect illustration of the three Newtonian laws of motion: Ai Weiwei holds the urn (inertia), the urn is in free fall (principle of action), and the urn smashes at his feet (principle of reaction); it is also a demonstration of the law of gravity, the earth's gravitational pull, and creative destruction which makes room for new creativity. At the same time, the Han Dynasty urn embodies a cultural tradition which has outlived its usefulness. The black and white triptych transforms this two-thousand-year-old artefact into a different artwork, gives it a new permanence and a new critical relevance. The value of the original is replaced by the "valuelessness" of the fake (Liveauctioneers).

Ai Weiwei has applied bright paint to vases that date back to pre-dynastic China and transformed them into Pop Art objects[3]; and he has decorated a *Han Dynasty Urn*[4] with the *Coca Cola* logo. These are similar iconoclastic actions, where the artist reinvents traditional objects and makes their re-contextualization possible. He refers to these works as *fake-fate* (Hill 2008). The vases, though now "wrapped" in a modern design, continue to exist in the showcases of museums and galleries. But where the *Coca Cola* logo melds with the Neolithic, and where bright acrylic colours lend the faded surface of an antique vase an irritatingly commercial banality, time ceases to exist: It is no longer visible either in tradition or in modernity, either in the original or in the fake—it has ceased to exist.

The re-assembly of Qing Dynasty furniture into surreal, unfamiliar looking objects that have been divested of their function represents a break with the traditional notions of authority and authenticity in ancient China. Like his artistic forbearer Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who coined the terms *ready-made* and *objet trouvé* at the beginning of the 20th century and who was regarded as the initiator of conceptual art, Ai Weiwei assembles everyday objects like doors[5] and furniture[6], coat hangers[7] or bicycles[8] in unexpected ways. This conceptual interaction—through the intention of the artist and through the new site—gives the ready-mades an entirely new meaning, which has nothing in common with the original object.

Ai's art bears strong traces not only of Marcel Duchamp, but also of object artists like Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) and graphic artists and painters like Jasper Johns (b. 1930), the prominent exponents of Pop Art. Even the "extended art concept" and "social sculpture" of Josef Beuys (1921–1986) appears to be mirrored in Ai Weiwei's actions and artworks. What distinguishes his work is that he is constantly moving between the cultures of East and West. Traditional Chinese art culture meets free, unrestrained Western art forms. A case in point is Ai's design for the *Beijing National Stadium*, built for the *Summer Olympic Games* in 2008 in cooperation with the Swiss architects *Herzog & de Meuron* (World News; Building Bejing Stadium 2008): It is reminiscent of an antique Chinese clay water bowl made or a porcelain rice bowl.

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[3] *Colored Vases*, 2005, 2006, 2008.
[4] *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca Cola Logo*, 1994.
[5] *Template*, 2007.
[6] *Table with Two Legs*, 2005; *Stools*, 1997; *Grapes*, 2008.
[7] *Profile Duchamp*, 1985.
[8] *Forever Bicycles*, 2006.

Ai Weiwei's close bond with his homeland is also clearly apparent in his "social sculptures" such as *Fairytale*, an action for which 1001 Chinese were invited in 2007 to the *documenta XII* arts festival in Kassel, Germany. Kassel, the town in which the Brothers Grimm lived and worked from 1798 to 1839 and which is the setting for a number of their fairytales, is today clearly marked by the physiognomy of the modern age. Selected from all sectors of the population and including farmers, teachers, students, artists, housewives and engineers, the *Fairytale* participants formed a very heterogeneous group indeed. What they all had in common and what distinguished them from their surroundings and made them recognizable was their homeland, the People's Republic of China. For many of them the opportunity to travel to Europe was a dream come true, an unexpected twist of fate that only occurs in fairytales by the Brothers Grimm or in the Tales of 1001 Nights. Their clothes, lunch bags, luggage and accessories were all designed by Ai Weiwei and his team: They were made into "social sculptures", recognizable as part of the exhibition. Commenting on his idea, Ai Weiwei said:

> To bring 1,001 Chinese to Kassel is to create the wherewithal such that each participant has the chance to confront him or herself with their own ordinary lives and at the same time to attend one of the major festivals of contemporary art. It's all about the personal experience, awareness, and consciousness as well as the direct confrontation and enlightenment they experience through the whole process. I believe this is the most important and meaningful experience that can be derived from cultural exchange (Seefranz 2007).

In his Fairytale action Ai Weiwei showed how the town of Kassel could be seen through the eyes of the Chinese, who are conditioned by quite a different understanding of and relationship toward the traditional and the modern. And vice versa, the action altered the appearance of the town, making it possible for the people of Kassel to see their own town differently. In the hundred days of *documenta XII* 2007 this act of integrating two different lifestyles, East and West, "cast a spell" on day-to-day life in Kassel in the manner of a fairytale; it left a lasting impression on the consciousness of everyone involved and created encounters which opened the way for something new, something that had never before been experienced.

