



**CONTEMPORARY ART AS AN EXPOSÉ ON SOCIETY AND
PREVAILING INHUMANITY: AI WEIWEI AND HIS CREATIVE
EXPRESSIONS OF DISSENT AGAINST THE CHINESE
GOVERNMENT**

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Abstract: Art is political in terms that we see many art takes place in the public areas and the way it engages with many ideologies which has existed from the past. Sometimes, or many a times this type of art becomes politically dangerous for the artist as well as the viewers who are engaging with that art. We have seen artists like Jacques-Louis David who involved his art in the bloodshed of the French Revolution, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), Pyotr Pavlensky – a Russian contemporary artist often referred to as a 'living pain' because of his extreme form of stunts to his political protests, and the legendary street artist Banksy who has been directing his politically pointed, satirical and clever pieces all around the world. In this paper we will be looking into another kind of 'protest artist' - Ai Weiwei, one of the famous contemporary figures who uses art to address the corruption of the Chinese government as well as other political issues. Few of his memorable pieces to be explored in this paper includes *Remembering*, which was a campaign to bring justice to the victims of the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) – which consisted of 100 million individually handcrafted porcelain sunflower seeds to comment on the culture of mass production and consumption and his stunt in Berlin Konzerthaus (2016) where he covered it with thousands of life jackets addressing the plight of Syrian immigrants and the European response to the refugee crisis. This paper will analyse the above texts and the meaning and power they hold.

Keywords: Installation, activist artist, Ai Weiwei, China, dissent.

Protest and politics go hand in hand, after all what is politics without people exercising their democratic rights to express dissent against the prevailing system? Expressing dissent has several channels, ranging from protests, hunger strikes, debates and uproar. But what makes protests more impactful is a touch of creativity – when it is made art. Art can be used to express dissent towards a government, a system, a corporation, or for social media swordplay. Art as a form, has gained impeccable significance in today’s time, because of its ability to silently yet loudly express objection or conflict. However, when art starts speaking volumes and subtly attacks the workings of the government in its innovatory style, the artist is deemed dangerous. The artist undergoes public scrutiny, and while a large portion of the population sees his art and appreciates its effort and form of protest, the other portion sees it as a threat. What this research paper aims to put forth is the discussion around how art and the artist turn dangerous the moment their art is of the dissident kind. To narrow down and focus on one such artist and his technique of protestation, the paper follows the interesting life of China’s renowned contemporary artist and activist, Ai Weiwei.

Ai Weiwei was named the world’s “most powerful artist” because of his art technique in which he used 21st century’s modern and technological advancements to its best use and created art pieces expressing dissent. As a contemporary artist, Weiwei used a dynamic combination of materials, methods and concepts and created diverse and eclectic art. Weiwei’s art was loud with friction as he held a mirror to China’s failings. His art was a reflection of China and its shortcomings. Weiwei having spent his primary years in New York as an artist in the 1980s, knows how to bring his life together with art in a daring and politically charged exhibition that helps our views on modern China. He uses any medium or genre, such as sculpture, photography, performance, architecture, tweets and blogs, to deliver his pervasive message.

Weiwei used his artistic skills to approach the corruption of the Chinese communist government and their negligence of human rights, most importantly in the sphere of the freedom of speech and thought (Candy 1).

“If my art has any meaning, it is as a tool for freedom”, Weiwei says when asked about his art, which reeks of his position as a provocateur and a dissident artist in China.

His hard-hitting art pieces include the famous *Sunflower Seeds* display at Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. The significance of this display is to throw light on the “Made in China” phenomenon and to shed light on how sunflower seeds are industrially produced due to the exceptional efforts of skilled labourers. It highlights mass consumption and the loss of individuality in the process (Hancox 279).

Another art piece that is extraordinarily poignant is Weiwei’s 2009 *Remembering*. It is not the conventional embodiment of “art” as such, but Weiwei never resorted to that traditional protocol anyway. His form was contemporary and it engaged mainly with materials and technology to showcase protest and serve as an exposé of the workings of the government or institutions (Chiu 175).

