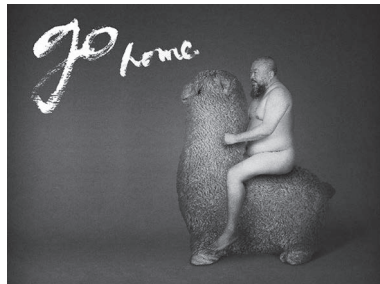


SOUCHOU YAO

The Political Art *of Ai*



I am writing this in tropical Malaysia, but my head is filled with thoughts of China from where I have just returned after visiting my eldest brother's family. The mind is a wilful master, and it takes me where it wants me to go. Faced with the mind's obstinacy, the writerly task is a constantly shifting terrain. The China I know and remember, and the China that causes so much censoring grief on the artist Ai Weiwei, enter and exit like unwanted guests, each trying to take up domicile in my head.

Linfen, a city of some four million people, is located in Shanxi Province in central China. Though an ancient city, Linfen has not been blessed with archaeological ruins and ancient monuments, so there is not much to see. Free from the tourist routine most of my time is with my brother's widow. Through polite coaxing, I prompt her to talk about the Revolutionary China to which she and her husband committed their lives. They had met in the medical school in Taiyuan, the provincial capital, he a young doctor made lecturer in infectious diseases, she a nurse from a village clinic. They fell in love and were married, and for their honeymoon went to the coalmines around Taiyuan to 'serve the workers' ravaged by Pneumoconiosis, the dreaded Black Lung disease. She told me of their experiences at the mines, joining the Communist Party and political education in joining the masses to 'forge a new Socialist China'. Now the narrative of their revolutionary romance is made real by this woman, her appearance wrinkled by age and attrition, but with the robust spirit of one who has truly lived and achieved 'great things'. During the Cultural Revolution she and her husband had been dragged through 'struggle sessions' because of their foreign connections. Kin sentiment—and their loyalty to us in Malaysia—had brought them towards the precipice of torture and public humiliation, and caused the early death of my brother. Nonetheless, old age and the passage of time has made her remarkably sanguine about the terrible happenings of Maoist China; like many people she sees them as painful necessities that have brought about the peace and prosperity of today.

I was driven to yet another banquet hosted by one of her party-official kinsmen. Snug in the leather seats of the Audi sedan, I mull over the consequences of post-Deng China: the consumerism, the money fetishism, the vapid worship of things Western, the pollution, and corrupt officialdom. I begin to tell her my thoughts, instantly regretting my ranting. I am tired and not a little angry with myself. As the Audi is speeding through the streets my mind begins to settle on a thought. With contemporary China, as you stroll along the pathway to meet its true aspects, you find yourself considering two choices—a China that has woken from the long winter sleep of Maoist absolutism, or a China that has turned its velvety face and re-sharpened the tools of brutal repression. Either way, you would, almost without fail, meet a dead end.

Ai Weiwei is globally known as a prominent Chinese artist, political activist, human rights advocate and an interrogator of Chinese government corruption. Given the difficulty in disconnecting these labels, curators and critics have settled for “political artist”, or a maker of “political art”. The “Chinese” in Chinese artist too, sits unhappily with him. For Ai is a global phenomenon; his works are trophy buys in the international art market as much as he is heavily courted globally by museums and galleries. In all this his Chinese-ness is but a minor reminder of some not insignificant facts—his country of origin; his now place of residence (Beijing) after the decade long sojourn in the USA from 1981 to 1993; his various scuffles with the Chinese state that together with his baroquely engaging works have brought him worldwide fame. In a sense, it is not altogether incorrect to think about Ai as essentially a “Chinese artist”, one who takes his unhappy relationship with the country of his birth as the subject of engagement.

