

A CRITIQUE FROM WITHIN: THE CORE OF AI WEIWEI'S SUNFLOWER SEEDS

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NAMED ONE OF the most "powerful figures in contemporary art" by the editors of *Art Review*, Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei is a brave and unrelenting critic of China's authoritarian regime.¹ Traversing a nation that circumscribes freedom of speech, dismisses oppositional public discourses, and silences the social significance of art, Ai's practice seeks to explore the intersections between contemporary aesthetics and his country's troubling politics.² Given his immense prestige in the international art world, Ai has the ability to leverage media attention to assist him in stirring up a new social consciousness in his native country.

Ai's grand vision is realized through a combination of the artist's penchant for artistic eclecticism and a clear set of political motives. As a multidimensional artist, Ai deploys a variety of art forms (installation, performance, sculpture), draws from a wide range of contemporary issues, and instils varying degrees of political intimation in his work. In pieces such as *Remembering* (2009), an installation constructed from 9,000 children's backpacks that form the sentence "She lived happily for seven years in this world" in Chinese characters, Ai laments over his country's poor regulation of civil engineering laws that led to the mass ruination of schools in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake.³ For this work, his critique is overt, distinct and unequivocal. In contrast, works like the iconic *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), which he debuted at Tate Modern, seem to present critics with a more ambiguous tonality. Such a tonality is reflected through the multifarious approaches taken by visual studies scholars seeking to dissect the work, and it is in this incertitude that lies the crux of this paper.

Sunflower Seeds, commissioned for the

Unilever series at the Tate in 2010, is an installation composed of 100 million individually handcrafted porcelain sculptures of life-sized sunflower seeds. The seeds were dispersed evenly across the hard floors of the capacious Turbine Hall, creating a majestic field of visual spectacle. Gallery-goers were initially allowed to step on the seed-scape and walk across the exhibit, but this permission was later removed due to health concerns raised over the prevalence of porcelain dust.⁴ Following the changes in regulations, viewers were only able to walk on the edges of the installation, and were prohibited from touching or moving the seeds.⁵

At first glance, one may be tricked into believing that Ai used real sunflower seeds for his awe-inspiring ensemble. However, upon further inspection of each individual seed, it becomes clear that all of the seeds on display are hand-painted porcelain replicas. When viewed at a close range, the tiny objects appear to be indistinguishable, but no two seeds are in fact identical to each other. In the words of political aesthetics scholar Christian Sorace, exhibition visitors are confronted simultaneously with the "sheer power of the mass and the unique singularity of each seed."⁶ Through the installation's physical grandeur, Ai intends for his viewers to critically reflect on the socio-political realities that spurred the materialization of his work.⁷

A thorough examination of *Sunflower Seeds* requires the viewer to first be acquainted with the byzantine construction process of the project. Involving a tedious 30-step procedure, the scale of production of the sunflower seeds was of epic proportions.⁸ Each seed was mould-casted, hand-painted and then fired at 1,300 degrees Celsius.⁹ More than 1,600 Chinese artisans from Jingdezhen, a town historically renowned for producing imperial porcelain, were involved in this

operation.¹⁰ It took the artisans a total of two and a half years to manufacture the number of seeds Ai needed in order to assemble the installation at the Tate.¹¹

Unlike the physical splendour of the work, which has been universally praised, critical reception towards the socio-political underpinnings of the installation take more divergent threads. Considering the myriad of interpretations one could ascribe to *Sunflower Seeds*, critics find themselves gravitating toward two ends of the spectrum in their analysis of this monumental work of art. One school of thought, represented by visual studies scholar Simone Hancox, firmly believes that *Sunflower Seeds* is imbued with the liberal values that Ai champions and that the work serves as a direct critique against the Chinese regime and its restrictive economic structure.¹² On the other hand, opposing voices represented by scholars like Sorace, argue that Ai's practice is one charged with authoritarian and Maoist ideals, and that it merely perpetuates traditional values and oppressive behaviours that have long been prevalent in Chinese society.¹³ While both sides make a cogent point, this essay seeks to reconcile these contradictions, arguing that the duality in interpretations should be viewed in unison, for Ai's insider's approach and personal involvement in the problematic state of affairs is what accords value to his critique of the Chinese regime.

