

The Contemporary Chinese Art Dilemma:
From Communist Government Control to Capitalist Market Control

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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with BLOUIN ARTINFO on October 2010, Pace Gallery founder Arne Glimcher discusses the opening of a 22,000 square foot gallery in Beijing, saying, “Just as China is the future, their art is the future. [Contemporary Chinese artists] have a narrative to tell that is quite fantastic. The western narrative, to the greatest extent, is over. The Chinese narrative is just beginning.”¹ The quote is telling of the power and influence of contemporary Chinese art in the art world today. In the past two decades, new museums, galleries, art spaces, and studios have opened in China on an almost daily basis. In fact, “so many things are going on at the same time that visitors to one event have to worry about missing other events of significance because of conflicting schedules,”² Meiqin Wang writes in “Confrontation and Complicity: Rethinking Official Art in Contemporary China.” Since Sotheby’s Asian auctions in March 2006, contemporary Chinese art has emerged at the forefront of the global art market. By 2007, five of ten bestselling contemporary artists on the international auction market were Chinese.³ China’s place in the contemporary art scene is hard to ignore. Not only are Chinese collectors fueling the art market, but the international market for contemporary Chinese art has also expanded significantly in the recent years. For a country whose modern art scene has only developed in the past few decades, why is it that contemporary Chinese art is so prominent today? What are the qualities of contemporary Chinese art that make it so desirable in the art market? What are the effects of the emerging market on the production, circulation, and distribution of contemporary Chinese art?

¹ Arne Glimcher, interview by Streeter Phillips, Oct 11, 2010, 2010, YouTube.

² Meiqin Wang, *Confrontation and Complicity: Rethinking Official Art in Contemporary China* (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2007). 73.

³ Jane Debevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*, Modern Asian Art and Visual Culture (Boston: Brill, 2014). 1.

This thesis will explore the effects of Chinese globalization and modernization on contemporary Chinese art. Contemporary Chinese art is an important case study because of its unusual development. Unlike western art practices, which grew out of gradual historical evolution of the traditional canon, contemporary Chinese art finds its origins in 1976 at the end of the Cultural Revolution. During Mao Zedong's governance of the Communist Party of China from 1949 to 1976, Chinese culture was virtually eliminated save officially sanctioned propaganda art. Thus at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Chinese art found itself at a tabula rasa. The events following the revolution encouraged artists to take inspiration from western art and philosophy, incorporating western techniques into their discussion of the Chinese experience. Although contemporary Chinese art appropriates western practices, the foundational history of the art differs vastly from that of the west. Unlike contemporary western art, which developed as a series of reactions against previous movements, contemporary Chinese art has grown out of a desire to find alternative modes of expression in attempt to discuss the Chinese experience. Central to the discussion of contemporary Chinese art is the introduction of global arts institutions such as the market to artistic concerns. Beyond the country's new cultural beginnings, China's shift from a communist to a capitalist state has brought forth significant complications regarding the production, circulation, and distribution of art.

The chapters that follow outline the intersection of Chinese socio-political and economic developments with art and culture. Chapter One discusses the social history of China. Since art is a product of many social phenomena, an understanding of the history of China as early as the Cultural Revolution will situate the growth of contemporary Chinese art within its social context. Following the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, where the government strictly regulated cultural activity, artists experienced a period of relative

liberation from official control. Contemporary Chinese art finds its origins in early artists' exploration with western techniques in order to express opinions on China's chaotic political history. The introduction of globalization and modernization also fueled artists' engagement with arts institutions such as the art market and art museums. Chapter Two discusses the effects of China's rapid urbanization and modernization on the Chinese population and artists' use of art as a means of coming to terms with China's dramatic changes. Wang Guangyi critiques capitalism's commodification of the quotidian through an invasion of mass produced objects and corporate advertisements. Zhang Dali incites discussion on the exclusionary spatial politics of urbanization, and Ai Weiwei deliberates the ideological control of China's authoritarian government. Chapter Three questions the benefits of globalization and capitalism on the contemporary art scene. The arrival of bourgeois arts institutions such as museums, galleries, and auction houses has facilitated artists' critiques of Chinese politics under censorship laws. However, the economic and political support that arts institutions provide artists does not discount the inherent authority and influence that arts institutions affect on the production of contemporary Chinese art. It can be argued that much of contemporary Chinese art is created for the art market and the western eye. The three chapters are building blocks for addressing the following question: If contemporary Chinese art is celebrated in the international art community for the "Chinese narrative," what is this narrative, and how genuine are artists' depictions of this narrative?

I. SOCIAL HISTORY OF MODERN CHINA: A contextualization of contemporary Chinese art within modern Chinese history

The development of contemporary Chinese art is inextricably linked to the socio-political history of China. For many, the artwork is marked by its incorporation of western style and philosophy with Chinese iconography and sociocultural narrative. The common misconception with this pluralistic style is the notion that Chinese artists began to take inspiration from the western art canon following Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up" policy in 1978. Although western philosophy proliferated with the instigation of this Open Door Policy in contemporary China, Chinese artists had begun to learn from their western counterparts as early as the Qing Dynasty. Rather, it was the introverted nature of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution that had stifled Chinese artists' cultural exchange with the west. The cross-pollination of western and Chinese art did not commence in 1978. Instead, fueled by dissatisfaction of the failure of the Cultural Revolution and subsequent politics, emerging Chinese artists furthered the western education that their earlier counterparts engaged in.

In "On the Social History of Art," T.J. Clark declares art as a product of social phenomena rather than a reflection of social history. History, in fact, is not mere background to a work of art, but a central element to the study of works of art.⁴ In order to study the development contemporary Chinese art, then, one must examine the social conditions that gave rise to the art—in particular, the effects of the Cultural Revolution and subsequent Chinese economic and political reform.

⁴ T.J. Clark, "On the Social History of Art," in *Images of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London, United Kingdom: Thames and Hudson, 1973). 10.

Modern Chinese exaltation of western culture began with 1917 May Fourth Movement, or, the New Culture Movement. Sparked by frustration over concessions of the Treaty of Versailles, the protests inspired revolutionaries who sought modernization and the development of a new Chinese cultural ethos through the grafting of western culture, for traditional Chinese values were viewed as an impediment to Chinese progression.⁵ In order to further the mission of western education, the revolutionaries established art academies dedicated to the transmission of western artistic values and techniques. Artists within this liberal camp were split into two groups: the bourgeois leaders, who sought democratic reform and favored European modernism, and socialist revolutionaries, who saw power in Soviet-style realism.

In 1949, Mao Zedong, a communist revolutionary, emerged to establish the People's Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party. The Chairman, who recognized art and culture's unavoidable attachment to politics, believed in the freedom of the people and the development of the country through the destruction of traditional society. Under the 1966 Cultural Revolution, a sociopolitical movement that purged capitalism and traditional Chinese culture in favor of Maoist communist ideology, Mao campaigned to destroy the "Four Olds"—Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas—in order to redefine Chinese culture in a manner that supported his agenda. "What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of meaning and form, the unity of revolutionary and political meaning and the perfection of artistic form,"⁶ he declared in the 1967 Yanan Forum on Literature and Art. Putting his cultural agenda into action, Mao established a new cultural

⁵ Tuo Li, "Introduction," in *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*, ed. Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pöhlmann, and Kai Reschke (Berlin, Germany: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1994). 3.

⁶ Mao Zedong, *Quotations from Chairman Mao (the "Little Red Book")*, 2d ed., ed. (Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press, 1967).

movement of didactic propaganda art that would persuade the Chinese people of communist values. Since Mao recognized the powerful effect of Soviet-style realism that earlier socialist revolutionaries preferred, all artists under Mao's communist regime worked for the government as propaganda art-workers, using Soviet-style social realism as official propaganda language.⁷

Consequently, realism was celebrated in the official sphere for its approachable nature, which most effectively conveyed Maoist optimism during the Cultural Revolution. For example, in Yu Zhenli's *We must grasp revolution and increase production, increase work, increase preparation for struggle, to do an even better job*, May 1976 (Fig. 1), a Red Guard stands beside lower-class agrarian and industrial workers and a student. The six energetic central figures stand in heroic and aggrandizing positions, emphasizing their prosperity under the Cultural Revolution. In the background, Yu showcases industrial structures emblematic of modernization—bridges, trains, factories, and busses—that point to the prosperity of the Revolution. The iconography of the poster is hard to misinterpret. In fact, the direct slogan, "*We must grasp revolution and increase production, increase work, increase preparation for struggle, to do an even better job*," is printed in communist red below the artwork, promoting Maoist mottos of hard work for national advancement. This was the extent of official Chinese visual culture during the Cultural Revolution: blatant propaganda artwork glorifying Mao, heroizing farmers, and preaching Maoist revolutionary ideology.

⁷ Li Xianting, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Chinese Art," in *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*, ed. Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pöhlmann, and Kai Reschke (Berlin, Germany: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1994).40.

A visual culture of propaganda art began to play a role in what is known as Mao's push for "pure culture." No art could exist outside of communist politics, thus Mao's purgatory of non-Mao-ist art extended beyond traditional artwork to pieces incorporating content outside of Mao's agenda.⁸ The Red Guards worked to eradicate all subversions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and all forms of culture that did not adhere to Mao's political campaign. By the mid 1970s, even the most clandestine subversions of the CCP were expelled, limiting Chinese visual culture to surface-level Maoist propaganda.

Following Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping launched the 1978 Reform and Opening Up directive, which introduced capitalism and globalization to China. The economic and political policies aimed to depart from official and non-official Maoist ideology by establishing a capitalist market economy and re-opening Chinese culture to outside influences. Initially, artists experienced a sense of liberation unrestricted by Mao's "pure culture." No longer bound to the creation of official propaganda art, early contemporary Chinese artists launched movements such as Scar Art and Rural Realism. The two movements appropriated communist realism to subvert CCP optimism of the Cultural Revolution, depicting the traumatic experience of the revolution and subsequent despair and disillusion.⁹ For example, Luo Zhongli's 1980 painting, *Father*, first exhibited at the Second National Youth Art Exhibition, 1980 best exemplifies the two movements.¹⁰ The painting shows the wrinkled, tired face of a Chinese peasant, drinking only soup from a porcelain bowl. The peasant's scant nourishment alludes to false revolutionary promises of

⁸ Paul Gladston, *'Avant-Garde' Art Groups in China, 1979-1989 : The Stars-the Northern Art Group-the Pond Association-Xiamen Dada : A Critical Polylogue* (Bristol: University Of Chicago Press, 2013). 16.

⁹ Andreas Schmid, "The Fine Arts after the Cultural Revolution: Stylistic Development and Theoretical Debate," in *China Avant-Garde : Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*, ed. Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pöhlmann, and Kai Reschke (Berlin, Germany: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1994). 16-17.

¹⁰ Gladston, *'Avant-Garde' Art Groups in China, 1979-1989 : The Stars-the Northern Art Group-the Pond Association-Xiamen Dada : A Critical Polylogue*. 20.

the “iron rice bowl,” which promised citizens a stable standard of living. *Father*, which eventually won first place at the Second National Youth Art Exhibition, exemplifies momentary liberation from official cultural restriction: Although Luo’s painting was displayed in an official exhibition, the artist was confident about adding furtively subversive messages in his artwork.