It is debatable Chinese contemporary art is at the peak of creativity—robust, young and aggressively innovative. Yet, having spent the last decades avenging the pain of the Cultural Revolution and its Maoist legacy, it is showing signs of exhaustion that often lead to a peddling of soft conceptualisation and popularism. The narrative of Chinese contemporary art begins in the year after the rise of Deng Xiaoping (as paramount leader of the People’s Republic of China) in 1978 when his social and economic reforms opened the way for a ‘revolution’ in the arts. The Scar artists, survivors of the Cultural Revolution, engaged and resolved the issue of national trauma. Coming into prominence at the same time were the Stars Group of artists, the key figures of which included Ma Desheng, Li Shuang, Wang Keping and Ai Weiwei. The Stars Group faced significant criticism and after a major skirmish with the state in 1983, many left the country to begin their fruitful sojourn in the West. Living and working in Paris, Wang Keping produced wooden sculptures of Buddha-like Mao figures, juxtaposing emotional reticence with a barely disguised pricking at the Chinese leader’s supine lasciviousness. Wang, like others of the Scar and Star artists, remodelled himself to join the Political Pop and New Wave Movements of the mid-1980s. Bold and brash, New Wave and Political Pop erased whatever lingering nostalgia there was for Maoist idealism from the previous generations of artists. There was no more the playful reconfigurations of socialist realism; rather its burial. Wang’s eventual ‘arrival’ as a great artist was signalled by his *Great Criticism* series: Microsoft, Gucci, Coca-Cola, and Chanel, all the new gods of cultural adoration. The awkward sibling of Political Pop was Cynical Realism, which reached its peak in 1995, six years after the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Their works widely extolled in Western art circles, the Cynical Realists outdid the Popists: they were gaudy, loud, and yet captivating. I see Cynical Realism as a sign of the end transformation of what stands for ‘the political’ in Chinese art. Zeng Fanzhi, Yue Minjun and Lui Wei: they marked their works with a pained disenchantment with the politics that had been for many defined by Maoism. Cool and reserved, when they turned their critical eye towards popular consumption, their works possessed the power to express one’s anxiety at the easy indulgence of global consumption, including that of art.

The rise of Ai Weiwei claims a niche in this chronology of movements and schools—as a Stars pioneering figure he has dramatically moved on. His politics can be understood as the final arrival of Chinese art’s journey from the Stars Group to Cynical Realism. The transfiguration of schools and fashions had their victors and vanquished, with Ai perhaps their most spectacular successor. The Artsy website lists one hundred and five of Ai’s works, in media ranging from sculpture and photography to prints and design. One of his earliest works is *Suzhou River in Shanghai* (1976), a wistful watery scene executed in ink on rice paper. The 1981-93 years in America produced works including *Mao (facing*

forward) (1986), an oil painting of the Communist leader lacerated by shadow lines across the face and torso, and *Last Cigarette of the Smoking Generation* (1986), a framed cigarette mounted on board. These are not works of great subtlety or critical edge. *It's the Way* (c. 1987) is a Polaroid of the naked artist framed by a cut-out crucifix, a crude layering of motifs we come to recognise as Ai's brand, like the 'up yours' finger at symbols of the establishment. (We in Australia were mystified when the Sydney Opera House got the treatment). These works carry traces of the conceptual heat of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s, but they have a potpourri or pastiche feel, of Ai experimenting in the use of motifs and medium.

Ai's return to China in 1993 initiated a set of works that has since made him famous. He photographed his wife Lu Qing flashing her underwear in Tiananmen Square in *June 1994* (1994). Perhaps this upskirting took place for just a second or so, the indifferent public and security men assuming it a mere prankish act rather than one of political protest. The same year he made *Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo*, of a pot from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) emblazoned with the most famous brand name of global consumption, followed by the infamous (performance and photo-triptych) *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), the video loop of the artist's destruction of a (supposedly) two thousand-year-old Chinese ceramic vase—an act of iconoclast import that only a Western audience witnessing the burning, as a performance, of Michelangelo's *Mona Lisa* (real or faked) would appreciate.

