

BLOOM 2020 – SHOWCASE FOR CCI103
PERSPECTIVES ON THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

POLITICAL AND PERSONAL PORCELAIN:
A COMPARISON OF CRAFT AND COLLABORATION

BETTY MOFFITT

Ah Xian and Ai Weiwei are artists who have used the same traditional crafts and collaborative practices to make political statements in porcelain. From a shared bedrock of materials, location and collaboration, these artists challenged the status quo through divergent use of presentation, personal orientation, symbolism and meaning.

To analyse these works requires orientation around who these artists are. Both share Chinese nationality, including childhoods during the Cultural Revolution and exposure to the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. They were exposed to Beijing's avant-garde artistic movements of the 1980s; Ai Weiwei became a leader of this group, whereas Ah Xian was a somewhat sceptical observer (Burchmore, 2017).

Ai grew to resent the Chinese communist system, living in an exiled family in a remote labour camp with a politically blacklisted father (Barrett, 2011). He has taken that background to drive his career as a preeminent global dissident and conceptual artist (Chen, 2011), claiming that "... liberty is about the right to question everything" (Bingham, 2010, p.1). His work takes a public stance pushing existing Chinese socio-political boundaries whilst courting the Western media and contemporary art establishment. Chen calls Ai "a consummate performance artist." (2011, p.10).

Ah Xian also experienced childhood during the Cultural Revolution. He deserted Beijing after the horror of Tiananmen, moving to Australia to study art. His practice evolved gradually and without significant public recognition until his return to Beijing to visit his ill mother. (Burchmore, 2019a). This journey carried him literally and spiritually back to the land of his birth (Feinstein 2003). Ah Xian's

artworks are a way of personal processing turmoil associated with his journey and the journey of another Chinese diaspora (Feinstein 2003).

Comparing two works by these artists helps to illustrate similarities and differences in the way they use traditional crafts and collaborative practices to challenge the status quo. They have both produced porcelain-based works, created in collaboration with the craftspeople of Jingdezhen – ‘the capital of Chinese porcelain’ (Barrett, 2011).

Sunflower Seeds (Ai Weiwei, 2010) (Fig. 1) is a massive installation, commissioned by the Tate Modern Gallery in London. It comprised 100 million porcelain life-size and hand-made sunflower seeds that covered the floor of the vast Turbine Hall. Visitors were invited to touch, to step on, and to play with the porcelain seeds (Bingham, 2013).

Ah Xian’s *China-china* (Ah Xian 1998-2004) (Fig. 2) consists of a series of over eighty porcelain cast busts of family and friends titled “China-china” to reflect their place of origin and the name westerners use to describe Chinese porcelain. They are decorated in traditional Chinese motifs and designed to be viewed from a 360-degree perspective (Burchmore, 2019a).

Ai Weiwei and Ah Xian both use traditional Chinese Imperial porcelain, a “...durable yet fragile, precious, but affordable” medium (Burchmore 2017, p.42). Although durable, porcelain is also fragile - emphasising the brittle existence of any personal or political structure (Burchmore, 2019b.). For both artists the “...use of Jingdezhen used once threatened skills to revive them and in protest against State's suppression of creativity and the devaluation of traditional Chinese culture" (MCA, 2012).

Although both artists use porcelain, the way each artist works with the community presents contrasts. Ai utilises the craftsmen as workers to reproduce his conception of the sunflower seed (Davidson, 2013). Ai assumes a directive role of the quality-controller (Zhang, 2012), and never gives artistic credit to the workers (Cray, 2014, p.235). They are workers, not citizens, and have no agency in the creative task. Zhang (2012) characterises this use of participants as workers (*gongren* in Mandarin).

In contrast, Ah Xian asks his collaborators to create busts, but then calls for their participation as “citizens” (*gongmin* in Mandarin) to apply traditional designs to the finished article (Zhang, 2012). Each bust is “... a collaboration between the individual and the group fusing time-honoured techniques with contemporary methods" (MCA, 2012). Craftspeople contribute creativity; they are

more than just workers in the manufacturing process. Ah Xian challenges the status quo by giving creative freedom to local artisans, recognising the creativity held within them despite political repression (Burchmore, 2017).

Porcelain is a fragile material. Though their material choice is the same, but the way it is treated is very different. For Ah Xian, the fragility seems to reflect the brittleness of the existence of the Chinese diaspora. He uses the material with reverence, the busts to be preserved and treated with great care, displayed away from human touch.