To Hancox, a scholar who affords credence to the political efficacy of Ai's artistic vision, *Sunflower Seeds* acts as a social commentary that critiques China's economic zeitgeist as one dominated by rapid industrialization and the assembly line mode of production.¹⁴ Such a direction demonstrably erodes traditional and artisanal practices, reducing the significance of the individual in society. In her article "Art, Activism and The Geopolitical Imagination: Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*," Hancox asserts that Ai's commitment to the handmade challenges China's fervent espousal of capitalism and the mass production of homogenous commodities.¹⁵ By focusing on artisanal skills, the artist attempts to highlight the decline in traditional modes of production and seeks to revive them through his employment of the Jingdezhen artisans.¹⁶ During the production phase, artisans were given the agency to leave their personal marks on the seeds that they made, skilfully creating pieces with evidence of their artisanal indexes.¹⁷ Furthermore, even though the artisans mostly worked collectively in designated common areas, they were allowed to take bags of seeds to paint in the comfort of their own

homes.¹⁸ This greatly juxtaposes the highly regimented and alienating conditions assembly line workers experience in modern day China.

Those fortunate enough to have had a chance to hold an individual seed at Ai's installation would concur that the delicate object cultivates an imagination of the individual who crafted it. Hancox contends that "the spectacle of 100 million seeds" creates a dialectical relationship between the tremendous amount of labour required to create the installation and the "relative ease with which it is consumed," which ultimately elicits feelings of "indebtedness or gratitude towards the artisans."¹⁹ This tension reminds viewers of human corporeality in a sea of objecthood and draws them closer to the commodity. The perceptive triggers described by Hancox would not have been prevalent if the seeds had been industrially produced. Additionally, Ai uses an object that could easily be mistaken as a mass-produced product in order to provoke his viewers into thinking about the way in which things are being made in society.²⁰ While *Sunflower Seeds* boldly retains Ai's usual public-spirited motivation and untrammelled criticality, the work concomitantly contributes to the solution of capitalist alienation by revivifying the centrality of the human gesture.

Although the general understanding of Ai's work focuses on the artist's trenchant critique of the Chinese regime, scholars like Sorace, who represent another school of thought, disrupt such a reading and makes the case that Ai is a mere perpetuator of authoritarian and Maoist ideals.²¹ Growing up in Mao's era and having personally lived through the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, Ai was heavily influenced by the Maoist regime and its political ramifications.²² Ai's essays, artworks, and interviews allude to "a set of political ideals and contradictions firmly rooted in the tradition of Chinese Marxism," and this explains the "critical perspective" he often deploys in his practice.²³ Ai's father, poet Ai Qing, who did not shy away from publicly expressing his rightist leanings, was denounced during the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957.²⁴ The family subsequently spent many years in labour camps in various parts of China. Ai was nine years old when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, and peace was only restored to his family upon Mao's death and the demise of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.²⁵

In his article, "China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei," Sorace contends that Ai's work is made possible because of the very "same political system it



Ai Weiwei Sunflower Seeds Exhibit (detail)
© photograph by Mark Rowland, 2010, www.flickr.com/photos/roubicek/5113457805



'Sunflower Seeds' by Ai Weiwei, Tate Modern Turbine Hall
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denounces.²⁶ For instance, in 1995, Ai photographed a performance of himself dropping an ancient, one-of-a-kind Han Dynasty urn (circa 206 BC–202 AD), shattering it to pieces.²⁷ Similarly, in a 2006 exhibition called *Coloured Vases*, Ai coated "fifty Neolithic vases (circa 3000–5000 BC) with bright monochromatic industrial paint."²⁸ Such performances recreate Cultural Revolution exercises of "destroying religious, traditional and cultural objects in order to shatter superstition," and have later been denigrated for the irreversible damages done to the country.²⁹ Ergo, Ai's work could be construed as mere reproductions of events that were once orchestrated by Mao during his ruling, giving the artist's practice a pronounced authoritarian tenor.