The early 2000s was a phase of consolidation for Ai. Between 2004 and 2006 he produced a series of work both laconic and drivingly subversive, with the rehash of an old theme. *Coloured Vases* (2006) again unleashed the new on the old, in this case a 'destruction', by industrial paint, of a Chinese antique—a vase from the Neolithic period (5,000-3,000 BC). There was the teasing, almost absurd resurrection of traditional aesthetics in *Wave* (2005), a mocking demolition of form and its meaning—a cultural critique that tears down the pretensions of Chinese civilisation. From *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* to *Coloured Vases*, his work pokes a wet finger onto the paper lantern; the fragile vulnerability is at once revealed and exposed. *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* finds a positive reception in the West partly because, I believe, of its exuberant telling of the hegemony of traditional icons and their ideological power generally. It is a distinct modernist gesture; its power lies in the easy extension of contexts and concerns beyond China. The audience needs not know the time or the Chinese system of period classification of the object Ai is returning to the dusty ground; it is enough to know it is extremely valuable and an archaeological treasure.

Coloured Vases and *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* keep company with other his projects of 'cultural demolition'. It is difficult to forget them—they are dramatic, boldly executed and brazenly sensational. Our viewing pleasure is biased towards an appetite for vandalism, the trashing of tired old things, like putting to flame the love letters from a neurotic affair of one's youth. More engaging for me are the wooden sculptures produced during the same period; they show Ai can be conceptually perceptive without resorting to hype or cant. Each of these works has its origin in the domestic function, but the 'a desk is a desk' certainty is made ambivalent by the misshaping or contortion of the original form. *Table and Pillar* (2002) is a polished antique table 'stabbed' by a tall wooden pillar—a phallic entry, one is tempted to say, into the womb of a piece of domestic furniture from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). *Table with Two Legs* (2004) on the other hand, is full of Surrealist vivacity that is almost homage to Méret Oppenheim's *Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)* (1936). Simply, a desk that cannot be used to write or eat on is pure form without substance, an empty signifier. In 2007, Ai produced the wooden sculpture *Stool*, another playful conceit, a piece of furniture that cannot be. It might be said that "stool" is another name for shit, a semantic link that would achieve even more effectively 'cultural destruction'.

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One is dazzled by the virulent ‘fuck Chinese civilisation’ or ‘shit on Chinese civilisation’ denigration that lurches towards cynicism or personal abnegation: why does Ai hate China so much? Or does he? With *Fairytale Chairs* produced in the same year, his critical angst is much muted, even though it presents the same strategy, the manufacturing of fakery as artistic protest against the fetishism of antiquity. Seven years later, *Grapes* (2014) duplicates the theme—forty Qing Dynasty stools glued and dowelled together into a circular cluster of wooden legs—that suggests a gathering crowd of fans having just discovered their object of adoration is a void; *The Wizard of Oz* in Zen mode.

The ‘Furniture Series’, as I shall call it, is quite distinctive in Ai’s repertoire—there is something in these works that reinforces the inner heartbeat of Ai’s political project. A work like *Grapes* (2010) bears an uncertainty of feeling that somehow emanates from the artist’s global preening. The ‘Furniture Series’ does not so much ask questions as positing a nagging doubt on the sheer monumentalism of Chinese antiquity. They are remarkably deconstructive works. Yet, one feels something is amiss—Ai is like a football coach who believes he has all the strategic moves covered, but is blind to the fact that some players are not following the game plan. In both the ‘Furniture Series’ and *Dropping the Ming Vase*, each object’s origin lacks the pointed quotation marks: it is Qing Dynasty or Ming Dynasty, not “Qing Dynasty” and “Ming Dynasty”. If *Table and Pillar* (2002) were tagged “Wooden Pillar and Table from the ‘Qing Dynasty’ (1644–1911)”, the whole currency of the work would have radically changed. The destruction of fakes simply does not have the credibility, as does that of objects of genuine antiquity. Of course, the desks, chairs and the Ming vase could just as well be genuine—Ai has sufficient prestige to muster funding for their purchase; in which case it raises some problematic issues.

