

Ai Weiwei's Provocative Expressions and the Fight for Human Rights

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Abstract

World-renowned artist and human rights activist Ai Weiwei has been creating art that has shaken the Chinese government for nearly two decades. It has exposed the atrocities the communist ruling power has showered upon its citizens and given hope to those that believe they have lost everything. In this review paper, I have compiled from several articles and books what I believe to be his most influential works that have had the most significant positive effects on the world. The works include Remembering, Sunflower Seeds, and @Large. I will discuss how these pieces were created, how they were received by his audience and critics worldwide, and their positive and negative consequences.

Introduction

The 1982 Constitution of the Chinese Government guarantees freedom of speech to its citizens. However, during Ai Weiwei's detention, due to his website and other artwork that speaks against the government, the authorities asked, "what is the reason you have become like this today?" Ai Weiwei answered, "First, I refuse to forget. My parents, my family, their whole generation and my generation all paid a great deal in the struggle for freedom of speech." However, "many people died just because of one

sentence or even one word." He added, "Somebody has to take responsibility for that." The responsibility is represented through the continuation of three significant works I present in this review paper. The artworks raise awareness of these injustices not only in China but worldwide. In order to increase awareness, Ai Weiwei started by presenting pieces that directly confronted modern China. He started creating more interactive art project installations that are bigger in scale, like the Remembering, Sunflower Seed, and @Large, further discussed

in this paper. I believe these three pieces are his most significant and have had the most considerable effect on exposing the corruption of the Chinese government.

Remembering

Ai Wei Wei experimented with how the internet and digital information can circulate and the collective potential of how far that information can reach. What began with a small blog in 2006, grew to thousands of anonymous readers to participate in this “mass movement” connecting his political stance (anti-communism) and his art projects.

On May 12, 2008, a significant earthquake hit Sichuan, China. However, thousands of children in a school near the area died because of the “tofu-dreg” poor construction built by the Chinese government. The officials used a corrupted approach to build more buildings cheaper by mixing concrete with other materials, creating less stable structures. Therefore the Chinese government tried to hide everything about this disaster. There was no official roster of the names of the missing children, not even an accurate count of how many people were affected by this earthquake. The government was clearly trying to hide something. There was a list shown to the public, but it was only to have a roster, a poorly made one with false information. No one knew where the log originated from. The public never knew who the children were or who was behind this corruption scheme. “[Three hundred days], we still cannot know who left us in the earthquake, why those children led us,

and how they were taken” (209). When the parents were eager to know the truth behind their children’s death, “the government concealed the facts, and in the name of ‘stability’ persecuted, threatened, and imprisoned the parents” (209). The government did everything to hide the truth about this tragedy. However, Ai WeiWei knew that “the children who died in the earthquake” were not unknown figures; they were the result of what the Chinese government called a “stabilized” (209) nation.

In frustration, on March 20, 2009, Ai Weiwei uploaded a post called “citizen investigation” he wrote, “People interested in the citizen Investigation, please leave your contact information: xuesheng512@gmail.com. Your actions create your world” (209). He started gathering a group of citizens who would be willing to dig deeper into this corruption. Risking jail time and perhaps even death, he successfully created a list of children who had died and dedicated artwork to honor the children. He understands that as the list of names becomes clearer, other hidden issues will arise. With the list of the children’s names, Ai Weiwei created the artwork “remembering” to acknowledge that “The Sichuan disaster is not the first nor the most wrongful. But all the details of this tragedy will be forgotten and once again it will be like nothing ever happened” (10/55), Ai states as the motive for this piece. This artwork was exhibited on the facade of the Haus der Kunst art museum in Germany and consisted of a 9000 brightly colored backpack that spells out “she lived happily for seven years”

in Chinese, a quote by one of the mothers of the perished.



Because of all these investigations and how Ai Weiwei stepped up against the government, his hotel room was broken into, “he was beaten and later learned [that there was] internal bleeding and brain hemorrhage that required emergency brain surgery. Ai Weiwei wrote this article so that people could share his experience of being beaten by Chinese police, jailed, and fined 2.4 million dollars. Ai Weiwei’s attempt in using his blog and creating this installation shared more about the details of corruption in the Chinese government to a bigger audience and brought them together to give more courage to create change.