In contrast, Ai Weiwei takes a destructive approach to the material where the seeds are made to be walked upon and eventually eroded from wear. This approach has echoes of earlier works, including his iconic *Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn* (Weiwei, 1995) (Fig. 3). These performances replicate the Cultural Revolution practices of destroying traditional religious and cultural objects to "shatter superstition" (Sorace, 2012, p.402).

A significant difference between how each artist challenges the status quo is the scale and orientation of their works. *Sunflower Seeds* is an immersive work, designed for a major international gallery and a vast audience. It is an outward-facing interactive artwork of monumental scale that references the abundance of people and the manufacturing capacity of China. It is an example of Ai Weiwei as an artist and entrepreneur who creates jobs and incomes as well as artworks (Hjorth & Holt, 2016).

In contrast, Ah Xian's busts were not made for massive public spaces; they are small, delicate and constructed for display in a controlled environment. Most are housed in glass display cases which allow viewers 360-degree views. The works are also inward-looking, and each bust showing closed eyes signifying the work is about personal emotion rather than a public statement.

Both artists share Chinese heritage, but they use this 'otherness' to challenge the status quo in profoundly different ways. Ai Weiwei embraces and exploits the Eurocentric orientation of the global contemporary art world to enhance his art and create a conversation between his two worlds. His work "...traverses East and West, meshing them together" (Hancox 2012, p.280). Although he explicitly rejects national or cultural orientation by claiming "The world is a sphere, has no East or West." (Hancox 2012, p. 280), he places himself inside the Eurocentric perspective. He uses that to amplify his voice to challenge the status quo. Sorace describes Ai's material as the 'flesh' of politics

(2014). He supplies the 'exotic other' culture that fulfils Western expectations of a contemporary Chinese artist (Hancox, 2012).

Ah Xian's challenge to the status quo is more subtle and inwardly focussed (Feinstein, 2002). His work reflects personal experience and journey rather than social/public experience. In his writings, Ah Xian decries the 'swarming' of artists to the Euro-American mainstream, at the expense of their heritage. He suggests that "most artists from a non-Western background who actively try to cast themselves into the mainstream ... are cooperatively participating in [a] globalised art culture in a globalised form" (Burchmore, 2017, p.42). Against this trend, he affirms a devotion "...to follow with interest and introspection the ancient art and culture of China" (Burchmore, 2017, p.42).

The language and symbolism used by both artists is also a point of significant difference in their challenge to the status quo. Both works are provocative and capable of different interpretation by different audiences. (Hjorth & Holt, 2016) Nevertheless, they speak with entirely different voices. Connotations derived from symbols are always culture-bound (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018) and Ai Weiwei exploits this forcefully. *Sunflower Seeds* presents a cacophony of layered symbols, some evident and available to a global audience, others subtle and open to multiple interpretations, whereas *China-china* uses more straightforward semiotic language.

Ai Weiwei uses an obvious sunflower metaphor in his work (Barrett, 2011). Sunflower seeds were a precious childhood treat for Weiwei. However, they also relate to the Communist era notion of Mao as the sun and the people as sunflowers following the leader, (Figures 4 and 5) (Ai, Bingham & Daniel, 2010). These porcelain sunflower seeds are infertile and inedible. A reference to the Great Famine, where millions starved due to political ineptitude representing the failure of the Chinese system to grow and nourish its people. (Barrett, 2011). More subtly, the seeds also represent increasing Chinese mass production and the commodification of an ancient craft-form and reference China's role as globalisation's manufacturer of useless goods (Barrett 2011).

In contrast to Ai Weiwei's multi-layered symbolism Ah Xian produces masks (or life-casts) which are indexical representations in semiotic terms; for they "bear a direct connection with that which (they) signify" (Burchmore, 2017, p.36). These casts form a direct interaction between subject and material. This imbues the casts with "a living presence with posture relaxed, closed eyes as if resting or in contemplation, and expressions peaceful" (Burchmore 2017, p.33). They depict people of a similar or older age to Ah Xian. These are people old enough to have been on a comparable life journey, those

who would have experienced the same turmoil in China and emotions of the diaspora. Closed eyes suggest inward contemplation whilst the decorations of Chinese symbols wrap around the busts signifying the essential Chineseness of the subjects – something that engulfs them. Ah Xian's work is about closure after moving to Australia after the horror of the Tiananmen Square massacre. He is coming to terms with turmoil (Feinstein 2003). It is a very personal inward expression where the semiotic structure is much less convoluted than the public, outward expression of Weiwei.