Yet, of the three major schools of art that emerged after the Cultural Revolution—realism in the form of Scar Art and Rural Realism, avant-garde, and traditional painting—it was the Chinese avant-garde that created the most commotion in Chinese culture. Similar to the disillusioned students who had led the New Culture Movement, the leaders of the Chinese avant-garde were young artists who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution and felt disenchanting by Mao’s unfulfilled promises. Accordingly, avant-garde artists continued the agenda of the New Culture Movement by working to develop a new Chinese cultural ethos inspired by western technique and philosophy. Not only was western culture appropriated as a rebellion against the introverted nature of a failed Cultural Revolution, the avant-garde also spearheaded China’s 1979 to 1989 Modern Art period, in which underlying narratives that called for democracy and personal freedom characterized Chinese art. After all, China’s loosening political grip contributed heavily to artists’ expression of emerging impatience with authoritarianism and conformity. Modern Chinese artists explored their newfound freedom by reacting against the population’s blind following of Mao and the aesthetics of self-expression that were suppressed amongst art-workers.¹¹

¹¹ Gao Minglu, “85 Art Movement (1986),” in *Contemporary Chinese Art : Primary Documents*, ed. Hung Wu and Peggy Wang (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

However, even as a majority of avant-garde artists were interested in political engagement, those who sought to explore artistic expression struggled to distance from political discourse. Although certain art groups such as the Stars rebelled against Maoist coupling of art and politics by working to create a new language for modern art that explored existential feelings of individual experience in modern China, the contested sociopolitical situation of China was impossible to avoid. Whether it is because of iconography in the pieces, or politicized organization of exhibitions, works of art associated with this group contained blatant political symbolism that was oftentimes interpreted as anti-government.¹² It was impossible to separate oneself from politics so soon after Mao's death, for participation in and disillusionment with the Cultural Revolution left young artists feeling "to one degree or another the inescapable weight of historical responsibility".¹³

In 1989, several events occurred that changed the newly liberating landscape of Chinese art. First, authorities shut down the Stars' 1989 China/Avant-Garde exhibition, which showcased prominent Chinese avant-garde art. The exhibition closure was indicative of the Party's toughening crackdown on democratic movements, as China re-asserted its sensitivity to anti-establishment art.¹⁴ In fact, months after the shutdown of the China/Avant-Garde exhibition, the Chinese army massacred hundreds of democracy protestors—many of whom were students involved with the avant-garde art movement—at the Tiananmen Square Massacre. While pre-1989 conditions of Chinese art were fueled

¹² Yang Wei, "A Look at Chinese Contemporary Art after the Move from Yuanmingyuan to Songzhuang," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark (Hong Kong S.A.R.: New Art Media Limited, 2000).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Li Xianting, "The Pluralistic Look of Chinese Contemporary Art since the Mid-1990s," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark (Hong Kong S.A.R.: New Art Media Limited, 2000).

by a curious leniency from the Chinese government and a push for democracy, the escalating incidents in 1989 pushed Chinese avant-garde art underground.¹⁵ The dreams of a democratic state died alongside the hundreds sacrificed at Tiananmen Square. Consequently, the post-1989 environment prompted artists to question the underlying optimism of the 1980s.¹⁶ The development from China's modern art period to contemporary art signaled a "growing disaffinity of unofficial art produced within the PRC and supposedly progressive economic and social reform"¹⁷, for the multiple stages of official regression back towards intolerant regulation fueled artists' engagement with critical theory. Using the western style, technique, and philosophy, contemporary Chinese artists confronted the Chinese tradition, creating pluralistic artwork with deliberate political connotations.

Nonetheless, the socio-political influences of contemporary Chinese art extended beyond that of governmental externalities. The pivotal economic and social changes that China experienced under Deng Xiaoping's 1978 Open and Reform policy significantly altered the institution of contemporary Chinese art. Most importantly, Deng's policy of economic liberalization abolished state economy and established a free market. Under the capitalist get-rich-quick mentality, Deng encouraged the Chinese people to be driven by market incentives. In fact, the government even integrated culture into China's economic plan, establishing the Culture Industry Bureau sector, whose goal was to investigate, research, organize, plan, and make policies for the cultural market.¹⁸ For the first time since

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gladston, *'Avant-Garde' Art Groups in China, 1979-1989 : The Stars-the Northern Art Group-the Pond Association-Xiamen Dada : A Critical Polylogue*. 26.

¹⁷ Ibid. 27.

¹⁸ Meiqin Wang, *Confrontation and Complicity: Rethinking Official Art in Contemporary China*. 83.

the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese art was subject to market rule. Beyond the political narratives that artists injected in their pieces, artists also changed their approach to art. As Jane Debevoise notes, artists collectively shifted their attention towards the art market.¹⁹

If Peter Burger's theory of art as an institution of bourgeois society is transferred to case of contemporary Chinese art, one can easily identify the development of modern Chinese capitalism as a seed for bourgeois arts institutions' recent infiltration of China. According to Burger, art as institution incorporates the productive apparatus of art—its method of production, its circulation, and its consumption.²⁰ Since the art market affects the mode of distribution and circulation of art, the emergence of a Chinese art market is an element of the bourgeois art institution that arrived in China alongside modern capitalism. In fact, the existence of the Chinese art market also infiltrates art production through the subjugation of art to market demands, changing the way that artists approach their work; in contemporary China, art is created with an awareness of market value. Thus as individual market subjects rather than collective cultural workers, artists supported the development of China's culture industry through the market sales of their artwork, both domestic and international. Since money became a dominant factor for success in China, more artists began to combine commercial goals with artistic goals. The 1992 Guangzhou Biennial, for example, inaugurated the integration of art and market, the goal of which was to "establish a new image for modern China by combining commerce and culture."²¹ Increasingly, contemporary Chinese artists began to confuse cultural products with

¹⁹ Debevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*. 219.

²⁰ Peter Bürger, "Theory of the Avant-Garde," (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). N.p.

²¹ Debevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*. 223.

financial profit. Lü Peng, China's foremost art critic, curator and historian, and founder of the Guangzhou Biennial, bluntly asserts the economic goals of the exhibition, arguing that it was only by manipulation of the art market (pre-assessed pricing of artwork) that artists could determine the success of their work.²² In fact, it was believed that "artists articulate the secret of the soul; but society uses money to affirm the value of that secret."²³ The consequences of a Chinese free market—most importantly the valuation of artwork based on its performance in the market—renounced the communist model established by the Cultural Revolution. Contemporary Chinese culture had abandoned Maoist ideals for capitalist principles of the bourgeois art institution adopted from western art practices. Beyond the grafting of western technique and philosophy, China's Open and Reform Policy also introduced practices of the bourgeois art institution that dominated western art conventions.

Towards the end of the Twentieth Century, contemporary Chinese artists split into three directions. Some departed for the west to seeking artistic freedom and improvement of their foundational theoretical knowledge, some turned to cynicism in opposition to official promotion of optimistic relief following the end of the Cultural Revolution. Many engaged in the art market and culture industry, and most participated in arts institutions by exhibiting their works in domestic and international museums, galleries, and auction houses. In response to the tumultuous sociopolitical events from the Cultural Revolution to the present, contemporary Chinese art now embodies a pluralistic relationship that

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 228.

oscillates between a critique of capitalism and Chinese politics, a repetition of historic styles, and a “playing into” of the rising art institution.

II. CRITIQUE OF CHINA: Three critiques of the modern Chinese experience by artists Wang Guangyi, Zhang Dali, and Ai Weiwei

The institutional transformations that China had experienced following the Cultural Revolution had an impact on all facets of the Chinese experience. The era after the Revolution was marked by social, political, economic, and even spatial change that oftentimes functioned in contradictory ways. China's mass modernization and transformation into a global and capitalistic powerhouse produced a nation of optimistic hopefuls who worked hard to achieve capitalist dreams. These goals, however, were contradictory to the socialist political foundations of the modern Chinese government. As Mao Zedong's famous maxim, "no construction without destruction"²⁴ reads, the modern Chinese experience is characterized by a period of rapid construction and destruction that has confounded, misguided, and alienated Chinese citizens.

Of contemporary artists working in Beijing in the late 20th and early 21st century, the works of three artists best encompass the narratives represented in contemporary Chinese art. In particular, the ways in which China's transformation after the Cultural Revolution has affected Chinese citizens. Wang Guangyi, considered one of the founding fathers of contemporary Chinese painting, critiques the effects of capitalism with his *Great Criticism* oil painting series, 1990-2007, which equates the persuasive mechanisms of western capitalist culture with revolution propaganda. Zhang Dali, a multi-media artist working in graffiti and photography, documents the mass transformation of urban spaces with the series *Dialogue*, 1995-2005. Last, Ai Weiwei, a multimedia experimental artist

²⁴ Philip Tinari, "Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn: Ceramic Works, 5000 Bce-2010 Ce* (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010). 33.

notorious for inciting controversial discourse regarding politics in his activist work, engages in various art forms that seek to deconstruct institutional ideology. These three artists represent a growing narrative in contemporary Chinese art as artists increasingly struggle to come to terms with, critique, and attempt to move beyond the immense changes in the Chinese environment—oftentimes than not, much of which is outside of their understanding.

Wang Guangyi and Capitalism

When Deng Xiaoping applied his Opening and Reform Policy in 1978, China experienced a radical change. A large section of China's economy shifted from a socialist to a capitalist model, which contradicted the communist policies that Mao Zedong had put into force during the Cultural Revolution. China's rapid economic growth suddenly replaced Mao's pure culture with consumer culture, confusing Chinese citizens as they straddled a politically communist country that was in part economically capitalist. Gradually, communist propaganda was replaced with capitalist advertisements, shifting the Chinese mentality from a collective ambition to work hard for national prosperity to individual competition for the fruits of capitalism. As China transitions from a political to an economically based society, Deng Xiaoping encouraged his citizens to "strive in the direction of the market."²⁵²⁶

Wang Guangyi responds to the penetration of transnational capitalism in the Chinese experience. Considered one of the founding fathers of Political Pop, an avant-garde

²⁵ Deng Xiaoping tells the Chinese to "strive in the direction of the market" in a speech during a 1992 tour of Shenzhen and Zhuhai.

²⁶ Lü Peng, "Political Pop and Artists," in *A History of Art in 20th Century China* (New York City: Charta, 2010). 960.

art movement that grafted stylistic techniques of Andy Warhol's Pop Art, Wang works to discuss Chinese politics in an ironic and often mocking way.²⁷ The artist stimulated discussion on the effects of this unexpected change, questioning the cost of a capitalist economic shift on the Chinese people. Using Political Pop as an "anti-system tactic" that was a dual satire of politics and consumerism,²⁸ Wang suggested that these two elements of Chinese society were inextricably linked. In the artists' *Great Criticism* series—his most famous project—well-known propaganda iconography from the Cultural Revolution was harnessed to discuss Wang's experience of modern-day China.²⁹ The series mocked and ridiculed the rise of commodity economy and, by extension, the Chinese government.

To begin, the *Great Criticism* paintings put explicit Maoist iconography in the same space as prominent western capitalist logos. By relating stereotypical Chinese images with western advertisements, Wang drew a direct relationship between capitalism and communism. In the 1991-1994 painting, *Great Criticism: Coca-Cola* (Fig. 3), three muscular Chinese peasants holding Mao's "Little Red Book" and sporting communist costumes assertively grasp an ink pen under which the Coca-Cola logo is printed in bright white. The background is primarily red—the Communist Party color—featuring part of a yellow star that cuts the composition into three parts. In the foreground, random numbers are stamped in white and black ink throughout the canvas, suggesting stock numbers of mass-produced objects. The pluralistic painting contains both communist propaganda iconography and capitalistic imagery. First, Wang merges the soviet social realism style popularized in Mao's propaganda posters with Andy Warhol's Pop art style, an American

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 963.

²⁹ Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (China: Timezone 8, 2008). 67.

movement that uses commercial imagery from popular culture. The three figures and the painting's red and white theme allude to the communist motif, while the flat and straightforward composition replicates Pop art and commercial graphics. When *Great Criticism: Coca-Cola* is compared with Andy Warhol's *Green Pea*, 1968 (Fig. 4), the stylistic similarities are easy to identify.

For example, the painting and screen-print both utilize flat and bright primary colors that echo commercial graphics. In fact, *Great Criticism* and *Green Pea* exclusively incorporate the colors red, yellow, white and black. The uniform planes of color are not shaded; instead, a sharp contour shadow delineates the ridges on the top of the can in *Green Pea* the same way that thick and defined contours accentuate the muscles of each figure's arm in *Great Criticism: Coca Cola*. The graphical depiction of the images' subjects alludes to the stylistic simplicity of capitalist advertisements, directing the viewer towards the stylistic strategies of corporate propaganda. Moreover, neither piece gives indication of the subject's placement. While the background of Wang's painting is a graphically designed collage of a yellow star and the Coca Cola logo, the green pea soup seemingly floats in front of a neutral background. The lack of location placement in both pieces highlight the notion that the two artists are not concerned with naturalistic detail. Rather, it the paintings' connoted messages that are significant to the works of art: the effects of capitalism. Both paintings point the viewer to the capitalist logos that dominate the composition. On the bottom right corner of *Great Criticism: Coca Cola*, the white Coca Cola logo distinctly pops out amongst the red and yellow palette of the painting. Similarly, the white Campbell's logo in *Green Pea* stands out from the red background of the soup can. If Warhol's soup cans and their graphical style are famous for their mockery and accentuation of capitalist mass

production and advertisement, Wang appropriates the Pop art style in order to discuss capitalism's effects on modern China. The two artists' works comment on the increasing commodification of daily life through the invasion of mass-produced objects and corporate advertisements.

