Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn
(Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE – 2010 CE)
February 24 – April 18, 2010

**Arcadia University Art Gallery**
**Illustrated/Annotated Checklist**

**Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn**

This piece, comprised of a clay sculpture depicting a male figure from the Song dynasty (960–1279) trapped in a Johnnie Walker whisky bottle, is one of the first works Ai Weiwei produced upon his return to China in 1993 after a decade in New York City. (In a similar work from 1994, *Tang Dynasty Courtesan in Bottle*, Ai Weiwei presented a sculpture of a woman from the Tang Dynasty [618–907] in an Absolut Kurant vodka bottle.) “While evoking the popular Western tradition of placing sailboats in bottles,” writes Charles Merewether, “the artist suggests the capture and commodification of Chinese culture within the confines of a United States-led commodity economy.” While the economic profiles of the United States and China have shifted since these works were made, they still play off what Merewether describes as “the tension between the unique artifact and disposable object, painstaking craftwork and mass production, antiquity and modernity.” The bottled sculptures signaled Ai’s focused study of the history of Chinese antiques, most of which are ceramic. However unprecedented, Ai’s gesture was a logical extension of this exploration of found object sculpture developed during his time in New York in response to his introduction to the work of Marcel Duchamp.

**Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn**
1995
tripthy of gelatin silver prints
each print 49 5/8” x 39 1/4”
Courtesy private collection, USA

**Blue-and-White Moonflask**
1996
replica in style of Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign era (1736-95), porcelain, glaze and cobalt brushwork
20 7/8” x 14 1/2” x 3”
Courtesy private collection, USA

Commissioned by Ai Weiwei in the manner of other counterfeit artifacts produced for the Chinese antiques market, this blue-and-white flask was made in Jingdezhen where the artist maintains a kiln and a staff of approximately twenty craftsmen. This small city was the center of China’s ceramics industry for more than a millennium (up until recently) and achieved international recognition for its high-quality porcelain, which dominated the national and international market from the 13th through the 18th century. Contemporary replicas such as this example, can only be exposed by carbon-dating, if even then, as counterfeiters often mix in flecks of old clay to foil investigators. One of dozens examples of such vessels in Ai’s oeuvre, it stands as a material interrogation of assumptions of historical authenticity.

**Coca-Cola Vase**
1997
vase from Neolithic Age (5000–3000 BCE) and paint
11 7/8” x diameter 13”
Courtesy Tsai Collection, New York

Since 1994, Ai Weiwei has made a series of works in which ancient Chinese ceramics are painted with the iconic logo of the Coca-Cola Corporation. Equal parts decoration and defacement, this gesture can be related to art historical touchstones from Marcel Duchamp’s assisted readymades to Andy Warhol’s serially fabricated paintings to the controversial ‘rectified’ Goya prints of the Chapman Brothers. Yet Ai’s concerns are not necessarily art historical, at least not different from that of the second, even though the urn is smashed into pieces at his feet. There is no evident surprise on his face, nor is there an expression of shock or dismay. Its ruin is presented as ordinary so that whatever response there may be concerning the urn’s value is left to the spectator.” Ai Weiwei himself proposes that “the action is powerful only because someone thinks it is powerful and invests value in the object.” The triptych can be seen in relation to the destruction associated with the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong’s command to his Red Guards “to smash bourgeois inclinations”. As such, the work challenges assumptions about what constitutes culture and the means by which its value is constructed and perceived.

In *Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn*, 1995, Ai Weiwei develops his engagement with historic artifacts as readymades even further, entering the realm of performance. In this work he photographs himself calmly dropping a glazed Han vessel onto a stone floor. Charles Merewether addresses the impassive way in which this action is realized and possible complicity of the viewer: “Ai Weiwei’s pose in the third photograph is no
This small, coffin-like box is constructed from the remnants of Quin dynasty temples. Each box holds one grey brick taken from the destroyed houses of a traditional hutong, a narrow alley lined by traditional courtyard residences. It can be regarded as a memento or relic symbolizing a body laid to rest. The irony in the title also suggests a challenge to the Chinese government and developers to reconsider what they are destroying in their rush to create a new, modern city. While operating on a very different scale, this small piece alludes to Template (2007), the massive gate made of Ming dynasty doors and windows that collapsed at “Documenta 12”, as well as Ai’s brick-based, minimalist architecture. The piece may also help viewers draw a connection to Arcadia’s own historic building that houses the gallery which is distinguished by its 100-foot brick smokestack as well as the glazed brick walls of the gallery’s interior.