Ai Weiwei is one of the rare mediators between Western forms of expression and Asian appreciation of traditional craftsmanship. His objects—made of porcelain, carpet, tea, paper and wood—are of the highest quality and are a testimony to the skills and painstaking work of many craftspeople. This perfection

in craftsmanship is a further acknowledgement by the artist of his own tradition and his own roots. Thus, several years of intricate work preceded the *Sunflower Seeds* exhibition in London, with some 1,600 craftspeople in Jingedezhen 景德鎮, the centre of porcelain making, involved in the production of porcelain sunflower seeds. With this laboriously crafted installation, in which each of the hundred million seeds were fired at a temperature of 1300 degrees centigrade, painted by hand on both sides and fired again at 800 degrees, according to the ancient porcelain-making process, Ai Weiwei was seeking ways of transposing a traditional technique into the language of present-day art. The production process was entirely traditional, which means that from the making of the clay to the finished sunflower seed there were between twenty and thirty stages. Groups of artisans in small workshops worked together closely and played their different parts in the various production stages. Work could also be taken home and done alongside the worker's household chores (Sunflower Seeds 2010). As with so many of Ai Weiwei's works, the message of the installation is multi-layered. It varies from the question of the relationship of the individual to the collective and criticism of mass production to allusions to the need to share in times of deprivation and hunger. A sunflower with its myriads of seeds also stands for the Chinese people, who turned towards the true light of the sun, Chairman Mao (Thomas 2010). Each seed, each person, is unique, distinctive in the potentiality of his or her individual expression and in this respect must be appreciated. But only together do Ai Weiwei's hundred million sunflower seeds cause a gigantic sea of porcelain to sound like the ocean and allow visitors to the *Tate* to become immersed in a new realm of experience, which may have nothing to do with China but may recall memories of one's earlier life or a long forgotten walk on a pebble beach.

A further example of an intricately hand-crafted object is Soft Ground, a 380m^2 woollen carpet woven specially for the exhibition in *Haus der Kunst, Soft Ground* (2009). It is a precise copy of the floor in hall 2 of the Munich museum, an accurate reproduction of the 969 rectangular tiles that make up this floor. Each tile segment was photographed and its position accurately recorded. It then took ninety days for the carpet to be traditionally woven in a state-owned weaving mill in Hebei 河北 province. During the production process the colours and lines of each segment were fashioned accurately and woven in wool died in a combination of threads made of six strands (Ai et al. 2009, 53). With his carpet project, Ai Weiwei was responding to the *genius loci* and engaging in a dialogue with the

ideology-steeped history of *Haus der Kunst*. This exhibition building, which was commissioned by Adolf Hitler, is built of German lime stone rather than Italian marble, and because this material is less resistant to abrasion, it bears the clear traces of the past seventy years, rather like a topography of time. On the obvious level, the woollen carpet covers the old worn stone floor. In fact, however, the ambiguity of the imitation emphasizes rather than conceals historical reality. The carpet also creates a thick buffer that muffles the sounds of the immediate present but at the same time permits the visitor to become immersed in the time dimension of an inglorious past.

Ai Weiwei's soft, thick carpet also symbolizes China's relationship to its own history, when in the imperial era outstanding craftsmanship and artistic expression flourished. Ai is addressing the relationship between the level of artistic and technical production and the level of political consciousness. In other words: To what degree can art develop freely under an authoritarian regime? For Ai Weiwei, freedom of artistic expression, both in form and content, is only possible if traditional craft techniques and freedom of artistic expression are preserved. Though *Soft Ground* provides no final answer to this question, the subtle dialogue between materials and functions is thought-provoking indeed.

Though influenced in his artistic expression by Western forebears and styles, Ai Weiwei has chosen to use only traditional Chinese materials here. In this way, the significance of tradition only becomes apparent through its elimination, a double negative so to speak: The de-contextualization of tradition transforms it into a new artwork.

5 In Praise of the Net and Freedom

Alongside these more or less conventional art objects are digital pictures and messages such as emails, blogs and particularly commentaries posted on *Twitter* or the Chinese equivalent, the microblog site *Weibo* 微博, all of which are indispensable components of Ai Weiwei's direct engagement and political activism. His website is closely monitored, censored, and regularly shut down by the Chinese authorities. Implied criticism of the regime, wordplay or comments that upset the authorities simply disappeared, albeit for a short time only. The site is quickly reinstated under a different web address; this cat and mouse game is ongoing. Although the authorities are now on the same technical level as internet

users and are spending huge sums of money on controlling and censoring the net, there are still many ways of circulating uncensored information and expressing opinions. Critical and candid web users are Ai's main audience, his harshest critics and his staunch supporters. Commenting on the significance of the internet in China, he says:

> I think we were different people before the arrival of internet technology. We humans can now be influenced in a different way. We can also exercise our rights on very different channels or exercise power in different ways. This versatility means redefining both the individual and society (Friedrich-Freksa 2010).

Through the massive spread of digital media the interaction between the individual and the collective is in the process of being redefined in China, too, and this is inevitably creating a new consciousness in the digital public sphere: The fundamental right of every individual to be allowed to question things without fear of reprisals is being expressed. And here lies the key to individual and collective freedom.

Ai Weiwei's artistic and public actions are clear reactions to and critical comments on the political and social reality in his homeland. In his work he does not belong to the Western avant-garde. His use of craft traditions and techniques that have been handed down in China through the ages reveals the artist's desire for direct expression rather than "intellectual sublimation". In the special tension between Ai Weiwei's deep roots in his own cultural tradition on the one hand and his clear position vis-à-vis China's political reality on the other, his artworks are trailblazers of a new, deeply political, re-oriented, free-thinking and creative Chinese contemporary art. They convey a true impression of the elemental importance of political and artistic freedom to him, because his art and his life are based on a radical desire for self-determination. To conclude my essay, I would like to quote Ai's own words in praise of freedom:

> My life is characterized by having no plan, no direction, and no goals … I can throw myself into the things that I like, and because there are no obstacles, I can never be trapped (Ai and Siemnons 2009, 21).

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