Ai Weiwei’s art goes beyond all forms of convention and mainly embodies the idea of experience and feelings that are evoked in the viewers of his art. What, we believe, is that Ai Weiwei wants us to feel the way victims of a system feel under treacherous regimes and events. Another artwork of his includes the wrapping of 14,000 life vests to Berlin’s Konzerthaus concert hall. This installation is a tribute to the refugees that died at sea in an attempt to escape war and poverty in the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, we can perceive that Weiwei’s art stood for the people and against the inhumanity of society.

This paper will constitute further emphasis and discussion regarding the aforementioned art pieces by Weiwei and highlight how his art is creative, expressive, and a direct reply to the

negligence and dereliction of the government and the prevailing institutions. The paper will talk in length about the significance of the above art pieces by Weiwei which resonates with the idea of protesting against a current system or phenomenon through art.

The goals that this research paper aims to fulfil are:

- The importance of protest art and how it acts as a visionary in expressing dissent in society.
- Ai Weiwei as a contemporary protest artist who, without following the conventional method of art, uses modern tools and devices to express dissent in an artful and impactful manner.
- The focus on Weiwei's three very significant artistry and handicraft: *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), *Life vests in Konzerthaus Berlin* (2016), and *Remembering* (2008) highlight the growing dissent against the government, institutions, and events that portray lack of humanity.
- The idea of the artist being the most powerful person in the country who uses art to provide an exposé on the corruption, misdoings, and inhumanity that the state currently indulges in.

Remembering, 2008

One of many Ai Weiwei's famous works of art was his tribute to the lives lost in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake where several thousand lives were lost especially of the young students in schools and universities. His absolute exasperation with the government who failed to mourn and respect the lives of every single person whose life was lost in the tragedy led to the idea to his making of this very art. *Remembering* became his response to the inhumanity and silence extended by the government in a state where loudness and debate was required to understand the tragedy and damage done to the entire city of Sichuan and the loss of lives of approximately

80,000 students. In the process of acquiring information and names of the lives lost, Weiwei underwent a lot of difficulty because the government was not willing to dwell on the same matter. In his blog, he expressed,

“The Chinese government censored and controlled all of the information about the earthquake, so people didn’t know the details of what really happened. I wanted to know how many students had lost their lives. Schools built by the state are supposed to be very secure – they should not collapse. I made hundreds of phone calls to the education department, the police and civil departments, to ask questions about the student casualties, but of course nobody would talk to me”. (Weiwei *The Guardian*)

In order to tackle this censorship and control over the actual reality of the Sichuan earthquake and the tragic loss of student lives, came alive Weiwei’s art *Remembering*. Weiwei undertook his own political investigation where he carried out the duty of finding the names of every missing student and called out the government to account for their deaths. In one of his blogs, Weiwei wrote how he goes knocking doors around the village and meeting the victims’ parents and requested for simple information, of the students who lost their lives, like names, birth date.

Weiwei was successful in collecting the names of upto 5,000 earthquake victims through his citizen investigation procedure. He discovered, through his social and political investigation, that negligent construction was suspected to have been responsible for the deaths of thousands of children in collapsed public schools in the earthquake. Weiwei reprimanded officials for not having released details of the fatalities and mobilized his growing readership to investigate as well, which lead to the creation of *Remembering*. (Wang 15)

Remembering is an installation of 9000 colored backpacks in Haus der Kunst which were arranged on a wall to form a quote in Chinese which was written by a mother who lost her daughter in the earthquake. This blunt masterpiece by Weiwei was a direct attack on the

government's lack of interest in human lives. By evoking sentiment and emotions in the viewers and the citizens of China, especially the relatives of the human beings who died in the Sichuan earthquake, Weiwei proved that art speaks louder than the society, and that "natural disaster is a public matter". Weiwei's purpose was to create awareness on the government's lack of interest and silence toward the lives lost during the earthquake as well as the corruption and cover-up involved in keeping the number of deaths suppressed, and he was successful in doing so through his artistic display of a heartfelt message taken from a victim's mother and realized through the use of children's backpacks. Weiwei's art criticized the government for its lack of compassion in a time of national tragedy, through *Remembering*, and he believes it is this very act that deemed him the "most dangerous man" in China.