Souvenir from Beijing
2002
brick from dismantled hutong house,
box made of iron wood (tieli) from
dismantled temple of the Qing
dynasty (1644–1911)
3 3/4” x 13 3/4” x 8 7/8”
Courtesy Ai Weiwei, Beijing

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Within the limited temporal scale of the 20th-century avant-garde. The works operate as historical implosions across a much wider gulf of time. By exploiting the visual similarity between the swirling decoration of prehistoric Banshan ware and the calligraphic curves of the Coke logo, Ai brings the ‘beginning’ of history into formal contact with our own late-capitalist moment. In this way, these ceramics operate as explorations of the generic: a return to the socially engaged Realism that Alex Potts and Thomas Crow have both located in the art of the 1960s. Just as Warhol extended his artistic activity across a range of objects, such that the individuality of each work was made relational to the larger project of ‘business art,’ Ai’s serial exploration of the Coca-Cola pot directs our attention to the everyday character of these Neolithic objects. Today they are rarities, treated as sculptures by museums, galleries and collectors. But originally, they were functional objects made in large numbers, cultural achievements of a technical rather than artistic kind. They were the dispensable material culture of that time and place, just as soda cans are of ours. In this regard, Ai’s painted urns are not simply postmodern gestures, critiques of commodity structure (though they are that as well). They are, rather, unstable concoctions in which opposed cultural qualities collide: the handmade and mass-produced, the physical and iconic, ancient and contemporary. It is in such collisions, Ai seems to suggest, that ideas of relative cultural importance are produced. Faced with these ceramic détournements, we may reflect on the fact that value - Ai Weiwei’s true subject – is both impossible to fix, and the realest thing of all. (From Glenn Adamson’s abstract for his exhibition catalog essay.)

Colored Vases
2006
vases from the Neolithic age (5000–3000 BCE) and industrial paint
from between 10” x diameter 9” and 14 1/2” x diameter 9 1/2”
Courtesy AW Asia collection, New York

This pair of jars extends Ai’s commentary on the surprisingly high prices recently obtained for the original Yuan dynasty jar on which they are based, a value unusual for a blue-and-white vessel from that period. Its presentation here, as a multiple, references the mass-production technique used to create the model. Painting on the inside of jar-like vessels has a long history in China but it was not done on porcelain until the 14th century. While the technique of underglaze painting on porcelain in general is not difficult, painting the interior surface of a round, closed vessel is. In many craft traditions, such techniques might have been lost over time, but this is not the case with ceramics made in Jingdezhen, where traditional and advanced techniques of ceramic production can still be sourced. Another important feature of these “inside-out” jars is that the decoration is visible only when the jars are viewed from above, a reference to the so-called anhua or “secret” decoration, which can only be seen when the ceramic object is viewed up close. This type of decoration typically appeared on high-quality, “imperial” porcelains from early in the Ming period (1368–1644). Its ostensible invisibility gave the owner of the vessel privileged information about of the piece, knowledge that can indicate social and cultural status. In the case of Ghost Gu, the narrative content of the decoration of the original Yuan-period jar was also attractive for its symbolism. It alludes the story of Sun Zi rushing down a mountain to rescue his disciple, an ancient moral tale which would have been known by an educated viewer, and therefore recognized. Such narrative designs appear on Chinese ceramics from an early date, and in the Yuan period can be related to the development of woodblock-printed book illustrations at that time. (Adapted from exhibition catalog essay by Stacey Pierson.)

These nine Neolithic urns have been dipped in industrial paint, an act that has covered their ancient patterns with flows of pastel color we might associate with Tupperware or Warhol’s silkscreens, thus neutralizing the authority of tradition and redefining the objects’ contemporary aesthetic value. Masking the luster and bold decoration of their original surfaces, the acrylic paint does not destroy the brushwork, which remains intact beneath a veneer of contemporary synthetic pigment. The exact contour of their patterning

Ghost Gu
2006
two replicas in style of Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) porcelain with underglaze 10 5/8” x diameter 13 3/4”
Courtesy Ai Weiwei, Beijing

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Souvenir from Beijing
2002
brick from dismantled hutong house,
box made of iron wood (tieli) from
dismantled temple of the Qing
dynasty (1644–1911)
3 3/4” x 13 3/4” x 8 7/8”
Courtesy Ai Weiwei, Beijing

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becomes each vessel’s own secret. Ai’s intervention disrupts the aura of enigmatic antiquity that permeates these objects, altering our affinity with them, which now goes no further than the gaudy gaiety of their new vividly colored exteriors. Says Ai: “To have other layers of color and images above the precious one calls into questions both identity and authenticity of the objects. It makes both conditions non-absolute. You can cover something so that it is no longer visible but is still underneath, and what appears on the surface is not supposed to be but it’s there.”