The most important aspect of both artists' works is their use of a flat and cartoon-like manner of painting that emphasizes a loss of artistic individuality in the paintings. As discussed earlier, this graphical style replicates the techniques of corporate advertisements. In the case of Andy Warhol's *Green Pea*, the artist's brushstrokes—by extension, hand—is missing from the production of the piece, for it is not uncommon knowledge that a majority of the silkscreened artwork produced in Warhol's art "factories" was created by the artist's many apprentices.³⁰ Similarly, personal brushstrokes are not visible in Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series. Although the series is painted, each work resembles prints, as the artist's brushstrokes vanish into the smooth surface of the canvas. The works of both artists could be created by anyone—there is no indication outside of the artists' signature that is indicative of their personal skill. The lack of individuality epitomizes capitalism's celebration of mass production, where small-scale, artisanal production is undervalued for large-scale and mechanized high-quantity production systems. Wang's *Great Criticism* series is a critique of the standardization that results from capitalism: beyond a standardization of commodity objects through mass production, the economic practices of capitalist corporations have also replaced the notion of the individual with statistical computations of consumers. Advertisements encourage consumers to desire certain products by projecting market-determined demands of the

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). 9.

market into marketing strategies. If the communist system is criticized for its eradication of individuality in pursuit of social equality, capitalist practices can also be criticized for its trivialization of people as consumer statistics that are taken advantage of through advertisement and marketing.

Thus the crux of the series is the message that capitalism and western advertisements have replaced communism and propaganda artwork in China. This notion is not only strengthened by Wang's emphasis of the Coca-Cola logo, but also by the artist's deliberate placement of the logo in the painting. In fact, *Great Criticism: Coca Cola* replaces text commonly found in propaganda posters with the Coca-Cola sign, suggesting the idea that the liberty Chinese citizens experience at the conclusion of Mao's dictatorship has been blighted by capitalist advertisement. Rather, Chinese communism and western capitalism are "two incongruous ideologies" that perhaps "promote the same ends through different means and social values"³¹: much like communist ideology, which suppresses individualism, capitalism creates passive consumers dictated by corporate values. As Jane Debevoise writes in *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*, "with humor, one historical trap was substituted for another, as shiny brand names offering the prospect of a consumer paradise replaced earnest workers who had one delivered promises of socialist utopic. Both were as seductive as they were vacant."³² The series, then, is the artist's expression of disillusionment with the introduction of capitalism in modern China and his grappling with the effects of capitalism on society. Through the *Great Criticism* series, Wang suggests that perhaps capitalism does not differ vastly from

³¹ Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China*. 66.

³² Debevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*. 265.

communism. After all, advertisements control the desires of the masses in a similar manner as communist propaganda posters' ideological control of the people.

Zhang Dali and Urbanization

If Wang Guangyi criticizes capitalism's standardization of people and culture, Zhang Dali discusses the spatial politics of Chinese urbanization, revealing urban Beijing's effects of homogeneity and uniformity as social spaces dominated by economic and political power that excludes and alienates traditional residents. Urbanization is a significant factor in Chinese modernization. The reconstruction of Chinese urban spaces is perhaps most expositive in Beijing's transformation. Beijing was originally constructed during the Ming (14th – 17th c.) and Qing (19th – early 20th c.) dynasties as the political capital of the country. Traditional Beijing consisted of four historical cities: the Outer City, the Inner City, the Imperial City, and the Forbidden City. During the formation of the Republic of China in the first half of the 20th century, much of the Imperial City was destroyed for a major east-west avenue that was built to streamline urban traffic. Towards the last years of the Cultural Revolution, the Outer City, the Inner City, and historic tower gates were destroyed in order to further Chinese modernization.³³ As China continued to modernize under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, Beijing became subject to a rapid remodeling that was realized through the destruction of traditional architectural structures, characteristic residential buildings, and unique streets and alleyways.³⁴ The city's urbanization has been marked by unprecedented speed, size, and scale of the transformation that left the city unrecognizable to its own residents; it is impossible to keep track of the changes. Much of Beijing is

³³ Hung Wu, "Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*: Conversation with a City," *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000). 1-5.

³⁴ *Internalizing Changes: Contemporary Chinese Art and Urban Transformation*, Geske Lectures (Lincoln, NE: THE University of Nebraska, 2009). 7.

constantly in rubble, as traditional houses are demolished for skyscrapers and condominiums, and residents are incessantly relocated from the inner city to the outskirts.³⁵ Today, Beijing is a shell of Chinese modernization. The only unique quality left of the city is the traditional buildings that officials have deemed worthy to save.

Following the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, Zhang Dali, like many other Chinese artists, fled the country. The artist relocated to Bologna, Italy where he worked as a commercial painter who produced “oriental-style paintings.”³⁶ In Bologna, graffiti tags and murals encompassed Zhang’s daily life, eventually inspiring him to pick up a spray-can in 1995 to create the first rendition of his *Dialogue* series—a graffiti of a contour profile of the artists’ distinctive bald head.³⁷ Later that year, the artist moved back to Beijing, for the linguistic and cultural differences between Zhang and Italy had contributed to an alienating identity as an “overseas Chinese.”³⁸

When Zhang returned to Beijing, he was shocked by the city’s drastic transformation. China had experienced dramatic upheaval in the past century, but it was the mass scale metamorphosis of Beijing that solidified the changing Chinese experience. The city was virtually unrecognizable to Zhang, who sought to document this reconstruction.³⁹ Thus the artist transferred his bald head graffiti from the streets of Bologna to the walls of Beijing’s unappreciated architectural structures—the debris of historic buildings that were being torn down for the construction of newer, shinier modern

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Wu Hung, "A Case of Being 'Contemporary' - Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). 302.

³⁷ "Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*: Conversation with a City." 750.

³⁸ Ibid. 754.

³⁹ Ibid.

buildings. In a photo of a 1999 rendition of the series (Fig. 5), Zhang's bald head is contoured on the ruins of a demolished building. The white wall that holds the graffiti is peeling and unmanaged; bricks that have fallen from the wreckage still litter the ground. The center of the graffiti is empty as if the artist had blasted a hole in order to mimic the destruction and violence that had been performed. Although *Dialogue* is a graffiti series that replicates the same symbol over different architectural structures around the city, each rendition is different: some of Zhang's bald heads are cut out like the one in the 1999 photo, some are simple outlines, and others are repeated successively over the length of a long wall. By 1998, over two thousand of Zhang's bald heads tattooed the city, marking both houses fated to be demolished and those already in rubble. *Dialogue* represented the artist's "contested relationship" with and uncertainty about the future of the city.⁴⁰

In an interview with Wu Hung in 2000, Zhang explained his choice usage of a self-portrait:

"This image is a condensation of my own likeness as an individual. It stands in my place to communicate with this city. I want to know everything about this city—its state of being, its transformations, its structure. I call this project Dialogue."⁴¹

The self-portrait, then, represents the artist's identity and relationship with Beijing. *Dialogue* is his way of speaking to a city that is undergoing enormous change. It grows from Zhang's desire to converse with a city that he grapples to comprehend. Each repeated portrait signifies the same person—Zhang—reaching out for identity and conversation, yet each portrait's signification changes as its spatial-temporal context changes. A bald head on

⁴⁰ Wu, "Zhang Dali's *Dialogue: Conversation with a City.*" 750.

⁴¹ Ibid. 750.

a soon-to-be destroyed building, for example, signifies impending violence, whereas a bald head on rubble signifies an act of destruction that has already occurred.

Despite the series' title and the artists' goal to communicate with the city, however, *Dialogue* never explicitly engages in dialogue with its environment and viewers. "At the beginning, it was not so successful because people did not understand what it was. On one hand, they didn't understand graffiti as a way to express, and also because they didn't know what the tag stood for, or what it was," Zhang explains in an interview.⁴² As the first widely recognized graffiti artist in Beijing, Zhang's art did not encounter the same graffiti-culture interaction as it did overseas, thus conversation with other graffiti artists did not occur. As an alternative, Zhang lingered around the sites of his graffiti, hoping to catch his viewers' reactions. Although Zhang's account of the reactions was multi-faceted and varied—there is the taxi driver who said the bald heads reminded him of mafia symbols, or the woman who worried the graffiti marked houses doomed to be destroyed—these reactions were one sided.⁴³ For example, in one of Zhang's early photos of *Dialogue*, the artist captures two young boys as they walk past the graffiti (Fig. 6). In the photo, Zhang's bald head is turned towards the two walking boys, leaning forward in a way that calls for attention. Yet, the boys resist contact with the graffiti; one walks on, while the other turns away from the graffiti to stare indifferently into the camera. There is no interaction between the viewers and the art, for *Dialogue* is ignored by the passerby. Either the viewers react to the art in a definitive and non-interactive manner, or art experiences unreturned calls for attention.⁴⁴

⁴² Zhang Dali, interview by Lisa Huang, 2016; Dali Zhang, interview by Lisa Huang, 2016.

⁴³ Wu, "Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*: Conversation with a City." 756.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 756.

The photo is indicative of the general response Beijing inhabitants have to *Dialogue*: there is, rather, no dialogue.

Consequently, Zhang pivoted his project to engage in another form of dialogue. Instead of capturing passersby's reactions, Zhang framed his photographs of the graffiti in a manner that juxtaposed the dilapidated sites with other buildings, forming a dialectic relationship between the demolished and the preserved and constructed. In *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing, 1998* (Fig. 7), Zhang brutally carves a hole into the wall that holds his graffiti head, so that his portrait is characterized by a gritty and vast emptiness that alludes to the wall's imminent destruction. In the background of the photo, Beijing's Forbidden City rises, forming a comparison between the traditional architectural structures the government deems worthy to save, and those that are not. On the other hand, in the *Demolition, 1999* (Fig. 8), the desolate remains of a demolished building act as the canvas for Zhang's smashed out profile. The rubble is contextualized by the background, in which a new condominium—some parts still under scaffolding—is built. These photos compare that which is destroyed to the buildings deemed worthy for preservation or construction. They venture to engage in another type of dialogue with the city: a representation of unwanted versus wanted. It is another of Zhang's attempts to refuse the city's monologue. The city, however, wins in its resistance to communicate with Zhang's *Dialogue*. Although Zhang's photos compare the two kinds of structures Beijing refuses and welcomes, they still act as evidence of this incongruity, rather than show the graffiti's communication with the new city. The sentiment is indicative of the state of the modern Chinese city: rapid modernization has resulted in a lack of understanding between the city and its people. As Wu Hung says, "In theory, demolition and relocation were

conditions for the capital's modernization. In actuality, these conditions brought about a growing alienation between the city and its residents: they no longer belonged to one another."⁴⁵

Yet, the project is not a complete failure. Beyond Zhang's intention to engage in dialogue with viewers and other graffiti artists, a significant element of the series was its ignition of urban discourse. The city's refusal to engage in conversation with the art strengthens *Dialogue*, for it reveals a fundamental problem in China's urbanization. Ultimately, *Dialogue* does not interact with the city, but engages in dialogue with the media, as the works launch a debate regarding larger issues of urbanization.⁴⁶ Most powerful, however, is *Dialogue's* reflection of a cosmopolitan metropolis and its spatial politics. The series launches discussion of the following questions: At the height of urbanization, whose city is Beijing? For whom is it built? Who has control over this space?⁴⁷ The boys in Zhang's early photo of *Dialogue* (Fig. 6) may be ignorant to the graffiti, but the series performs the act of calling into question the spatial politics of the transformation of Beijing. Zhang speaks of this form of dialogue, saying that the most important element of the piece was the discussion that it aroused. "A lot of people discussed the works," Zhang says, "people from different circles of life, different parts of society. They asked what it is and why I was doing this, so there was a dialogue."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid. 760.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Maurizio Marinelli, "Urban Revolution and Chinese Contemporary Art: A Total Revolution of the Senses," *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015). 166.

⁴⁸ Zhang, "Skype Interview."

The importance of this dialogue is the manner in which it brings to attention public discourse regarding Chinese spatial politics. In an interview with Maurizio Marinelli, Zhang reveals the oppressive nature of Chinese urbanization:

From 1949 [even before the massive urban transformation of the post-Mao era] urban construction has been the creation of government officials. Urbanization has been the work of the government... the work of some kind of mentally incapacitated cadre obsessed with ideological principles and GDP growth.⁴⁹

Beijing's urban changes can be understood in terms of the notions of spatial politics that theorists such as Irit Rogoff, Henri Lefebvre, and Mark Wigley discuss. Zhang's *Dialogue* works to reveal the ways in which the government represses Beijing citizens through urban transformation of the city. In "Theses of the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin writes that there is "no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" for every product of culture and the quotidian is at the cost of another.⁵⁰ For Beijing, the construction of an urban space comes with the violence and exclusion of those who previously inhabited the space. Ultimately, urbanization is not the realization of Beijing's citizens needs, but, as Zhang says, an establishment constructed by and for government officials.