Sunflower Seeds, 2010

Sunflower Seeds 2010 is a work made up of 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds which were all individually hand-painted. *Sunflower Seeds* was originally titled *Kui Hua Zi* (its literal meaning in Chinese). The work was exhibited as "The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds" from 12 October 2010 – 2 May 2011 in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. The porcelain sunflower seeds altogether weighed around ten tonnes and it was arranged in rectangular or square field with a depth of ten centimetres on the floor in the Turbine Hall (Bingham *Tate*). The production of these seeds was in Jingdezhen in northern Jiangxi, China, which is a region known for its kilns and the production of high-quality porcelain. Rather than using the large-scale factory for the production of the seeds, Ai choose to make it in a cottage-industry setting, prompting us towards the "Made in China" experience which everyone identifies with cheap labour-products.

Sunflower was something which was symbolic during the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s and 1970s as it was often used to symbolised Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976), the

Communist leader of China. The main idea of Ai in the work is ‘the one and many’, ‘the individual and the masses’, ‘self and society’. Ai personally commented on the importance of the sunflower seeds in his proposal for the Unilever Series Commission:

[In] the times I grew up, it was common place for The People, the sunflower faces the trajectory of the red sun, so must the masses feel towards their leadership. Handfuls were carried in pockets, to be consumed on all occasions both casual and formal. So much more than a snack, it was the minimal ingredients that constituted the most essential needs and desires. Their empty shells were the ephemeral traces of social activity. The least common denominator for human satisfaction. I wonder what would have happened without them? (Ai Weiwei, March 2010)

Ai Weiwei, instead of making sunflowers for his installation, made the seeds as it depicted the true capacity of what the people might become when they are pictured as a collective of individuals and what these individuals might become when they are collectively empowered as the people (Sorace 397). Ai wanted us to visualize this large amount of the sunflower seeds with the Chinese population. Hang Chunxiao, a Chinese art critic also commented on the installation which according to him illustrates the individual existence of the people of China where they are senselessly figured, arranged and generalized by the collectivist consciousness. Ai has also talked about and questioned the collectivist consciousness which is historically rooted in both the Confucian doctrine and Communist ideology in China. The suppression of the individual by Communism has resulted in a number of social and political problems, and collectivism has constrained the choice and opportunities of an individual, narrowing the directions and types of claims that is generated in a society. This has led the social groups in China to live in a similar political and economic environment and share similar life-experiences, which developed similar behaviour patterns among individuals as an action in the pursuit of collectivism (Zhou 54).

In the work of *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai used quantity in three dimensions: first, the accumulation of the large numbers. In a large scale, every seed becomes identical to each other and their individuality disappeared when they are accumulated in large numbers. Like every Chinese person in a totalitarian society, the seeds appear totally generic. Ai remarked, “People in China have come from a history in which there was no individualism; everybody was just a piece that identified with another, more like a type of unified society” (Bingham and Daniel Tate). Second, he pursued the repetition of every single element in his work which generated a sense of ritual, a type of power like the grey sea of sunflower seeds. Third, the large numbers in the exhibition hall created a sense of theatricality which invited the participation of viewers.

Indeed, *Sunflower Seeds* is an installation that allows the viewers to explore the mutually constitutive relationship between individuals and collectives, and singularity and communality, which are issues that are profoundly associated with the hybridized collectivist ideologies of both Confucianism and Communism. Any behaviour outside state control are accounted as a challenge to the Communist state.