Sunflower Seeds

Sunflower Seeds by Ai Weiwei is a similar work as it involves a collective group of people creating one piece. However, the approach is different. In remembering, Chinese citizens worked together to raise awareness of the government's corruption by interacting more

with Ai Weiwei and the installation visitors. Whereas in Sunflower Seeds, he hired Chinese citizens to create each individual sunflower seed and exhibit them in a private gallery space. There were limited interactions between the artist and the hand crafter. The project was installed at Tate Modern, London, and includes 100 million sunflower seeds handmade in porcelain and painted as the 11th installation of the Unilever series the museum hosted. This piece represents how a single artist can express their voice by reflecting on each seed as an individual. Each seed looks identical to the others, but when it is part of 100 million other sunflower seeds laid together in a small area, the seeds become something else, something much more powerful. You can spot a single sunflower seed when you pick one up with all its beautiful details, but when placed together with the others, "it disappears through this massiveness."(35).

Because this project was created in China but exhibited in London, it represents how artwork and ideas/conversations can cross borders and how this affects how east and west are "ideological constructions," Weiwei states (280). There are many ways the west and east could connect through this project. Ai Weiwei tried to make it so that he was not exploiting cheap Chinese labor. A video paired with this installation showed how the Chinese artisans dressed in a wide range of clothing, from jeans to high heels. This represents a person's dual identity, influenced by the west and focused mainly on how the creator (east) and visitor (west) can connect through this installation. However,

this was closer to how the western critics interpreted the piece and not how Chinese critics saw it.

Sunflower Seeds had two different audiences, one in the west (where the exhibition was shown), including the critics and viewers, and another in China (where the installation was created), including the Chinese media and critics. Western critics thought this exhibition was an iconic (provocative) installation showing his political views (political iconography - 120). In Ai Weiwei's artist statement, Western critics frequently referred to two cities: 1) "the sunflower as a sign of the cult built around Mao and 2)" the sunflower seeds as a symbol of friendship among the common people. Many critics related this piece to the past Chinese government. The critic Andrew Graham-Dixon wrote in the Sunday Telegraph how this piece represents the fall of China's totalitarian system because "sooner or later China will have to change. One day all those seeds will grow (120). Unlike the Western critics, the Chinese critics refused to read this piece politically (iconographically) but focused more on how this project relates to global capitalism. Barrett argued how Ai Weiwei exploited China's population of unskilled migrant workers (121). Even though Ai Weiwei argued that he rescued the artisans from unemployment and how western critics found how they showed the artisans were a good representation of the interrelation between the west and east. Chinese commentators only saw this as a project "fixated on economic growth based on high investment

and cheap labor" (122) relating to the current government of China. The Chinese critics were especially sensitive to the fact that this project was being exhibited in London, not China, making it seem like Ai Weiwei only used China. They also stated that the artisans might have been exposed to work-related health issues.



On April 3rd, 2011, Chinese police arrested Ai Weiwei, and his family declared him missing. Because this was during the Sunflower Seeds exhibition, Ai Weiwei was of many people's interest. The Tate Museum hung a banner on one of its buildings saying, "Release Ai Weiwei." For an unknown reason, Ai Weiwei was released on bail, possibly due to global pressure or political issues like the UK foreign secretary condemning the Chinese government to release Ai Weiwei. Many Chinese critics disagreed with how this installation contained political meaning in a positive light. Still, Ai Weiwei

managed to get himself both prisoned and bailed through this piece, showing the power of this work and how the Chinese government found this piece against their values.

@Large

Alcatraz, a federal prison located in the San Francisco Bay area, was opened for 29 years until it was closed for reasons of brutality and was deemed too expensive to operate. After the prison closed, Alcatraz was designated as a National Historic Landmark and is a popular tourist attraction for its dark history. In order to change the perspective of Alcatraz, Ai Weiwei, NPS, and FOR - SITE foundation joined to open a collection of site-specific installations Ai Weiwei created from September 27, 2014, to April 26, 2015.