When approaching *Sunflower Seeds* in relation to Sorace's argument, there could be many reasons for which one would arrive at the same conclusion. For one, Ai singlehandedly engineered the entire production process of *Sunflower Seeds* by taking advantage of China's cheap, abundant, and acquiescent labour.³⁰ The Jingdezhen artisans

involved in this project were paid merely £0.58 per hour, an amount that pales in comparison against the minimum wage of £5.93 in the United Kingdom, where the installation was exhibited.³¹ A project like this could only have been financially possible with the enlistment of Chinese labour. Moreover, the job posed a serious health risk to the artisans.³² As aforementioned, the Tate prohibited visitors from walking on the seeds because of the possible dangers of inhaling porcelain dust. If even such a short exposure to the porcelain dust was deemed hazardous, one could imagine the precarious conditions in which the artisans, who spent two and a half years making these seeds, had to endure.

Ai may appear to have given his artisans the ability to mark their individuality by bestowing on them agency over their brushstrokes, but critics such as Sorace question the validity of such a claim. For Sorace, this notion of artisanal agency was built upon an illusion, for the artisans were given specific instructions as to how everything had to be made, and they worked under regular supervision during their

time in the workshops.³³ Seeds that did not meet the required standards were unceremoniously discarded. Most importantly, the artisans' individual efforts, though publicly acknowledged, are not celebrated and remain largely anonymous.³⁴ Ai was the only artist credited with the success of the work. This fact certainly mirrors the troubled nature of Maoist authoritarianism, where dictators blatantly disregarded their people's interests in order to capitalize on their unquestioning deference for self-gain.³⁵

Upon preliminary examination of these two seemingly conflicting interpretations of *Sunflower Seeds*, it is evident that critics have splitting takes on Ai's work, alongside the values associated with his artistic and political standings. That being said, the prevalence for such divisiveness could be explained by a dearth in synthesizing important information on Ai's personal history and the sociopolitical climate in which he grew up in alongside the political underpinnings of his work. Partaking in such a process is integral for those who wish to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of *Sunflower Seeds*. Moreover, assessing Ai's work against the backdrop of his own words, ideologies, and lived experiences would further serve to untangle the theoretical puzzle of this article, creating a space for the aforementioned contradictions to dissolve.

First and foremost, the principal reason why Ai deploys sunflower seeds in his installation is due to the fact that they serve as a symbolic marker that directly references the propaganda paintings of the Cultural Revolution. Many of these propaganda paintings depicted a hopeful Mao surrounded by sunflowers, which denoted his people.³⁶ When Ai contemplates the social significance of sunflowers for Mao and the Cultural Revolution, he is also confronting his own dealings with Mao's authoritarianism. "Chairman Mao is the sun," said Ai in an interview in 2010, "and all the ordinary people loyal to the party are the sunflowers."³⁷ On the surface, it may appear incredulous to some that Ai is nodding to a dictator and an affiliated movement that caused him and his family such immense suffering, but he is in fact using *Sunflower Seeds* to engage in a process of "self-criticism" and through that, proceed to criticize the regime at large.

On numerous occasions, be they during interviews or through personal writings, Ai emphasized the relationship between his work and the practice of criticism and self-criticism, a Maoist ideal that he was exposed to during his early childhood.³⁸ In his personal blog, Ai mentioned that that he grew up in a

society that "emphasized critique, bestowing on self-criticism the highest value."³⁹ Self-criticism, a doctrine pushed by Mao's regime, is necessary in a one-party state like China because it allows for criticism without questioning the ideology.⁴⁰ Without admitting to one's own mistakes, power structures would become highly rigid, which could lead to potential civil turmoil and hamstringing the development of the country. Admitting to one's own mistakes also allows an authority to retain their control and still be able to act without appearing unscrupulous.⁴¹ Although it has been forty years since the Cultural Revolution, Maoist self-criticism still operates within the Community Party in China today.⁴² The main idea that is being propagated in the present is that a good party member or citizen must practise criticism and self-criticism by "surveying the world through critical lenses, with the target being any person, cultural organization, government or system of power."⁴³

