

The Real Thing (excerpt from 2,000-word essay)

Glenn Adamson

To navigate the temporal chart of Ai's work, there are no better guideposts than his Coca-Cola pots, a series that began in 1994 and has continued to the present. In each iteration an ancient storage vessel, purchased at a Beijing antiques market, is festooned with a hand-painted rendition of the iconic logo of the Coca-Cola Corporation. Equal parts decoration and defacement, this gesture, like the dropped Han-dynasty jar, uses the preciousness of historical Chinese artifacts against itself. In both cases Ai signals his high regard for these objects, and his impatience with the hushed reverence they inspire. As markers in time, however, the Coca-Cola pots are still more complex than the photographic triptych. The first thing to notice is the very fact of the series' *longue durée*. The repetition of an artistic gesture or idea is not without parallel in Ai's oeuvre, but it is striking that he has sustained this one idea for over fifteen years now without variation—apart from that provided by the vessels and paint that constitute his raw materials.

Each vase is a pile-up of historical reference points. At one level, Ai offers a visual pun between the cursive calligraphy of the Coca-Cola logo (designed by Frank M. Robinson in 1885), and the swirling, handpainted decoration on neolithic Banshan ware. And there are other, more recent allusions too. As is often the case with this artist's work, the example of Marcel Duchamp and his assisted readymades is front and center; and as Dario Gamboni writes elsewhere in this volume, the more recent, equally controversial "rectified" Goya prints of Jake and Dinos Chapman are an important point of comparison as well. For the purposes of understanding these pots, however, it is more useful to turn to that other great exponent of Coca-Cola art, Andy Warhol. Perhaps no post-World War II artist was as quotable over the course of a long career, but it may be that that Warhol's aperçu on the subject was his very finest:

*You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.*ⁱ

With these words, some three decades before Thomas Friedman,ⁱⁱ or for that matter Charles Saatchi, Warhol outlined his manifesto for a flat world—the same world he portrayed in his paintings. His images of Coca-Cola bottles manage to be at once thrilling, boring and terrifying: a profusion of desirable goods (all the Cokes, remember, are good) that calls to mind both the dead sameness of a glass office tower façade, and the massed ranks of soldiers in a Nazi rally.

Warhol's fascination with the deathly face of the commodity finds a correspondence in Ai Weiwei's thinking; he recently said that museums are "like the dead bodies of past wars...the killing field."ⁱⁱⁱ And just as Warhol extended his vision of the commercial sphere across a range of objects, such that each work was subsumed within his larger project of "business art," Ai's Coca-Cola pots direct our attention to the entire world of value that has been constructed around ancient objects, both past and present. Today they are precious rarities, treated almost as sculptures by museums, galleries and collectors. But originally they were functional objects, made in large numbers: cultural achievements of a technical and utilitarian, rather than artistic, kind. These crafted wares were the dispensable material culture of that time and place, just as mass-produced soda bottles are of ours. His seeming act of defacement is therefore a restoration of sorts—he is, speaking very loosely, treating these vessels as they were meant to be treated: as generic. Yet, as was also the case with Warhol, Ai Weiwei is staging this spectacle of ordinariness within the boundaries of an artistic gesture. The pots he chooses are old, but not necessarily of museum quality. Some may not even be "authentic." The only reason they would make their way to a museum at all is because of his intervention. And Ai Weiwei is not just any artist; his works are among the most sought after in the contemporary marketplace. In terms of the absolute bottom line, then, he is *adding* to the value of these pots as commodities, as surely as Warhol's paintings of Coke bottles and soup cans were more valuable than the objects they represent.

ⁱ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 100.

ⁱⁱ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ai Weiwei interviewed by Mathieu Wellner, in *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry*, 104–111: 108. On Warhol and death, see Thomas Crow, "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol," in *Reconstructing Modernism*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 311–31.