In Irit Rogoff's "The Aesthetics of Post-History," the theorist writes the following of a work of historical commemoration:

What is it that the work of historical commemoration wishes to achieve? I would say that above all else it wishes to render the invisible visible, to effect a form of historical reconciliation and to attempt the satisfaction of a desire for a concrete

⁴⁹ Marinelli, "Urban Revolution and Chinese Contemporary Art: A Total Revolution of the Senses." 166.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York :: Schocken Books, 1988). 256.

material presence as a tangible manifestation of some process of redemption with is taking place.⁵¹

To Rogoff, and many other critical theorists such as Benjamin, historic work aims to render the invisible visible—to document and showcase the “barbarism” that is involved in the construction of civilization. After all, the violence and conflict that actually produces spaces are always masked by an appearance of harmony and cohesiveness in design.⁵² *Dialogue's* blatant juxtaposition of Beijing's modern ruins with the construction of a new metropolis makes visible the violent process that facilitates Chinese modernization. Zhang's photographs of *Dialogue* boldly point to the vicious deconstruction that occurs in Beijing every day, succeeding in a revelation of the trauma of eviction and destruction that is a consequence of urbanization.

There is another element to *Dialogue* that strengthens the series' significance. In rendering the invisibility of the violent construction of modern Beijing, Zhang also sheds light on urban Beijing's alienation of its citizens. As Mark Wigley theorizes in *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, “it is the very gesture of exclusion that produces space in the first place,” for the production of space is inseparable from the production of otherness.⁵³ As a matter of fact, in a 1999 photograph, Zhang deliberately positions the National Art Gallery in the background of his graffiti heads (Fig. 9).⁵⁴ “The National Gallery would not exhibit my works, so I found a way to exhibit my works anyways. They may not exhibit my

⁵¹ Irit Rogoff, “The Aesthetics of Post-History: A German Perspective,” in *Joseph Beuys : The Reader*, ed. Claudia Mesch and Viola Maria Michely (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). 130.

⁵² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991). 144.

⁵³ Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction : Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993). 69.

⁵⁴ Wu, “Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*: Conversation with a City.” 764.

works, but I exhibit them in my photo,"⁵⁵ Zhang has said when asked about the photo. By situating his portraits *outside* of the national gallery, Zhang reveals his exclusion from the institution. Not only does his art occupy a space outside of the gallery, but the portraits also point to the artist's self-identification as an outsider. His graffiti will one day be destroyed along with the wall they inhabit—while the National Art Gallery continues to stand in the background, Zhang and his art will suffer the same fate as the rest of traditional Beijing. In fact, Zhang's estrangement from the museum is a metaphor for a majority class of Chinese citizens Zhang calls "half-citizens," those who play a role in the construction of the city, yet are excluded from the benefits of it.⁵⁶ After all, despite *Dialogue's* exclusion from the gallery, Zhang continues to photograph the series—the photo being a medium in which one could exhibit his or her site-specific work in an artificial gallery space. Much like "half-citizens," Zhang experience an urban contradiction: both play a role in the construction of their exclusion in hopes that, one day, they too, can be included.

However, the argument can also be made that perhaps Chinese citizens participate in urbanization in order to empower themselves with the rights to their city. As mentioned earlier, the construction of the Beijing urban space has resulted in the segregation and expulsion of working class citizens from their traditional city. Beyond a spatial displacement, however, the urban city has also deprived its citizens from urban life through an alienation of its residents. What does it mean, for example, that one of the only traditional complexes that the government has preserved is the *Forbidden City*—a palace whose name infers prohibition of visitors despite it being a tourist destination? If Henri

⁵⁵ Zhang, "Skype Interview."

⁵⁶ Marinelli, "Urban Revolution and Chinese Contemporary Art: A Total Revolution of the Senses." 159.

Lefebvre's theory of the rights to an urban city is applied to the Chinese condition, it can be understood that modern Beijing deprives the Chinese working class from urban life, for urbanization and capitalism have produced a social space that is dominated by economic and political power and expels dominated groups to the periphery by creating a center of richness and power.⁵⁷ Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*, then, is not only a primer for dialogue regarding the destructive nature of urban construction. The bald heads that the artist sprays around the city are symbols for the artist's declaration of a right to his city. After all, the city "can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life as long as the "urban" [is a] place of encounter, priority of use value."⁵⁸ Zhang's attempt to take back his city through graffiti is representative of the right of the people to create and develop *their* city as a collective power, rather than the government's interventions in their own political interests. As Mark Wigley writes in *The Architecture of Deconstruction : Derrida'*, "In the end, there is no space without violence and no violence that is not spatial."⁵⁹ Although China has alienated its own people from their homes in the process of constructing a powerful modern city, Zhang fights back with his graffiti in an effort to claim the rights to what the city could and should become.

Ai Weiwei and Ideological Critique

If Wang Guangyi criticizes the consumer culture that is born from China's capitalist economy and Zhang Dali discusses the violent, selfish, and exclusionary governmental process of urbanization, Ai Weiwei's artwork expands on the two artists' subversions of Chinese politics in order to undermine the ideological control of the government. The goal

⁵⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). 147-159.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 158.

⁵⁹ Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction : Derrida's Haunt.* 6.

of Ai Weiwei's work is to question power—especially that of institutional problems that arise with Chinese modernization. In particular, the politics of value and eradication of subjectivity.

Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo, 1994 (Fig. 10), one of Ai Weiwei's first art projects upon returning to China after thirteen years of living in New York, sets the foundation for Ai's deconstruction of the ideology of institutional force. In *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, Ai paints the Coca-Cola logo over an antique vessel from the Han Dynasty. The artwork questions the importance of the worth and authenticity of antique object: does the value of the antique object change with Ai's intervention?⁶⁰

Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo was inspired by Ai Weiwei's frequent trips to Beijing's antiques and flea markets. During his visits to the market, he was struck by the high quality ceramic replicas of historic pieces that were found in the corners of stalls.⁶¹ The dust-covered vessels did not differ from historic pieces elevated and preserved in antique museum collections, an irony that provoked Ai's questioning of the valuation of the objects: Who is it that inscribes higher value on certain objects? Systematically, the price of ceramic objects are placed on the object's historical context—its age, its usage, and its ownership. The valuation of these objects is particularly curious because ceramics can be categorized as either high or low art (fine art or craft) simply based on the object's context.⁶² The significance of *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, however, is the impact of Ai's intervention on the piece's value. Possibly found in a dusty corner of an antiques

⁶⁰ Glenn Adamson, "The Real Thing," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn: Ceramic Works, 5000 Bce-2010 Ce* (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010). 53.

⁶¹ Sue-An Van Der Zijpp, "Unbreakable," in *Ai Weiwei*, ed. Mark Wilson, Sue-An van der Zijpp, and Karen Smith (Groningen, Netherlands: Groninger Museum, 2008). 9.

⁶² Gregg Moore and Richard Torchia, "Doing Ceramics," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn: Ceramic Works, 5000 Bce-2010 Ce* (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010). 12.

market, Ai suggests that his simple addition of the Coca-Cola logo deems it worthy of museological display, for it is only with Ai's minimal intervention that the work of art will be given the possibility of display in a museum.⁶³ Heavily influenced by the work of Marcel Duchamp, Ai echoes the philosophy of Duchamp's readymades by questioning the assumptions of artwork. Much like Duchamp's readymades—mass-produced, non-art objects that are selected and placed in an aesthetic setting as art—Ai's urn is selected and slightly altered by the artist's addition of a Coca-Cola logo. If Duchampian notions question the production of value through spirituality of the artist's signature, Ai's *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* questions the value of antique objects through small artistic interventions. What makes an old object more valuable than finely crafted objects? In the case of contemporary counterfeits of antique objects, why is the perfect counterfeit inherently less valuable than the original? Would the entire art institution be undermined if a perfect contemporary replica were placed in the institution? Perhaps the meaning of a work of art is not intrinsic to the art itself, the two artists ask, but in the context of its display apparatus.

Ai's questioning of the politics of value is furthered in his performance art piece titled *Dropping A Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995 (Fig. 11). The performance, which is documented as a black and white photographic triptych, shows Ai Weiwei dropping a ceramic vessel in three frames. In the first frame, the artist is photographed holding the ceramic urn. In the second frame, the urn is suspended in air as Ai releases it from his hands. In the last frame, the urn is shattered upon impact with the ground.⁶⁴ One can read the breaking of the vase

⁶³ Glenn Adamson, "The Real Thing," *ibid.* 53.

⁶⁴ Van Der Zijpp, "Unbreakable."

as a metaphor for the shattering of the vessel's value. On the other hand, Ai Weiwei intentionally uses ceramics for its historic value within Chinese culture. After all, ceramics are considered an integral part of the Chinese cultural identity. When Mao's maxim, "no construction without destruction" is recalled, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* can also be understood in terms of Chinese modernization. For example, the Coca-Cola logo in *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, indicative of capitalism, wipes out the essence of the vessel the same way that Ai's shattering of the Han dynasty urn destroys history.⁶⁵ Similar to *Dialogue's* critique of urbanization as an eradication of Beijing's history, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* resembles the rise of Chinese capitalism, which has replaced traditional Chinese culture for a new value. Ai questions the following: what power ascribes this value?

Due to ceramics' integral part in Chinese culture, a number of Ai Weiwei's seminal works feature ceramic ware. As Ai discusses the transformation and place of ceramics in contemporary China, he simultaneously critiques the trajectory of change in the Chinese culture. If *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* and *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* question the politics of valuation through the use of ceramics, Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010 (Fig. 12-14) critiques the loss of individuality that comes with the rise of capitalism.

Sunflower Seeds was a work installed in the Tate Modern's 1000m² Turbine Hall. The piece covers the cement floor of the industrial hall with porcelain sunflower seeds measuring a depth of 10 cm.⁶⁶ More than an installation, *Sunflower Seeds* require the participation of its viewers. Ai Weiwei calls it a performance art piece, as the significance of

⁶⁵ Tinari, "Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei." 33.

⁶⁶ Juliet Bingham, "Introduction," in *Sunflower Seeds*, ed. Juliet Bingham (London, UK: Tate, 2010).

the piece is revealed as viewers immerse themselves in the space, inspecting each handcrafted porcelain sunflower seed. The piece comments on the homogenizing effects of industrial mass production, which results from the capitalist government's focus on money.

An integral part of *Sunflower Seeds* is the porcelain production industry in Jingdezhen, the world's first large scale porcelain production site. Unlike the rest of modern China, Jiangdezhan has preserved the primitive method of production, as porcelain created in the area continues to be made by hand. While Jingdezhen was historically a site of mass production, traditional craftsmen at Jingdezhen became undervalued as industry and technology take over.⁶⁷ In fact, in the 1980s, Deng withdrew state support of Jingdezhen's porcelain production "cottage industry" workshops as companies who follow the "cheap labor model" emerge in other provinces, mass-producing cheaper ware.⁶⁸ The story of Jingdezhen, then, is a story of the hyper-objectification of labor. Traditional craftsmen like those at Jingdezhen are replaced with commodity workers that produce lower quality objects at lower costs. In order to meet the demands of the market, China engages in a "race to the bottom" where labor is undervalued and workers become commodities.⁶⁹ Similar to Zhang's non-citizens, China's modernization has created a class of non-people, where workers lose their subjectivity.