As cultural critique, the ‘Furniture Series’ has to resurrect the protocol of form in order to execute the devastating put down. Contemporary Chinese artists are proud of the craftsmanship that go into the making of their work. From Ai’s furniture items, Shen Shaomin’s *Bonsai Series* (2007-09) to Xu Bing’s *Tian Shu* (1987-91), the ‘heavenly book’ of faked Chinese calligraphy—assert the near perfection with which they have brought alive traditional aesthetic form. Those Chinese artists who are internationally successful keep studios in China and call upon the craftsmen, and craftswomen, to assist in production; the exact people who made possible Ai’s epic *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), at Tate Modern where one hundred million porcelain ‘seeds’, hand-painted by 1,600 Chinese artisans, were installed on the gallery floors. This may have been a commentary on mass consumption and the loss of individuality, but it might also be a critique about the Chinese political economy where relative wages and subcontracting are the norm. So is *Sunflower Seeds* a critique of the Chinese political economy or its validation? I tend to settle for the latter.

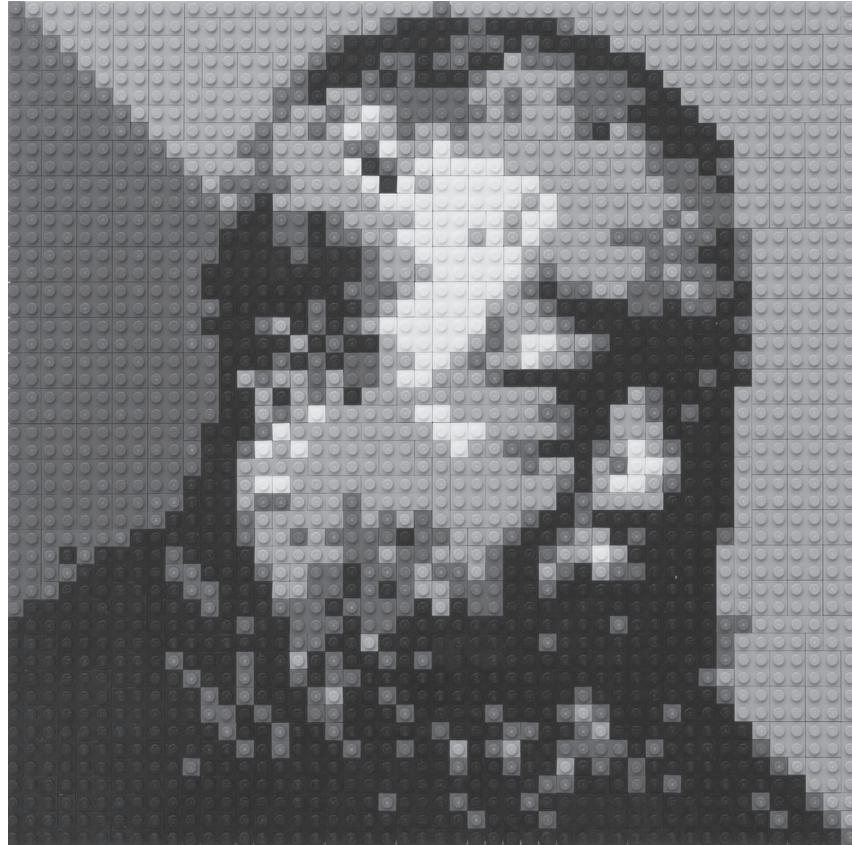
For all his critical anger, one detects in Ai a notable innocence regarding the flaky separation of form and content. For form itself can be the message. Jean-Luc Godard imprinted in his films this critical insight; “To me style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and the inside of the human body—both go together, they can’t be separated”.¹ With Ai, when ancient objects are reproduced in such immaculate perfection, one might wonder at the artist’s inner desire. From the resurrection of the ancient aesthetics, cultural consent is but centimetres away. Of course, the ‘Furniture Series’ is a work of a significant double act: the validation of form is preparation for its rude dismissal. Yet, its final gesture feels remarkably tame. It is as though form and message are like lovers locked in a coy embrace; each won’t let go of the other. Ai may want to figuratively fuck Mother China, but the Oedipal pull is strong and something stands in the way of its final execution.