This video documents the sober, procedural defacement of a collection of Neolithic urns purchased by the artist in Beijing flea markets starting in 1993. Over the course of the work’s duration, Ai and an assistant dip each historic vessel into 5-gallon buckets filled with colored paint. This slow, deliberate, and systematic process, a routine in which the urns are not destroyed but gently compromised by the industrial paint, makes Ai’s use of black and white, stop-action photography seem even more fitting for the destruction depicted in the photo-triptych Dropping a Han dynasty Urn.

These two works are part of a larger array of similar but unique pieces (each with their own distinct shade of green and stem) that are sometimes displayed in field-like groupings. As replicas of natural vessels (forms carrying both large amounts of water as well as seeds) they relate to the many other containers in the exhibition and, like the porcelain sunflower seeds, evoke the tradition of glazed ceramic vessels that mimic the appearance of organic forms. In an exhibition of vessels with flat bases as well as feet, the near perfectly spherical forms and glossy sheen of these works distinguish them as unnatural despite their efforts to convince.

Untitled
2006
porcelain
1 ton, diameter approximately 80”
Courtesy Ai Weiwei, Beijing

This mound of what appears to be sunflower seeds is actually a pile of hand-crafted replicas made from porcelain. As such, the pile reads as agricultural produce that has been harvested and is awaiting containment, perhaps in one of the Neolithic pots in the exhibition. (In the context of this exhibition, it is interesting to recall that what we call a sunflower seed is actually a husk-like container for the edible kernel inside it.) The resemblance of this cone (weighing exactly one ton) to minimalist sculpture, as well as its affinity to the takeaways of Felix-Gonzales Torres, is contradicted by the mound’s profligate expenditure of manual effort. The fact that each seed is unique invests it with a paradoxical value. The work’s potential abstraction is also denied by the following reference offered by Ai Weiwei: “I grew up in the desert and sunflower seeds were actually a street snack. Regarding the Chinese propaganda: we are all sunflowers because we are all facing the sun and the sun is Mao Zedong.” Suggesting the cycles of regeneration implied by Dust to Dust, Ai’s “seeds” (and their conspicuous atomization of material and process) destabilize the singularity of the clay object in a similar way.

Watermelons
2006
porcelain and glaze
17 1/2” x diameter 15”
Courtesy Ai Weiwei, Beijing

This untitled work, among the most recent in the show, demonstrates Ai returning to the vessel form after producing a series of ceramic studio objects that have little to do with classic Chinese ceramics. Included in this series, begun in 2006, is a work depicting male genitals held upright by a stream of urine and a series of glazed porcelain Waves (after Hokusai), that according to Philip Tinari, “seemed to function as jokes in the face of a new order that no one quite yet understood.” Unlike the earlier vessels in the exhibition, however, all of which refer historic forms, this untitled example is more fanciful. The blue and white sphere inside the large, undecorated urn has no obvious historical precedent. The small oculus at its top (in contrast to the wide-mouthed, undecorated urn in which it is lodged), suggests the pupil of an eye looking back from the bottom of a well. Together they seem to propose a physical conundrum asking whether the containers are empty or full.
Dust to Dust
2009
ground Neolithic pottery (5000–3000 BCE), glass jar
10 1/4” x 7 7/8” x 7 1/8”
Courtesy Ai Weiwei, Beijing

Inside this jar are the accumulated remains of pulverized earthenware. The container is one example from an edition of forty identical works originally presented in a gridded wood display case. Resembling dirt, the ground pottery points to the origins of clay as earth itself while alluding to cyclical, material transformations of the body, an interpretation suggested by the work’s title (“Remember, O man, that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return” Genesis 3:19.) The piece also demonstrates ceramics as something that might be spilled or even rendered airborne. Despite being sealed inside a lidded jar, Dust to Dust suggests recent accounts of the Beijing atmosphere brown with dirt from open construction pits. (The Chinese government curtailed all construction in Beijing three days prior to the opening of the 2008 Olympics in an effort to clear the air in time for the games.) Like Ai’s porcelain sunflower seeds, Dust to Dust reads like a landscape. Both works suggest the sublimity of incomprehensible quantities we can associate with the proliferation of mass production that is among many of China’s innovations.