Unlike modern Chinese mass production, all of Ai's sunflower seeds are carefully hand-painted and subject to rigorous quality control. When viewers see the piece from the balcony of the Turbine Hall, they see a blanket of grey mass. Initially, the seeds provide the

⁶⁷ Brendan Mcgetrick, "Everything Is Necessary," *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Jane Chin Davidson, "Affirmative Precarity: Ai Weiwei and Margarita Cabrera," *Journal of Visual Culture* 12, no. 1 (2013). 133.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 138.

homogenizing illusion of being the same. Upon closer inspection, however, viewers begin to notice that each seed is unique, for each is hand-painted by a separate worker with a separate style. When Ai speaks of the production process of the seeds, he says, "each one is different. You show it through your own control of the brush and your breath and your own body gestures. You pick a seed up and you put on ink, more ink or less ink, lightly or thickly painted. Then you have to turn it over and place it down. It's such a beautiful act."⁷⁰ The seeds exude an affective power on their viewers as they reveal the humanity and subjectivity behind its production.⁷¹ In fact, the installation's juxtaposition within the industrial space of the Turbine Hall, formerly the home of electricity generators of an old power station, further emphasizes the humanity of the seeds. *Sunflower Seeds*, a larger metaphor for capitalism and the ensuing loss of individuality, is Ai Weiwei's attempt to show that individuality can still exist in mass production. It laments the modern Chinese way of production promoted by those in power. In an interview with Juliet Bingham and Marko Daniel on 31 May and 1 June 2010, Ai says:

Society quickly develops into two levels: a higher level who just want to maintain stability and make a bigger profit and be stronger, and the general public who don't feel capable of being involved. My work very much relates to this blind production of things. I'm part of it, which is a bit of a nonsense. The sunflower seeds can never be planted and can never grow, but the process of continuously doing something that's not really useful in such a massive way and takes such a long time and with so many people involved reflects those conditions.⁷²

With *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai introduces the idea that those in power do not simply construct value. Rather, everything is decided by state and money. The decision to feature

⁷⁰ Mcgetrick, "Everything Is Necessary." 68.

⁷¹ Juliet Bingham and Marko Daniel, "Conversation between Ai Weiwei, Juliet Bingham and Marko Daniel, 31 May and 1 June 2010, Beijing," *ibid.* 77.

⁷² *Ibid.* 81.

sunflower seeds alludes to the Maoist metaphor of Mao the sun, whose sunflower citizens follow the communist part the same way sunflowers face the trajectory of the red sun.⁷³ In modern China, the Chinese people continue to act in accordance with the capitalist goals and values of the government. Ai continues his critique of the government, saying:

What China is doing today isn't really sustainable. They sacrifice almost everything for a quick profit—environment, education, social standards, morals – all those things are being sacrificed just to get rich quick. China is blindly producing for the demands of the market. We're seeing the lowering of standards and basic values in general in both China—of course, in China it's a dream—and in the west. But because of the political and economic situation, people are shy to insist on those values, which are, I think, the foundation of society. Sooner or later the problem of this neglect will show. There's a general blindness and ignorance about these things.⁷⁴

Ai Weiwei's works are deeply rooted in social change. Having grown up in northern exile due to the government's accusation of his father's rightist views, which contradicted the values of the Communist Party,⁷⁵ Ai Weiwei exercises the right to question power. Ideological control is a powerful tool that the Chinese government wields to unify the masses to work in the interests of those in power. During the Cultural Revolution, Maoist ideology was promulgated to further Mao's agenda. In the present, capitalist values are promoted in order to support the government's financial goals. Today, one still cannot speak out against the government and its views without legal repercussions. Therefore according to Ai Weiwei, it is the work of artists to act as spokespeople and transformers of society. As Ai Weiwei once said:

⁷³ Brendan Mcgetrick, "Everything Is Necessary," *ibid.* 63.

⁷⁴ Juliet Bingham and Marko Daniel, "Conversation between Ai Weiwei, Juliet Bingham and Marko Daniel, 31 May and 1 June 2010, Beijing," *ibid.* 80.

⁷⁵ Cristina Carrillo de Albornoz, *Ai Weiwei* (New York, NY: Assouline, 2014).

China's cultural predicament is that, aside from economic troubles and the heavy burden of its own culture over the last century or so, it is still constrained by other problems. That is the special nature of being a Chinese artist. The problems faced by Chinese artists are not merely cultural. The Chinese artist must fight for freedom of expression, for the space to survive, and for a whole host of other things. China lacks a real intellectual class, lacks a well-educated public. To talk about China's art, one must research China's cultural environment, its conditions of survival, because we already clearly feel how artists face problems with regard to even the most basic protections, and this directly influences artists' morality and thinking.⁷⁶

According to Ai, it is not just the tumultuous recent history of China, nor the constantly shifting economic goals of the country that is of concern to Chinese artists. A central issue that Chinese artists grapple with is the desire for liberty in a manner in which artists are free to express their ideas and concerns without oppressive control of the government. It is the artist's job to dismantle ideological control and reveal the repressive conditions of their environment, for China's "cultural predicament" concerns basic protection of the freedom of expression. The sentiment expressed in the quote captures Ai's mission as an artist: To affect change through the revealing and questioning of invisible systemic problems that produce oppressive conditions.

The works of Wang Guangyi, Zhang Dali, and Ai Weiwei all exhibit contemporary Chinese artists' engagement in socio-political narratives. China's rapid modernization and shifting political agendas since the fall of the Qing dynasty have largely affected the experiences of many Chinese citizens. The highly charged political climate of modern China makes it almost impossible for artists to create artwork that escapes political discourse. The artwork discussed in this chapter represents artists' struggles with China's changes since the end of the Cultural Revolution. It represents artists' use of art as a means of

⁷⁶ Zhuang Hui, "Interview with Ai Weiwei," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn: Ceramic Works, 5000 Bce-2010 Ce* (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010). 24.

expression and an outlet in which the issues in urban China can be grappled with. Wang Guangyi's critique of the capitalist system, Zhang Dali's critique of urbanization, and Ai Weiwei's critique of the ideological control of authorities all demonstrate aspects of modern China that the population struggles to comprehend and fights to understand. As Zhang Dali remarks at the opening of "Pervasion: Works by Zhang Dali, 1995-2008" at the He Xiangning Museum on February 28, 2009,

Contemporary art is art that is concerned with man. In China, we are experiencing an enormous transformation. The responsibility of the Chinese artist is to use our visual and technical skills to represent and interpret all that has happened, and is happening, and that which influences our future.⁷⁷

Chinese artists, then, use art as a means to exercise liberty in order to question the changes going on around them. After all, "liberty is about our rights to question everything."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Zhang Dali Exhibition Catalogue," ed. United Art Museum (Wuhan, China: United Art Museum, 2015). 290.

⁷⁸ Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei*, ed. Mark Wilson, Sue-An van der Zijpp, and Karen Smith (Groningen, Netherlands: Groninger Museum, 2008). 14.

III. EMANCIPATION INTO OPPRESSION: A shift from communist limitations to capitalist market control

Chinese citizens have been largely affected by China's unstable politics since the fall of the Qing Dynasty. The country's turbulent history inspired many artists to critique socio-political issues in their artwork. By critiquing the Chinese experience, many contemporary Chinese artists seek democracy and emancipation from official control. It is through capitalism and globalization that the separation of art and governmental agenda is made possible, for high-profile affiliations with international institutions such as the domestic and international art market and non-governmental museums provide economic and political support to artists. The arrival of bourgeois arts institutions in China provided artists a space to work through their experiences of the Cultural Revolution and China's subsequent political changes. In addition, despite the political narratives found in contemporary Chinese art, the establishment of said arts institutions fueled the notion of art as a space apart from politics for the government, and created an aura of artists in media spotlight that protected political contemporary Chinese art from official scrutiny. Yet, by participating in the market, artists also subject themselves to the inherently oppressive hierarchies of bourgeois arts institutions. In fact, China's shift towards capitalist support also caused artists to combine commercial goals with artistic goals. Wang Guangyi, for example, mass-produces his paintings for sale. In recent years, Zhang Dali has created sculptural works intended for display in gallery spaces. And despite his critique of ideological control, Ai Weiwei even considers himself a representation of the defects of his time, for, as the highest selling artist in China, Ai primarily engages in large-scale works at prominent institutions around the world. In an era when the capitalist market determines

the success and failure of artwork through financial valuation, it is natural that contemporary Chinese artists integrate market demands into artistic production. Are artists critiquing the Chinese experience out of a need for expression or for market incentive? The paradox is indicative of the contemporary Chinese dilemma: in the renunciation of official support and control, Chinese artists have yielded themselves to the market and its analogous influence.

Following the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, the desire for democracy—long considered the antithetical governmental system to communism—existed as a common theme in the movements of the younger Chinese generation. According to the Chinese government, democracy is prevalent in China; after all, the country is called the *People's Republic of China*. Thus officials believe that the Party expresses and represents the will of the people. This is, however, an illusion of democracy, for a major stipulation in the definition of democracy is social equality—an idea that contrasts with the hierarchical nature of bourgeois societies. After all, bourgeois society is inherently classist, as those with higher capital occupy higher social classes. The democracy that the younger Chinese generation was looking for, then, extends beyond that of governmental systems of elective and decisive rights of the population. Rather, it is a form of politics where people have the ability to question power. According to Rosalyn Deutsch in *Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy*, democracy is understood as “a social practice challenging the omnipotence of power through the extension of specific rights.”⁷⁹ Hence democracy also represents the exercise of critique and the questioning of power.⁸⁰ Contemporary Chinese artists employ

⁷⁹ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 33 (1992). 36.

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Nikolas S. Rose, and Michel Foucault (New York, NY: New Press, 2003). N.p.

critical theory in order to question the authoritarian nature of the Chinese government. This is not to say, however, that artists call for an eradication of the government. In the words of Foucault, it is not that they “do not want to be governed at all,” but that they were concerned with “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of these principles, or the view of such objectives, and by the means of such methods, not like that, not for that, not by them.”⁸¹ Zhang Dali’s mission, for example, the artist’s mission is to have a voice and to conquer the right to express his opinion on the changes that were going in his society.⁸²

Wang Guangyi, Zhang Dali, and Ai Weiwei each raise questions about issues in the Chinese government that contribute to unmediated government power over the people. In order to exercise democracy as a questioning of power, the artists separate themselves from official patronage and align themselves with global and domestic arts institutions. In the case of contemporary Chinese art, it is arts institutions such as museums, galleries, artist collectives, and auction houses that provide primary support in place of official patronage. As noted in Chapter One, the art institution, as defined by Peter Bürger, encompasses the productive apparatus of art—its methods of production, its circulation, and its consumption. The arts institutions that provide alternate support for artists, then, encompass academic institutions and museums and gallery spaces, and market institutions such as auction houses. Not only do these institutions provide financial support to the artists, but the commercialization of art also provides political support to artists’ activities. China, after all, maintains strict control of the populace through censorship laws that prohibit public discourse regarding the government. It can be argued that Chinese artists

⁸¹ Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” 255.

⁸² Zhang, “Skype Interview.”

would not have been able to discuss the country's politics to such a grand extent without the support of such institutions.

It is important for artists to be able to discuss politics, partly because of China's unstable recent history. Since the fall of the Qing dynasty, economic and political instability have significantly affected the population. For example, the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre are both significant events that can be classified as historic trauma—collectively experienced, large-scale injustices. The trauma that many Chinese citizens experienced during these events, however, are suppressed and ignored under the Chinese government. Due to censorship laws that secure the government's ideological control over citizens, Chinese suffering is often repressed in order to build nationalism. For example, the Tiananmen Square Massacre is rarely—if ever—discussed.⁸³ And although discourse surrounding the Cultural Revolution is more prominent in the Chinese society, details of violence, poverty, and other tribulations experienced during the revolution are often left out of common discourse, for the government represses traumatic history in order to further Chinese patriotism. In suppression, however, the government has denied its citizens the right to come to terms with their trauma.

In Freud's theory of remembering, repeating and working through, psychoanalysis details two types of processes that are associated with trauma: Acting out and working through. Acting out embodies the repetition of repressed unconscious material in a compulsion to repeat the trauma that one has experienced.⁸⁴ On the other hand, working

⁸³ Colin Schultz, "Twenty-Five Years after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, China's Still Trying to Muffle Its Memory," *Smithsonian Magazine* 2014.

⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-through (1914)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1958). 150.

through is considered a practice of remembering that facilitates one's coming to terms with traumatic experiences. Working through contrasts with acting out—it is a process that one participates in so that he can cease to be possessed by the past.⁸⁵ In Freudian theory, working through can only be achieved through recognition of repressed memories by bringing the past into the present, a process that is not possible under China's severe censorship laws, at least in the public realm. The central problem with China's response to historic trauma is that the country actively represses memory in order to control their citizens and suppress future uprisings. Paired with China's rapid modernization that has pre-occupied the schedules and thoughts of most people, the population is prevented from taking the time to self-reflect on their experiences. "A lot of people were shocked and surprised by what was going on," Zhang Dali explains, "but a lot of people living here in China didn't have the time to think about or to digest the changes. The pace of life was too fast, and so there was no time to sit down and think about the changes or what was going on in a rational manner."⁸⁶ As a matter of fact, by virtue of authoritarian work to eradicate conversation surrounding unjust Chinese historical events, most Chinese of the millennial generation are unaware of the Tiananmen Square Massacre⁸⁷ and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. Censorship suppresses opportunities for a collective working through that is so important in coming to terms with the past. Any art that is officially controlled, then, naturally disregards discourse regarding the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the Cultural Revolution. The only exemption to official repression of historic trauma in art could be found in the Scar Art and Rural Realism movements that emerged in China in the

⁸⁵ Ibid. 155.