If I call Ai a Chinese cultural nationalist, this is not to suggest he abides to the narrative of the Communist state and its agendas. I have no idea whether he loves China more than he hates it. Nonetheless, “fuck China”, taken literally, is also an act of carnal love. Cultural nationalism seems to disclose a significant sense of pulling back, of softening the critical edge of his work. This is especially so when he shuns austerity of execution when austerity is called for, when he gives over to the allure of the Chinese aesthetic form. As with my brother’s wife, one’s adoration of China, in the secret heart of hearts, has not diminished the Communist state its many faults. For an artist, this may well be the most glaring bestowal of cultural nationalism: to lovingly, luxuriantly, reproduce the traditional aesthetics is also to bring back alive the devil. For modern Chinese thinkers, the devil is as much the political system as China’s culture and civilisation; the dilemma being it is harder to revolutionise culture and civilisation than the political system. As China’s nineteenth century reformers realised, to reject Chinese culture is also to reject something of themselves. China’s civilisation is a bastard, but it is *our* bastard, a refined and sophisticated one at that. You can’t say, “fuck you, China” without a some regret and love too.

For those making ‘political art’ now, there are simply so many wars and victims of state violence that engage their ideological affinities. At times Ai seems to be lost in ‘the land of opportunity’, so to speak. His brilliance is often suppressed by his tendency for rash judgement and rendering the social and political life of China in black and white terms. He has now expanded his horizons beyond China. His recreation of the image of the drowned Syrian infant on a pebbled beach on the Greek Island of Lesbos captured world media attention, but it was sensationalist and exploitative. In this and other works, his capacity for headline grabbing and geeky self-promotion has made it difficult to question what is the nature of Ai’s ‘political art’? Does it ultimately matter, and to whom?

Political art means so many things to so many people. Since artists make works in their own time and social milieu, all artforms are in a sense social and political. Artists can, in varying degrees of urgency and opacity, bring to public attention important issues of power or oppression that affect people’s lives. But that already covers so broad a domain as to be meaningless. It is not only cynicism that makes one say that after Freud, and Derridian post-structuralism, few would take an artist’s declared intention and the politics of his/her art as given. For the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, the greater issue is not ‘making political art’ but ‘doing art politically’, a rephrasing of Godard’s “It is a matter of making films politically; it is not a matter of making political films”.² From Godard to Hirschhorn—and Walter Benjamin and linguistic anthropology—are employed the same concerns about the mutual entanglement of message and form. Hirschhorn’s position is worthy of meditation by anyone making ‘political art’:

Doing art politically means giving form. Making a form—but giving form. A form which comes from me, from myself only, which can only come from me because I see the form that way, I understand it that way and because I am the only one to know that form. To give form—as opposed to making a form—means to be one with it. I must stand alone with this form. It means raising the form, asserting this form and defending it—against everything and against everyone. It means to ask the question of form for myself and try to answer—through giving form. I want to try to confront the great artistic challenge: How can I give a form which takes a position? How can I give a form that resists facts? I want to understand the question of form as the most important question for an artist.³



This is a position that moves away from the noisy agenda setting and righting the wrongs of the world, simply because this risks turning art into a ‘functional thing’, an instrument of sorts. The most polemical one can be is to take a firm position. In the giving of form, Hirschhorn never forgets the importance of individual vision that drives all art practices: “I am, artistically and intellectually, responsible for I do.”⁴ This is how I would read Hirschhorn: ‘doing art politically’ requires one to be existentially authentic, and that means ‘asserting’ and ‘defending’ one’s position, and at the same time, opening oneself to scrutiny. And certainly, the process of ‘doing art’ and the very act of making form offers a platform upon which to examine the artist’s desire and ideological pretensions. My mind keeps returning to Godard’s *Sympathy For the Devil* (1968) and *La Chinoise* (1967), both a self-conscious enactment of a film-in-the-making, less the end product. Like Godard’s films, perhaps ‘political art’ too should be works of auto-critique.