These differences in presentation, personal orientation, symbolism and meaning highlight the unique and direct approach of Ai Weiwei compared to the more subtle and collectivist approach Ah Xian brings to challenge the status quo. Their use of traditional crafts may be very similar. Still, their approach to art-making, collaboration and messaging are very different. Ai Weiwei takes a grand, flamboyant and direct approach using art as "my best weapon" (Sorace, 2014). In contrast, Ah Xian is understated and subtle, accepting the "...unpredictability of fate" (Burchmore, 2017). Their divergent approaches to contemporary art and the craft of porcelain set them apart from their peers and each other.

FIGURES



Figure 1. China-china bust.

Xian, A. (1998-2004). *China, China - Bust 81*. [Image]. Retrieved 15 September 2020, from <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2008.21/>



Figure 2. Sunflower Seeds

Weiwei, A. (2010). *Sunflower Seeds* [Image]. Retrieved 10 September 2020, from <https://www.dezeen.com/2010/10/11/sunflower-seeds-2010-by-ai-weiwei/>



Figure 3. Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn

Weiwei, A. (1995). *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* [Image]. Retrieved 10 September 2020, from <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/ai-weiwei-beginners-guide>

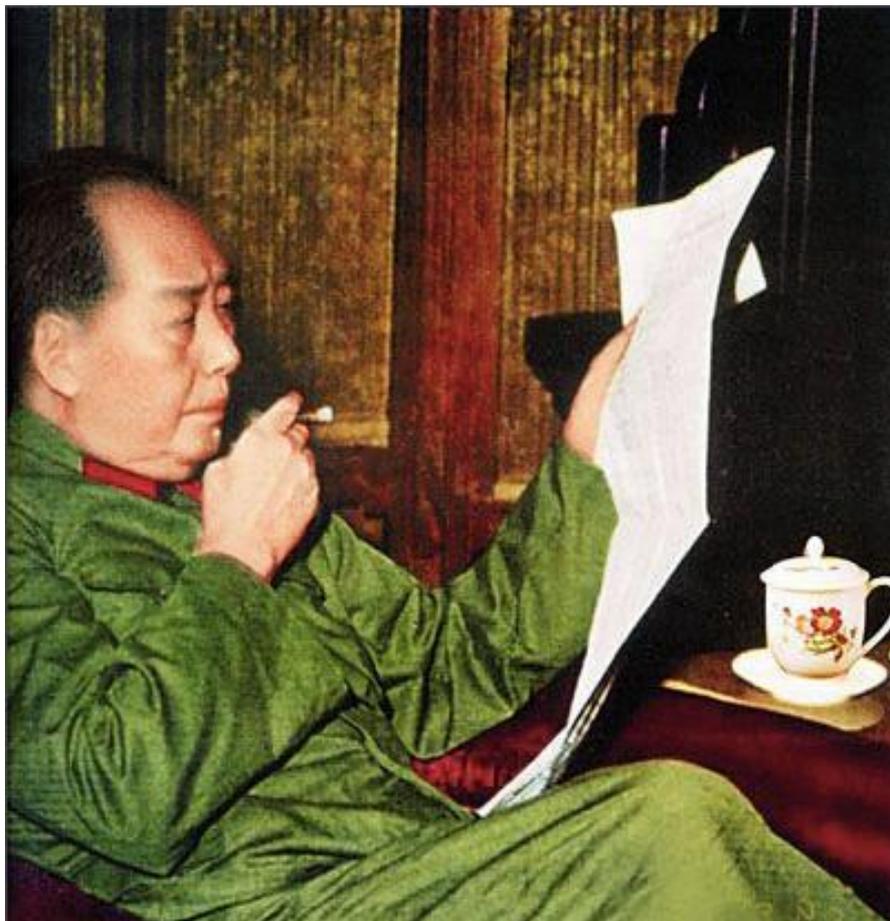


Figure 4. Mao Zedong photographed reading newspaper with a porcelain cup.

Mao Zedong photographed reading newspaper with a porcelain cup.. [Image]. Retrieved 10

September 2020, from

<http://baike.baidu.com/pic/2673044/987143/4bd1e803b46b831f3812bbf4?fr=lemma&ct=cover#aid=987143&pic=4bd1e803b46b831f3812bbf4>



Figure 5. Propaganda image of Mao Zedong.

The text reads: "Chairman Mao is the red Sun in our heart."

Retrieved 10 September 2020, from <http://m.052k.com/read/3996197274/>

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