⁸⁶ Zhang, "Skype Interview."

⁸⁷ Schultz, "Twenty-Five Years after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, China's Still Trying to Muffle Its Memory."

early 1980s. Even then, however, narratives regarding revolutionary hardship were still furtively subversive, for artists such as Luo Zhongli never directly revealed the underlying political intention behind paintings such as *Father*, 1980 (Fig. 2). Although *Father* depicts a Chinese peasant's insufficient sustenance, the painting does not implicitly connote widespread poverty during the Cultural Revolution. *Father* merely denotes a portrait of a man as he consumes his meal; the correlation of the bowl to Mao Zedong's iron rice bowl (as mentioned in Chapter One) is only suggested for the viewer to interpret on his or her own terms.

The need to work through this trauma is facilitated by art supported by arts institutions. When artists participate in overseas museum exhibitions and sell artwork at galleries and auction houses, they are given a platform outside of officially controlled expositions to discuss and critique their experiences; they are not burdened by official approval. In fact, while China actively represses memories, the west is interested and invested in Chinese narratives.⁸⁸ Yet western collectors and curators' interest in Chinese discourse ironically produces another kind of restriction: artists are not only given the opportunity to discuss political issues, but are almost obligated to do so in order to find success in the western art market. For example, the most successful contemporary Chinese oil paintings in the overseas market are those that critique the capitalist sociocultural values within the country's ideologically communist government.⁸⁹ It can even be argued that Wang Guangyi's critique of Chinese capitalism is deliberately painted in the Pop art style in order to appeal to a western period eye that is familiar with Andy Warhol's artwork

⁸⁸ Pi Li, "My Life, My Decision: The Political Nature of Chinese Contemporary Art," *Contemporary Chinese Art Bulletin* 2, no. 5 (1999).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

and its capitalist undertones. Thus the western market's demand for paintings with political narratives fosters artists' working through of Chinese historic trauma by encouraging artists to explore their experiences, albeit fueled by the force of the market.

Naturally, the establishment of the arts institutions in China and subsequent artistic opportunity for political discussion does not remedy artists' ongoing subjugation to China's strict censorship laws. The potential for legal repercussions continue to deter artists' direct discussion of Chinese politics. However, emancipation from official patronage does provide Chinese artists a relative freedom regarding political discourse. This is because, unlike the Cultural Revolution, present-day artists are no longer bound to the product of officially sanctioned nationalist art; artists such as Wang Guangyi are free to critique the Chinese experience through series such as *Great Criticism*, which comments on the persuasive powers of both communist propaganda art and capitalist advertisement. Beyond the provision of opportunity, institutional support also gives political protection to artists. Of course, artists are still subject to censorship laws and subsequent legal repercussions for critiquing Chinese politics. Since high-profile artists such as Wang Guangyi, Zhang Dali, and Ai Weiwei have all become prominent figures in the media through affiliations with art galleries, museums, and auction houses, officials are more wary of prosecuting artists. The Chinese government's decision to criminalize citizens continues to appear arbitrary, but the support of the domestic and international arts community ensures that the government finds somewhat plausible proof before arresting artists. Not only does the separation of art as a space apart from politics allow for political discussion under the façade of art, but the auratization of the artists in contemporary art culture and international media also provide artists a check against the unjust legal repercussions that often occur in China.

First, arts institutions are capable to some degree of establishing art as an autonomous space. Although the separation of art as other than and superior to the material world is often criticized in modernist theory for its fantastical and self-deifying ideology⁹⁰⁹¹, the idea of the avant-garde's ivory tower sets up art's identity as a space apart from politics. Ironically, art's autonomous status is actively helpful in protecting politically inclined Chinese artists from legal repercussions. Unlike the Cultural Revolution, during which art was declared as inseparable from politics, the autonomy of art as posited by the introduction of arts institutions relieves government scrutiny. One can argue that, through arts institutions such as museums that elevate the status of art in an otherworldly space, Chinese artists engage in a tactical play of autonomous separation that allows contemporary Chinese artwork to enable and extend the political mission of governmental critique. In essence, the understanding that art may exist in a space outside of politics, but rather, in a spiritual space, alleviates government scrutiny towards possible political narratives in contemporary Chinese art. Ultimately, the meaning behind most contemporary art is left to the interpretation of the viewer; if art does not explicitly connote political criticism, it is difficult for officials to label certain pieces of artwork as rebellious.

In fact, contemporary Chinese art's political exploitation of artistic autonomy can be likened to that of Dutch artist Rebecca Gompert's *Women on Waves*, 1999 (Fig. 15) art-

⁹⁰ In "The Affirmative Character of Culture," Herbert Marcuse writes of affirmative culture as a specific form of culture that develops with the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. Affirmative culture conveys the notion that culture is superior to civilization, and that individuals can momentarily achieve a superior mindset through an engagement with culture. According to Marcuse, this is problematic because it affirms the superior world of bourgeoisie society (the bourgeoisie are those who take part in high culture) under the supposedly spiritual art world. It exonerates culture from the responsibility of freedom and happiness, and naturalizes misery and suffering.

⁹¹ Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations; Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968). N.p.

activist project. In collaboration with the Atelier Van Lieshout collective, Gompert places a minimalist-looking white cube that houses a mobile gynecology clinic on a boat. The Dutch ship docks at countries where abortion is illegal and sails patients out into international waters where the boat is subject to Dutch laws. The goal of the project is to bring reproductive healthcare to women in countries where abortions are illegal. In Carrie Lambert-Beatty's "Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism," Beatty writes that the boat escapes legal repercussions under its identification as art. For example, when the ship set sail for Ireland in 2001, and it was stopped because Dutch authorities asserted that its mission as a medical facility voided its initial inspection certificate, the group's declaration and documentation of the ship as a work of art rather than a medical facility convinced Dutch authorities to allow it to continue its mission.⁹² In fact, Beatty writes, "It was, in a very literal way, art that allowed [Gompert] to put her idea into practice. The grant that provided the bulk of the money to construct women on waves' portable clinic did not come from the Dutch health ministry, nor the World Health Organization... It came from the Mondriaan Foundation."⁹³ *Women on Waves*, then, exemplifies the notion of an artistic pedigree that allows for art to make political statements through its identification as a space apart. "Here art is tactically configured as a space apart," Beatty writes, "not quite real and thus somewhat extra legal sphere that provides activism as a safe harbor."⁹⁴ Of course, the Dutch government operates vastly differently than that of the Chinese government, whose legal system is much more regulatory and strict. Yet, *Women on Waves* shows that art can be used as a cover for political missions, and that art's existence in a

⁹² Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 2 (2008): 322.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 315.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 322.

space apart from politics allows artists to make the argument that certain interpretations of their artwork are merely projections of the viewer rather than intentional on the part of the artist.

As a matter of fact, *Women on Waves*' use of art as a scapegoat for political activity can be compared to Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*. Critical narrative is easy to identify in *Dialogue*, as it "reflects changes and issues of Chinese society at the time: money, violence, and the residents' growing indifference."⁹⁵ Nevertheless, in the public sphere, *Dialogue* was not initially regarded as a political statement. Rather, the public's recognition of the series as graffiti art overshadowed any political interpretation. Public critique of Zhang's art focused on the claim that it defaced Beijing's urban space; in the media *Dialogue* was originally dismissed as an ugly form of western decadence.⁹⁶ Eventually, *Dialogue* launched media discussion about urbanization issues such as cultural diversity, social mobility, city planning, and environmental policies. However, the connection between *Dialogue* and a critique of spatial politics was obscured under the series' existence as graffiti art, for *Dialogue* never directly critiqued broad social issues—it only suggested criticism as bait for media discourse. While *Dialogue* succeeded in provoking discussion regarding the spatial politics of urbanization, its identity as a graffiti series autonomous from the political sphere has protected it from the government's recognition of its violation of Chinese censorship. Art, after all, can act as a cover for the revelation of real world truths.

Beyond art's autonomy as a space apart, the market value of contemporary Chinese art also contributes to the government's leniency towards critical political discourse

⁹⁵ Minna Valjakka, "Negotiating Spatial Politics: Site-Responsive Urban Art Images in Mainland China," *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015). 267.

⁹⁶ Wu, "Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*: Conversation with a City." 758.

hidden in artwork. When asked why the government is more understanding of contemporary art, Zhang Dali explains that is the changing government mentality towards art that alleviates official scrutiny. Following Deng Xiaoping's integration of culture into China's economic plan through establishment of a Culture Industry Bureau sector, Chinese officials began to recognize the economic returns of contemporary art. Initially, officials did not believe that art could be sold for a lot of money. However, as entrepreneurs began to build museums and art spaces across China, the powerful emerging art market proved to be a significant asset to the country. In essence, "they don't think contemporary art is necessarily something that is in conflict with the government anymore,"⁹⁷ for the market benefits of contemporary art support the financial agenda of the government.

On the other hand, an integral part of Zhang's intention in the *Dialogue* series is the use of media in order to further the artwork's mission. The use of media, rather, contributes to the second type of political protection that institutional support provides: celebrity exemption provoked by artists' prominence in international media. If Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* introduce the myth of the artist as an elevation of artistic valorization,⁹⁸ arts institutions also provide a foundation for artists to construct public international identities that protect them from severe legal repercussions. Ai Weiwei, for example, is aware of the aura of the artist as a powerful political tool. The artist arms himself with the myth of the artist by constructing a public artistic identity as the notorious political dissident of China. By constructing a public and mythicized identity, Ai draws from Andy Warhol's self-auratization that augments the

⁹⁷ Zhang, "Skype Interview."

⁹⁸ Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

value of his Pop artwork. If Walter Benjamin laments modern art for its loss of aura, Andreas Huyssen argues that the aura is re-introduced in postmodern art as the auraticization of the artist.⁹⁹ What ascribes value in contemporary art, then, is the identity of the artist. While the myth of the artist is constructed, it is also constructing—Ai's identification as a political dissident is deliberately perpetuated in the media and leveraged for social change.

Today, Ai Weiwei is considered one of the greatest activists and public dissidents in China. Beyond *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Sunflower Seeds*, a majority of Ai's artwork explicitly critiques Chinese politics. The artist's *Study of Perspective – Tiananmen Square*, 1995-2003 (Fig. 16), for example, candidly features him flipping off Tiananmen Square, a city square that historically monumentalizes Mao Zedong and heroes of the Chinese revolution. In fact, Ai Weiwei even runs a blog that exposes and investigates integral debates within Chinese politics, such as the Chinese government's mismanagement of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, or the exposition of police investigation practices in Shanghai.¹⁰⁰ Despite the clear political critique at the heart of these works, legal repercussions regarding Ai's artwork have been minimal, if any. It took four years for the Chinese government to shut down Ai Weiwei's blog in May 2009 under censorship laws, and authorities have not yet interfered with the artist's active Twitter presence.¹⁰¹ The reason for this leniency is simple: Ai manipulates the myth of the artist and international media in order to present himself as an important political dissident whose dealings with the

⁹⁹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986). 10.

¹⁰⁰ Uli Sigg, "Confucianism," in *Ways Beyond Art*, ed. Elena Ochoa Foster and Hans Ulrich Obrist (London, United Kingdom: Ivorypress, 2009). N.p.

¹⁰¹ Bingham, "Introduction." 2.

Chinese government will always appear in media spotlight. In fact, most of Ai Weiwei's unjust experience with Chinese law have been documented and translated into art by the artist and highlighted by international media. For example, the artist's *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, 2013 (Fig. 17), exhibited at the highly publicized 2013 Venice Biennale, recreated China's illegal detention of Ai in 2011.¹⁰² In 2011, media uproar regarding Ai's house arrest was so widespread that large art institutions around the world such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, the Tate Modern, and Creative Time joined protests for Ai's release. In 2012, a documentary titled *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* that details Ai's assault by Chinese police, the government's unexpected dismantling of his studio, and his 2011 detention at the Beijing international Airport and subsequent house arrest, received a special jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival. A website titled *FREE AI WEIWEI*, which investigates Ai's arrest and court case even exists. It is clear that any legal action executed by the Chinese government towards Ai Weiwei will certainly be covered extensively in international media, a notion that deters the government from subjecting the artist to unjustified severe legal repercussions.