An early example of this self-critical process at work is manifest in Ai's controversial involvement with the construction of the Beijing National Stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Ai was hired into the design team as a consultant but later distanced himself from the project due to his swelling anti-Olympic sentiments.⁴⁴ During his service term, Ai realized that, for China, the Olympics were a strategic tool used by the regime to affirm its power on the world stage, and whether or not its own people had to suffer for it to happen was not part of the state's considerations.⁴⁵ He declared that the "Bird's Nest" was used for propaganda purposes and likened it to a "fake smile" used to conceal the unseemly reality of China.⁴⁶ While Ai was part of the project, he consistently engaged in self-criticism by looking inward, negotiating his moral limits, and ultimately came to the conclusion that the project was imbued with values that contradicted his own.⁴⁷ By leaving the project, Ai made a clear declaration of his discontentment and frustrations towards his country's hypocrisy. If he had boycotted the Olympics by not participating at all, his outsider's perspective would have delegitimized much of his criticisms. That said, because of Ai's personal involvement, self-criticism, and subsequent withdrawal from the Olympics, he obtained an insider's standing that allowed him to freely address the issues within the system. Hence, if had Ai not treaded into murky territory in the first place, he would not have been afforded a chance to advocate for change and reform through later critiques.

Similarly in *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai's self-critical

worldview could in fact be the answer to resolving the contradictory interpretations critics have ascribed to the work. While Ai aims to denounce the shortcomings of the Chinese regime in *Sunflower Seeds*, he could not have done so without self-criticism, which explains why he needed to employ authoritarian ideals in his process in order to unearth the flaws in the political system and its socio-economic branches. In other words, he exposes the problems within the regime by perpetuating and experiencing them first-hand. The seemingly exploitative mode of production that Ai took advantage of granted him the position to criticize, for it made him an insider. Because he was the main orchestrator for the production of *Sunflower Seeds*, he knew how problematic it could potentially be, and this process ultimately gave him a clear vision of how and why industrial modes of production are slowly making artisanal work obsolete. This is the value of self-criticism, a Maoist doctrine that Ai exemplifies with his actions — before you speak of the world, examine your own subjectivity, as your own imperfections reflect and speak for the corruptions of your own surroundings.

The purpose of this article is not to discredit any particular side of the argument surrounding Ai's *Sunflower Seeds*. Rather, it seeks to change the divisive discourses around Ai's work by finding a common ground to allow two seemingly contradictory readings to converge and coalesce. In order to accomplish this, one needs to develop an intimate understanding of the artist's personal history and self-criticizing process in order to have a deeper appreciation for the political underpinnings of his works. In other words, Ai's adoption of Maoist principles in his practice should not be perceived as detrimental to his commitment to liberal values, for the Maoist principles and liberal values work hand in hand to incite new ways of thinking. With most of the western art world focusing on Ai's call for political reform, his authoritarian expressions should be made visible in order to understand the context from which they arise.

Akin to any dissident artists, it is perhaps Ai's biggest aspiration to use his artworks to provide a roadmap that would lead his people to a new consciousness. From countless arrests and unlawful retentions to rising back again and again to speak up, Ai stands as a fearless fighter. Thus, it is perhaps most befitting to conclude the essay with words from the man himself, for not only do they capture the essence of the paper, but these sentiments consummately evince the bellicose and tenacious nature of Ai as a

political warrior:

"If my art has nothing to do with people's pain and sorrow, what is 'art' for?"⁴⁸

"Taking contradictions and making them public is my best weapon."⁴⁹

The regime may have bigger guns, but Ai is here to stay.

NOTES

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