Life Vests in Konzerthaus Berlin, 2016

In another installation in 2016, Ai Weiwei collected and used over 14,000 life jackets of refugees who landed on the Greek island of Lesbos after struggling to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey. He tied the jackets together and wrapped it around the monumental columns of the Konzerthaus Berlin. At the center of the installation hangs a lifeboat with a sign that reads #safepassage. The installation was an effort to draw attention to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, to address to the numerous lives of men, women and children who are continuing to live in Lesbos.

Much like the backpacks used in *Remembering*, these life jackets signified the bodies that themselves were not present as well as the number of lives that are being risked to find peace and the lives that had been lost in an attempt to reach safe ground. This installation also

showcases Ai's persistent belief in human rights. He received these orange vests from the Lesbos authorities. The island which was made popular by its mention in the Homeric text has now become the middle ground in a desolate plight to jump ships, becoming a beacon of hope and a symbol of uncertainty (Pierce *Culture Trip*).

Weiwei's installation of these jackets goes further than simple materiality and dramatic attraction and it has turned into an art piece which is derived from an unforgettable real-time experience when he worked and visited the island multiple times since the crisis began (Contents, WA). Weiwei came up with his creative idea after spending time helping the refugees in the Greek island of Lesbos, where thousands of refugees landed after battling the harsh and unrelenting sea. It was a kind of an alarm for many who had already forgotten the immigrant situation which was still at large. The installation also reminds the world that more than 1 million migrants arrived to Europe by sea route in 2015 alone, and also the fact that over 400 people have lost their lives while crossing the sea. The installation, while seeking to draw attention to the global refugee crisis, fails to mention of the fact that the life jackets themselves were most likely non-functional, the product of an industry owned by smugglers in which these products would never actually function for their intended purpose (Haakenson *EuropeNow*).

Ai also received criticism for this installation as it is located in the centre of Germany which has been a symbol of tolerance and embrace of refugees since 17th century and it was pointed out for not staging the installation in countries like the UK, or the US who have taken in few or no refugees at all where Ai's important message would have been more poignant.

Ai Weiwei's creation anyway has represented the large number in a visual manner where the audiences resonate with and understand the lives of many individuals who have lost their lives searching for a peaceful space to settle in. The installation of these life jackets went a long way in highlighting the plight of Syrian refugees with the aim of forcing the public and the administration to do the right thing and restore peace in Syria.

Conclusion

Quantity and criticality were two main elements found in Weiwei's conceptual art pieces. Weiwei used the concept of quantity to highlight his dissent, for instance, the display of endless sunflower seeds, all of which identical to each other to portray the idea of individuality getting lost amidst the collective. His art helped shed light on the unnoticed extreme human efforts expended by the labourers. Another art piece discussed in this paper which further shows Weiwei as being an influential conceptual artist is the life vests display in Konzerthaus Berlin, as a tribute to the refugees that died at sea in their attempt to escape war and poverty in the Middle East and South Africa.

As a contemporary artist, Weiwei used materials to critique modern China. His usage of life vests, and sunflower seeds, do not follow the conventional route of art as such, but it is called art because of its ability to speak without using language. Weiwei's art has a language of its own, as we can safely infer from this research paper. Another significant artwork of his that has been detailed in this paper that shows Weiwei's position as an artist activist, is *Remembering*, which immersed art and emotion together and paid respect to the victims of the tragic Sichuan earthquake. Once again, Weiwei was successful in condemning the government for its lack of humanity through his way of art.

Although Weiwei faced a lot of criticism from the government, was arrested several times, and underwent extreme scrutiny due to his art, he never stopped protesting for human rights and freedom, and continued to hold a mirror to how we view modern day China.

To sum it up, we would like to put down Weiwei's response to a journalist who inquired about his open and artful expressions of dissent against the Chinese government,

"I don't see myself as a dissident artist, I see them as a dissident government!"

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