In June 22, 2011, Ai was released from jail by Chinese authorities. Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Asia Pacific Catherine Baber explains the official decision to release Ai, saying "His release on bail can be seen as a tokenistic move by the government to deflect mounting criticism... It is vital that the international outcry over Ai Weiwei be extended to those activists still languishing in secret detention or charged with inciting subversion."¹⁰³ Although official prosecution of Ai on his 2011 detention for tax

¹⁰² Edward Wong, "An Artist Depicts His Demons," *New York Times*, May 26, 2013 2013.

¹⁰³ Amnesty International, "Chinese Government Attempts to Deflect Criticism with Ai Weiwei Release," *Amnesty International*, 22 June 2011 2011.

evasion is ongoing today (the artist refuses to pay the \$2.4 million fine the Beijing court demanded¹⁰⁴), Ai Weiwei is now relatively free from his 2011 legal complications, continuing to produce politically charged artwork. In 2015, the artist received his passport from authorities, a symbol for his release from modified house arrest. Ai's dealings with Chinese authorities are telling of the political protection that artists receive from engaging in the institution and tactical leveraging of one's identity and status in the media. When one examines other cases of captured dissidents in China (such as Hong Kong publisher and Swedish citizen Gui Minhai's recent disappearance, arrest by the Chinese government, and coerced confession to unproven crimes) Ai's release from jail and ability to continue producing artwork can be understood as China's relative leniency. As Catherine Baber notes, it is the international outcry over Ai's arrest that contributed to the artist's release from jail. Today, Ai Weiwei continues to produce political artwork with relative freedom because he is under international scrutiny. Any unjust action taken against the artist will construct a bad image of China in the international world. It is the artist's use of his myth as political dissident and victim of Chinese authority, and manipulation of the media that provides political support in the form of celebrity exemption for his activities. Ai shows that the auratization of the artist can be used for social change to "raise awareness and spark debate worldwide."¹⁰⁵ Thus the arrival of contemporary arts institutions in China is important for it allows artists to construct mythicized identities that, when inflated in the international network, provides political assistance in the form of institutional support.

¹⁰⁴ Josh Chin, "Ai Weiwei: I Won't Pay," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2012 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Lambert-Beatty, "Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism." 312.

While said institutions gave contemporary Chinese artists the voice to critique their country to some extent, institutional support does not discount the traditional art institution. First, artist's participation in the art market and culture industry perpetuates Chinese commodification of art. Furthermore, as bourgeois institutions, arts institutions such as galleries, museums, and auction houses are flawed with imposed hierarchies and politics that are inherently repressive. The issues and limitations that institutional support brings are common critiques of bourgeois capitalism. Although contemporary Chinese artists found freedom for expression by participating in contemporary arts institutions, they have, perhaps, similarly caged themselves in the oppressive nature of the contemporary art world. The issue poses the following question: do artists critique the contemporary Chinese experience to work through collective historic trauma, or do artists work through historic trauma for market incentives?

As mentioned in Chapter One, the introduction of capitalism in China causes money to become the dominant factor for success. Accordingly, artists have combined market goals with artistic goals. These artists engage in a Chinese culture industry that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer critiques for its standardization of cultural items in subjugation of cultural items to industry and economy, money and power.¹⁰⁶ Contemporary Chinese artists' participation in the culture industry is problematic because the culture industry promotes market determination of value. As art is commodified in the culture industry for sale on the market, art products reflect the demands of the market rather than the expression of the artist. Art, then, becomes subject to the supply and demand of the

¹⁰⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1988). N.p.

market, and art valuation is reduced to its exchange value on the market. In fact, this arbitrary market valuation is the crux of Ai's critique in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, in which the artist critiques the politics of value in the antique Chinese art market. Yet the irony of Ai's piece is that *Dropping the Han Dynasty Urn* is a photographically documented performance art piece that the artist intended to sell on the market. Although many of Ai Weiwei's works question the politics of value, Ai continues to create pieces for the market. Whether his art is sold at galleries and auction houses, or whether it exists as large-scale installations at museums that garner widespread media attention and visitor interest, Ai Weiwei is exemplary of contemporary Chinese artists who are caught up in the distribution system of the culture industry, are subject to the supply and demand of the market, and seek legitimization in art's exchange value rather than use value.

In fact, Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series shows that it may not only be the art market, but the western art market that influences certain Chinese artists' works. As Chinese art collectively shifts its attention to financial objectives,¹⁰⁷ the western market proves to be most interested in contemporary Chinese art.¹⁰⁸¹⁰⁹ The argument is made that Wang's art explicitly appeals to the western viewer in an attempt to augment the artist's profits because the works harness the Chinese narrative that western critics are most interested in: dissatisfaction with the Cultural Revolution. This implied narrative is conveyed through blatant iconography that can be easily read by western viewers: the red

¹⁰⁷ Debevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*. 219.

¹⁰⁸ In "Making a Market for Contemporary Chinese Art," Debevoise writes about the discrepancies between the local and overseas markets, citing a painting by Wu Guanzhong that first sold in China for RMB 5,000 only to reappear overseas shortly thereafter with a price tag of US \$200,000. In a 2014 collaborative report produced by artnet and the China Association of Auctioneers, it is revealed that 20th century and contemporary Chinese art is the "only collecting category that generated greater total sales overseas than in mainland China" as "the high demand for this sector, can, in part, be attributed to the broader successes of international Contemporary Art in Western markets."

¹⁰⁹ artnet and China Association of Auctioneers, "Global Chinese Art Auction Market Report 2014," (Berlin, Germany: artnet, 2014).

and yellow color theme, easily identifiable propaganda figures, and familiar logos of western corporations. The art, then, was “imbued with all the emotions contingent to the western view of China.”¹¹⁰ In fact, while western critics and collectors celebrate Wang’s oeuvre for its comparisons of communist ideology with capitalist values, Wang’s artwork does not make sense to all Chinese viewers. The Chinese sentiment is evident in the artist’s discussion of his family’s reaction to his success. In an interview with Karen Smith, Wang said:

My brothers can’t grasp that the paintings command such high prices... What do they think the paintings mean? When they saw them, the first comment was that they were all about the Cultural Revolution? Such a simple reading. They think I’m trying to tell people that Coke or cigarettes are bad!¹¹¹

The brothers’ inability to comprehend his success is revealing of *Great Criticism’s* preoccupation with the western period eye. Perhaps only those who are well educated in western culture—primarily the qualities of Pop Art—are able to understand Wang Guangyi’s artwork. After all, the artist intentionally chooses to express his ideas through an American technique, rather than one that conveniences the understanding of the local Chinese audience. It is the western eye that prevails, for it is the foreign market in which most contemporary Chinese artists found success.

Despite the fact that the *Great Criticism* series criticizes western corporations’ hungry leap into the Chinese market, it panders to the western market. Although market preoccupation is considered an alternative way to liberate oneself from the constituencies of official art, *Great Criticism* shows the inescapability of the culture industry at the rise of

¹¹⁰ Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China*. 78.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 82.

Chinese capitalism. If the value of art is determined by market price, and if the demand for contemporary Chinese art is greatest in the western art market, contemporary Chinese artists will conform to western art practices in order to augment western interest of their works. Not only is artwork commoditized as market products, some contemporary Chinese artists also predominantly rely on western style and technique for market valuation, standardizing their artwork under the conventions of the western art canon. As much as western capitalist advertisements have replaced propaganda art, the irony of Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series suggest that the influence of the art market has also replaced official control of art.

Beyond the commodification of art and the aestheticization of commodity, however, engagement in market control and the culture industry is controversial because it standardizes culture. In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen argues that the culture industry's standardization of culture facilitates social control.¹¹² Through the elimination of uniqueness in culture, the culture industry constructs and promotes ideology, which, in Marxian theory, contributes to hierarchical power. According to Marx, the culture industry's construction of ideology is problematic because it legitimizes inequality and supports the status quo by making existing social relations seem natural, inevitable, and unchangeable.¹¹³ The sentiment does not differ considerably from that of Chinese ideological control, where nationalist ideology and the communist status quo are promulgated to control the population. If capitalism and the

¹¹² Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. 21.

¹¹³ Karl Marx, "Introduction to "a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", in *Early Writings* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1992). N.p.

emergence of an art market construct ideology that can be manipulated for social control, does the art institution trap contemporary Chinese artists in another form of authority?

On the other hand, if contemporary Chinese artists seek democracy by critiquing the Chinese government, one must also consider the inherent inequality and lack of democracy that engagement in arts institutions facilitates. Not only does the institution construct ideology that can be mobilized for social control, but the exclusionary principles of the art institution also heighten the separation of power in capitalist society. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese power hierarchies were determined by governmental position. In capitalist China, societal order is determined by money. An integral characteristic of most art institutions—particularly galleries and auction houses—is their participation in the art market. Accordingly, as contemporary Chinese artists commoditize their art for the market, the mission of democracy and governmental critique is often lost amidst patron demand and economic valuation. If the goal of contemporary Chinese art is democracy—the ability to critique, to give power back to the people, and to be governed not quite so much—why is it that most Chinese art is still inaccessible to the public? Why is it that Wang Guangyi's brothers' first comment about his *Great Criticism* paintings was that they either remind them of the Cultural Revolution or suggest to them that Wang was simply trying to “tell people that Coke or cigarettes are bad?”¹¹⁴ Why is it that the politics in Zhang Dali's early photo of *Dialogue* with the two boys exists between the self-protective gaze of the boy towards the photographer, rather than the interaction of the boys with the graffiti? When contemporary Chinese artists discuss China's socio-political climate in an effort to achieve, to whom do they perform their critique, and to what extent of social change do their works

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China*. 82.

achieve if they do not speak to the Chinese public? Does democracy require the understanding of the people, or is the mere ability to critique contributive to the mission of liberty and a non-hierarchical distribution of power? It is indisputable that the emergence of the art institution in China allowed for contemporary Chinese artists to separate themselves from official control and explore new manners of artwork, socio-political or not. Thus the question remains: Does the institution's repression of artists through market valuation of artwork and ideological control similarly influence the works of contemporary Chinese artists? The contemporary Chinese art dilemma, then, is as follows: in liberation from governmental oppression, contemporary Chinese artists have limited themselves by capitalist oppression.

CONCLUSION

China's shift from an insular and communist state to a global and capitalist country has had dramatic effects on the Chinese population. Chinese culture was largely affected by rapid modernization, resulting in a new language of artistic expression that appropriated western philosophy and technique to discuss the changing Chinese experience.

Contemporary Chinese art is distinct for its subversive critique of politics through a discussion of the population's experience of the country's changing political climate. The art market demand for contemporary Chinese art today grows at least in part from the art's unique political narratives.

As demonstrated in Chapter One, the relative freedom from official ideological control that contemporary Chinese artists enjoyed in the years following the Cultural Revolution encouraged artists to explore new manners of artistic expression and the boundaries of political critique. The introduction of globalization and capitalism to modern China brought forth promises of a free nation where access to international culture and participation in a free market allowed Chinese citizens to make individual decisions by themselves and for themselves. Artists such as Wang Guangyi, Zhang Dali, and Ai Weiwei explored the boundaries of moderate emancipation from official patronage, applying western philosophy and technique to analyze their experiences of modern China in a critical manner.

However, the three artists' works reveal that the hierarchical conditions of modern China do not differ vastly from that of the Communist Chinese regime. Although globalization and capitalism benefitted China in many ways (particularly through economic and industrial advancement), ideological control from both the government and capitalist

corporations continues to affect the population. Official systems continue to benefit the agenda of those in power, for the state's power and money remains in the hands of those in high socio-political positions. In fact, much like communism, which suppresses individuality for a collective population, capitalism is standardizing. Rather than encouraging individual agency through the establishment of a free market, late capitalism and its effects of commodification has further separated the dominated Chinese population with dominating individuals, using modernization as a guise under which Chinese inequality is perpetuated.

Thus Chapter Two illustrates the ways in which artists express their disillusionment of Chinese modernization. Wang Guangyi discusses the effects of capitalism by equating the persuasive mechanisms of western corporate advertisement with revolution propaganda. *Great Criticism* provides the foundation for a central problem that modern China faces: while the Chinese experienced relative freedom from official ideological control, Wang exposes the weakness of capitalism by suggesting that communist nationalist propaganda has been replaced by western capitalist notions. In fact, Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* series emphatically conveys the spatial politics of Chinese urbanization. As the artist attempts to reclaim ownership of a city that he has been alienated from, *Dialogue* suggests that urbanization may be a process that serves the agendas of certain privileged minorities in the marginalization of others. The two artists' disillusionment towards modern China's promises of prosperity can be summed up by Ai Weiwei's work, which reveals China's blind modern development through the politics of valuation. Despite the illusion of political freedom and individual agency that capitalism introduces to China, Chinese politics is still determined by and benefits those in power, whose goals have

shifted towards money and profit. In modernization, China has neglected the well being of its people. According to the critique lodged in the works of these artists, under the façade of national prosperity, Chinese globalization and capitalism are systems of modernization that packs the wallets of those in power.