Ai Weiwei's public art project, @Large, was created to "engage public feelings to raise political consciousness about government censorship and issues of social justice." Adding to Ai Weiwei's philosophy of how artwork is a method he uses to actively change the world politically. Ai Weiwei designed @Large to address the global dimensions of repression, censorship, and the importance of politically engaged art and to understand the purpose of art – fighting for freedom. Through @Large, there was an increase of over 13% of tourists visiting Alcatraz.

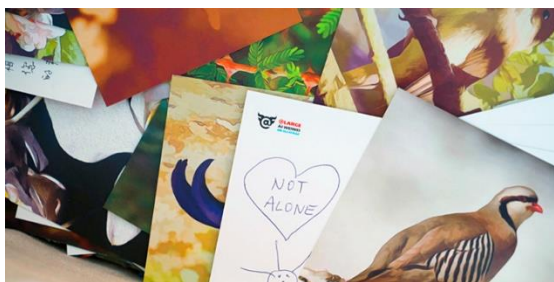
Some pieces Ai Weiwei included in the @Large exhibition were "With Wind" and 'Stay Tuned.' With Wind, located at the beginning of this exhibition, was an installation of a dragon kite

hung from the ceiling. The dragon represents the imperial authority in China, and the body is made up of the flags of 30 totalitarian nations with quotes from political activists exiled from those countries. Ai Weiwei criticized not only the symbolic capital of the Chinese State but also the agonizing confinement of Alcatraz along with their ethical issues about the penal labor and dissidents demanding rights and release. One last detail to keep in mind is the eyes of the dragon had the shape of the Twitter dove showing how Ai Weiwei used social media to critique the Chinese government and communicate with other people despite the Chinese government's restrictions. Stay Tuned was an installation with audio located at the A block in Alcatraz, composed of a series of spoken words, poems, and songs, by people who were imprisoned for their political stance or religious beliefs in the 12 cells of the A block. Most importantly, the sound of the installation came from Lolo, Pussy Riot, and Robbin Island Singers, who were sentenced to 6 years for recording an album calling for Tibetan independence, and a performance group, who were sentenced to 2 years for challenging the Russian President Vladimir Putin, and anti-apartheid activists confined for years in South Africa's most infamous jail.





There was another installation Ai Weiwei created titled 'Trace'; it was an artwork that included pixelated portraits of 176 people politically active that were detained or exiled around the world, along with their names, charges made against them, and the countries they were imprisoned in a Warhol style painting with lego blocks to sheer familiarity to the audiences and encourage interactions.



At the end of the @Large, the visitor's experience ended with an interactive piece titled "Yours Truly." In the dining hall of Alcatraz, this installation included large racks of prepaid and pre-addressed postcards to the 176 prisoners pictured in the Lego portrait of Trace. The visitors were encouraged to write to the prisoners

to tell how they were remembered and admired. For example, Ahmed Maher was one of the activists imprisoned multiple times fighting for human rights. And in December 2013, Maher was charged with the new law that Egypt had enforced called the "Protest Law," created specifically to restrict freedom of assembly. He was sentenced to 3 years in prison and 50000 Egyptian pounds, making him a prisoner during this exhibition. And through this interactive installation, many people were given a chance to connect with political activists. A boy named Benjamin wrote, "You're a hero. Never quit, we support you. You'll change the world". Through their experience at @Large, Ai Weiwei encouraged the audience of @Large to act upon the social and political ways through their personal interest and way of being motivated by feelings of empathy, anger, and grief.

Conclusion

By creating interactive art projects, Ai Weiwei spread awareness and his ideologies. It is, in fact, possible to change the world through art. The public could learn about the corruption the Chinese government was hiding and realize the power of the art projects he created. Through Remembering, he gathered citizens to help expose the government and let the public know that schools collapsed because the government used cheap mixed concrete to build the schools and came up with a list of names of those who died. Through Sunflower Seeds, he showed how

individuals could create immense power when they come together. With @Large, he could show how activists have been unjustly imprisoned and have the visitors connect with the activists by sending letters to them. Even though he was detained and exiled multiple times during this journey, he took full responsibility and continued his work. He changed how people viewed art and were able to bring people to experience and support his ideology. Many citizens and people worldwide stand with Ai Weiwei, but where does the Chinese government stand on this change? Would they ever be willing to accept their faults and stop exploiting their power?

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