This suggests several things. For one, we have to resist the tyranny of facts so beloved of empiricism. The Chinese state is indeed so oppressive, the Syrian infant did indeed drown off the Turkish coast, but the meanings we attach to them and the manner with which we express our ‘positions’—they are everything. Hirschhorn has asked, “How do I give form that resists fact?” For facts can be the seed of absolutism in political art because they fuel the conviction of one’s unshaken rightness. The Chinese state can hold up its benign face when it needs to, such as during the rescue effort after the Sichuan earthquake in 2013: government incompetence is the main feature of the disaster, along with residents being moved to tears by President Xi Jinping’s promise of century-old state benevolence, “The central authorities will look after you”. The death of the Syrian child was indeed profoundly tragic, but Ai’s cause was not served by his poor taste and injudiciousness that earned him the public derision—“crude, thoughtless and egotistical”⁵ and “Ai Weiwei the artist died in—and with—that fake death.”⁶

For an artist of such global celebrity status and political cache, we have the expectation that Ai does more than talk the talk. He has undoubtedly achieved a great deal—in voicing his protest against the oppression of the Chinese state and global human rights abuses. Yet the nagging feeling never dissipates that he might have done these better, with greater subtlety and, dare one say, artistic integrity. Ai is gifted with great skill and imagination, but his work rarely elevates itself to the *universalising* narrative of human suffering and endurance as, for example, Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), in protest of the German Luftwaffe terror bombing during the Spanish Civil War. We are humbled by the heroism of Spanish people as much as by Picasso’s clarity of vision and a selfless homage to his subject(s). Much of Ai’s art, even his ‘Furniture Series’, is burdened by his geeky call for attention and barely conscious stratagem of desire. His mission to expose human misery in one form or another advocates the argument of what not to do if ‘political art’ is to avoid mercy fatigue. If the artist pursues an exposé of the ills of a nation-state competing for world hegemony, it is essential that such critique is astute in its reproach of all its main targets. Ai may not be immoral in his attitude, yet whether he likes it or not he has aggrandised post-Cold War rhetoric about a rising global power refusing to abide by international standards of multilateral cooperation. China has rightly earned Ai’s critical rage, but the province of international relations is a web of ever shifting alliances and diplomatic intrigue. Every state power is self-focused, inevitably no greater or lesser evil than the other. But it is tempting to contend that the autocracy of the Chinese state is such a betrayal of the modernist faith in the march to social betterment, to make an attack on China as historically myopic. The bigger villain is progressivism or any one of our modern, capitalist yearnings; a work that meditates upon the fact that all human projects can go wrong would be one of tragic wisdom and philosophic depth.

At the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, for its 2015 exhibition *Andy Warhol | Ai Weiwei*, I viewed with cringing unease Ai’s *Lego Room* (2015) with names of Australian human rights activists and their comments sculpted on the wall from Lego blocks. It was naïve and artless, like some NGO celebrity’s rush to judgment of the country of Others. If cultural nationalism stifles the cultural demolition of earlier work, now his success and the near reverence he enjoys among the world’s museums and galleries similarly imprints upon his work an intellectual insouciance that borders on carelessness. But celebrity status and wealth does not necessarily unhinge one’s critical vigilance. The deceit, for the artist as much as for the viewer, is to not give over to the allure of fame and success—if art is to have significance beyond providing the bread-and-circus spectacle for the insatiable appetite of popular consumption.

The Political Art of *Ai*

Notes

¹ Quoted in Richard Roud, *Godard*, London: British Film Institute, 2010

² Quoted in Phillip Drummond, 'Jean Luc-Goddard', *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Geoffrey Howell-Smith (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 753

³ Thomas Hirschhorn, 'Doing political art: What does this mean?', <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n1/fullap01.html>; accessed 4 August, 2016

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Niru Ratnam, 'Ai Weiwei's Aylan Kurdi image is crude, thoughtless and egotistical', *The Spectator*, 1 February, 2016; <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/02/ai-weiweis-aylan-kurdi-image-is-crude-thoughtless-and-egotistical/>; accessed 4 August, 2016

⁶ Hamid Dabashi, 'A portrait of the artist as a dead boy; *Al Jazeera*, 4 April, 2016; <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/portrait-artist-dead-boy-ai-weiwei-aylan-kurdi-refugees-160204095701479.html>; accessed 4 August, 2016