Despite contemporary Chinese art's success in discussing Chinese politics, the irony is that artists participate in the very system that they critique. While artists such as Wang, Zhang, and Ai critique the oppressive nature of Chinese modernization and capitalism, all three artists participate in bourgeois arts institutions such as the art market. The argument can be made that contemporary Chinese artists must participate in bourgeois arts institutions for financial and political support—in fact, some artists even take advantage of art and institutional power as a way to escape Chinese censorship laws while engaging in political discourse. Nonetheless, the issue with contemporary Chinese art dilemma is that, by seeking institutional support and emancipation from official control, artists have catered to market demands and western collectors, constricting themselves to capitalist control of the market.

The study of the contemporary Chinese art dilemma reveals that perhaps inherently hierarchical structures exist in all human society; and these systems, to a certain extent, affect the production of things. If communism is a system of government that seeks to eradicate social classes and seemingly empower the community with collective ownership of means of production, a consequence of Chinese communism is widespread poverty and lack of political freedom under ideological control of the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, if capitalism is an economic system of private enterprise that facilitates economic growth and catalyzes political freedom, capitalism's weakness is its standardization and

commodification of culture and daily life. While we cannot determine whether communism or global capitalism is the “answer” to oppressive issues in contemporary China, the goal of contemporary Chinese art is to affect some degree of social change by exercising democracy and questioning existing systems. “I don’t think I can solve major social issues,” Zhang says, “but I can use art as a way of raising awareness within an anesthetized public of the wounds and painful realities that our generation has inherited.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ "Zhang Dali Exhibition Catalogue." 208.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. YU Zhenli, *We must grasp revolution and increase production, increase work, increase preparation for struggle, to do an even better job* (要抓革命促生产, 促工作, 促战备, 把各方面的工作做的更好). May 1976. 77 x 106 cm. From: Landsberger Collection.



Fig. 2. LUO Zhongli, Father. 1980. Oil on canvas. 227 x 154 cm. From: Huntington Archive OSU, <http://huntingtonarchive.osu.edu/>.



Fig. 3. WANG Guangyi (王廣義), *Great Criticism: Coca-Cola*, 1990-93, Oil on canvas, 200cm x 200cm. From: Asia Art Archives Collection Online.



Fig. 4. WARHOL Andy, *Green Pea*, 1968, Screenprint, 89.1cm x 58.7cm. From: Whitney Museum of American Art Online.



Fig. 5. ZHANG Dali (張大力) *Dialogue*, 1999, photograph. From: Klein Sun Gallery

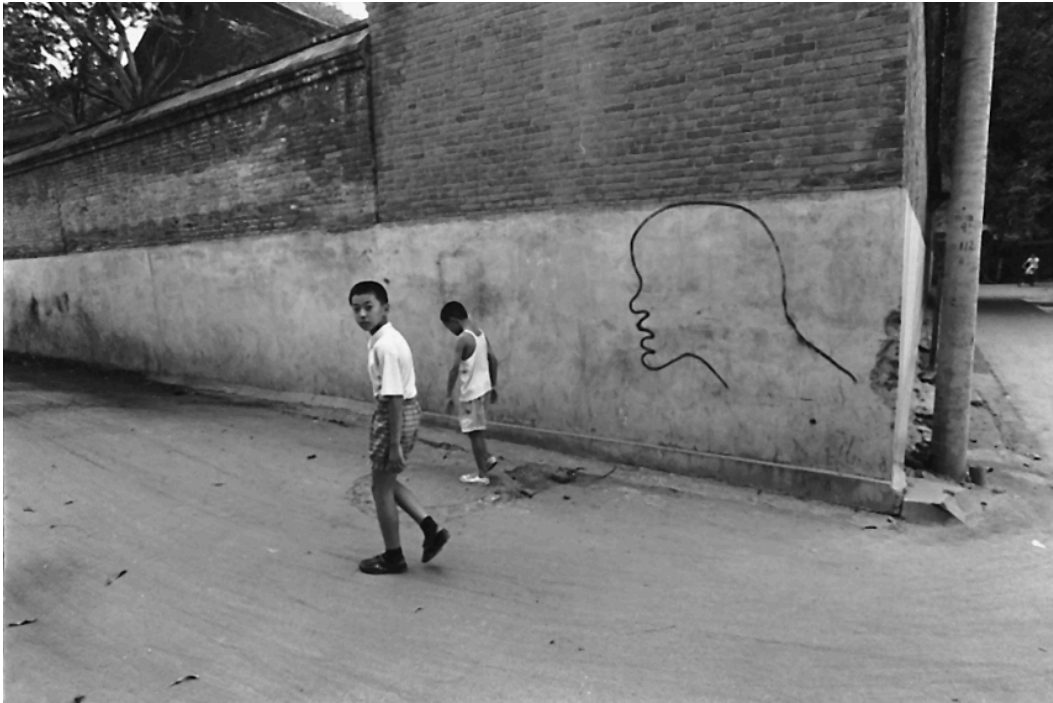


Fig. 6. ZHANG Dali (張大力) *Dialogue*, undated, black and white photograph. From: Wu Hung, "Zhang Dali's Dialogue: Conversation with a City."



Fig. 7. ZHANG Dali (張大力) *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing*, 1998, chromogenic color print, 90.3 x 60.1cm. From: MOMA.



Fig. 8. ZHANG Dali (張大力) *Demolition (Ciqikou, Beijing)*, 1999, chromogenic color print, 100 x 150cm. From: MOMA.



Fig. 9. ZHANG Dali (張大力) *Dialogue*, undated, black and white photograph. From: Wu Hung, "Zhang Dali's Dialogue: Conversation with a City."



Fig. 10. Ai Weiwei (艾未未), *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1994, paint and Han Dynasty ceramic urn, 25cm x 28cm x 28cm. From: Mary Boone Gallery.



Fig. 11. Ai Weiwei (艾未未), *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, black and white prints (3), 148 cm x 121 cm. From: Artsy.

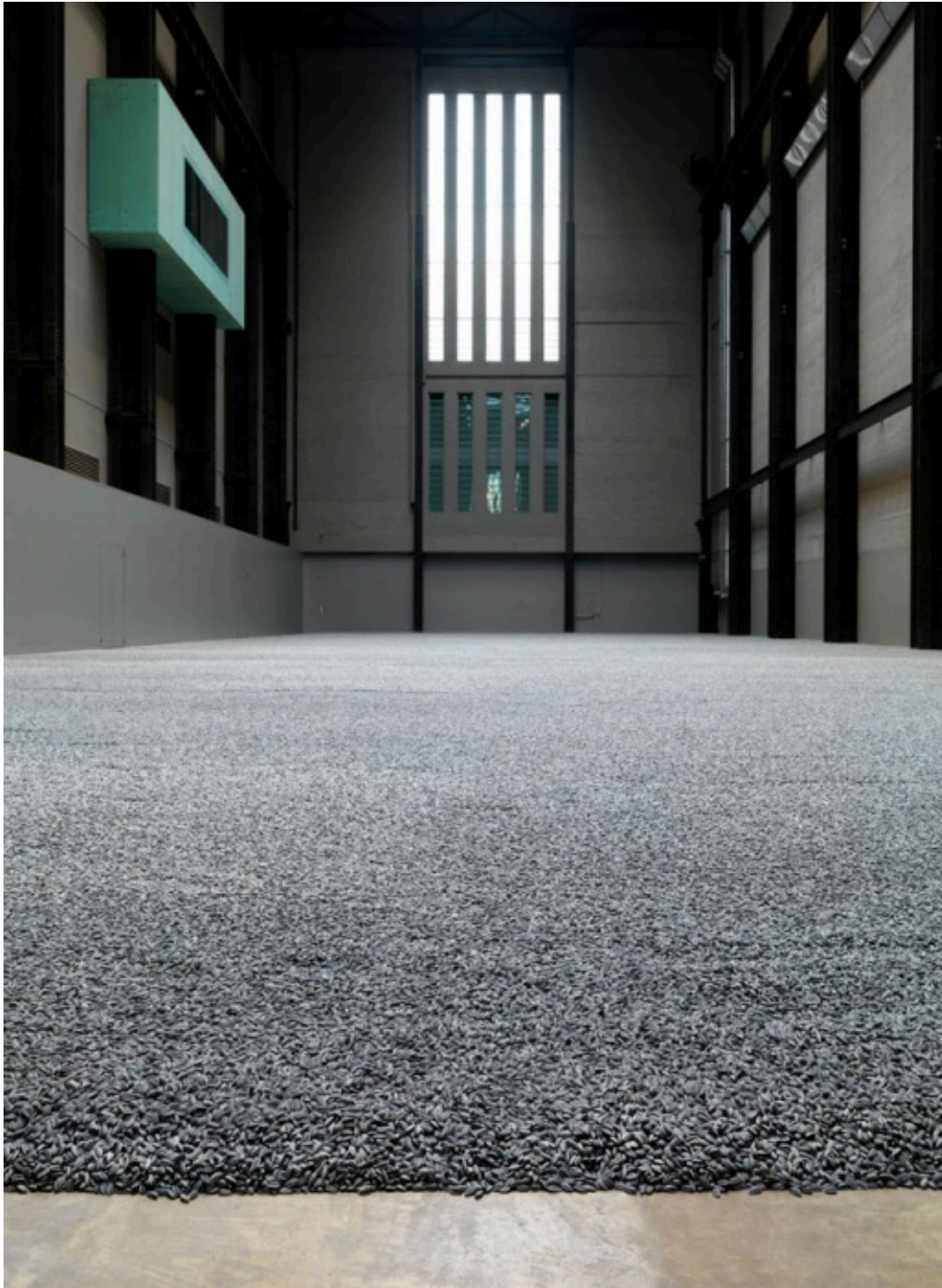


Fig. 12. Ai Weiwei (艾未未), *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, porcelain and ink. From: Tate Modern.

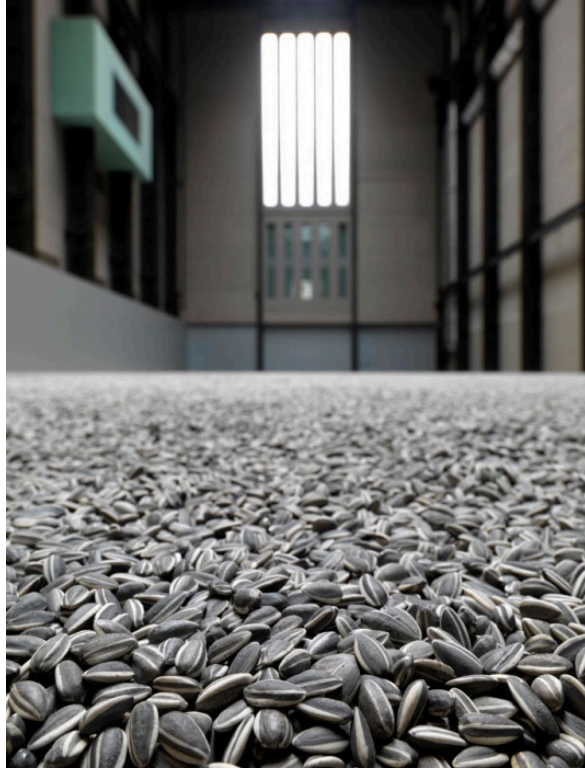


Fig. 13. Ai Weiwei (艾未未), *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, porcelain and ink. From: Tate Modern.



Fig. 14. Ai Weiwei (艾未未), *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, porcelain and ink. From: Tate Modern.



Fig. 15. *Women on Waves, Langenort, 2004*. From: *Women on Waves*.



Fig. 16. Ai Weiwei (艾未未), *Study of Perspective - Tiananmen Square, 1995-2013*, Gelatin Silver Print, 38.9 x 59cm. From: MOMA.



Fig. 17. Ai Weiwei (艾未未), *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, 2013, diorama in fiberglass and iron, 377 x 197 x 148.4 cm. From: Lisson Gallery.

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