Ai Weiwei: Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast (excerpt from 3,000-word essay)
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Dropping Urns and Overpainting Vases

The fame and the image of Ai Weiwei remain primarily associated with the iconoclastic component of his art and especially his 1995 photographic triptych Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn. Brought in relation with the equally publicized elements of his biography, such a work raises an intriguing and possibly disturbing question: how could someone whose father and whose own youth suffered so much from the Maoist campaign for “breaking down the Four Olds” (including the “old culture”) do something that could appear to some as a “reenactment”—though admittedly on a small scale—of the same inept destruction?i

Ai’s own answers to that question seem evasive. The three consecutive photographs, he once explained, resulted from “very quick decisions” and the desire to test a camera that could “take six frames in a second”; as for the urn, “it is only grabbed by the weight and gravity.”ii Such statements may be aimed at deflecting the significance given to Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn by critics who see it as “an iconoclastic gesture against power and authority”—a possibly useful antidote to the widespread belief in the artistic priority of “the concept”—and to redirect their attention from the action to the picture. But the artist’s attribution of agency to gravity also points to the resemblances between this work and Duchamp’s Three Standard Stoppages, the “idea of fabrication” of which was included in what Ai has described as his favorite book and one that “reads like a recipe,” The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp: “If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane distorting itself as it pleases and creates a new shape of the measure of length.”viii

A major difference is that, whereas Duchamp fixed the result of his mock experiment and used it later as a template, Ai recorded the transfer of agency from human to object (and physical laws), thereby delivering a portrait of the artist as an iconoclast. An often remarked aspect of this self-portrait is the impassive attitude of the sitter and the ocular contact he establishes with the spectator. These features stand out even more clearly if one puts them in the context of depictions of iconoclasm and iconoclasts, which generally emphasize emotional involvement to the point of “blind rage.” Goya, for example, made a memorable picture of a man balanced precariously on a ladder, with his eyes shut tight and still waving the pickaxe he has just used to smash a sculpture. The caption further exposes iconoclasts as blind not only to the value of what they destroy, but also to the very meaning of the acts they perform. Ai’s pose and gaze, on the contrary, express a combination of detachment and awareness, and they effect another transfer of agency to the spectator, who has to assess the value of what is being destroyed and the meaning of the act. The artist himself phrased this relationship in Duchampian terms: “the significant value about any act or art really exists in the viewer’s mind.”
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This is close to the institutional theory of art and goes back to Marcel Mauss’s theory of magic, adapted by Pierre Bourdieu to cultural production, including the Readymade. According to these theories, the magician’s and the artist’s power derive from the belief put in them, from their publics’ hopes and expectations. The question “What am I doing?” that the artist pictured in Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn seems to be asking from us can thus be rephrased: “What do you want me to be doing?” Judging from public reactions and comments, the answer is generally “destroying something precious,” and it applies also to Ai’s works in which objects are being transformed or damaged rather than destroyed, such as Colored Vases. The destructive component of these works touches a nerve that prompts critics to declare that “iconoclasm rules” and to emphasize or exaggerate the antiquity (and thereby the value) of the artist’s victims: “Take one Han-dynasty urn. It is more than 2,000 years old. Carefully paint a Coca-Cola logo across it. Then take several decorated Stone Age urns, anything up to 10,000 years old, and paint them white, or in garish colors.”vi One is reminded of Jones’s comment on the transgressive quality that helps explain the success of the Chapman brothers’ Insult to Injury series. With Ai, iconoclasm even seems a favor that can be bestowed upon the happy few, giving an odd twist to the traditional studio visit: “On several occasions, the artist spontaneously smashed a pot in his studio to the extraordinary thrill of visitors present who couldn’t quite believe their eyes but were very pleased to have witnessed it.”vii

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i The Four Olds were old ideas, old habits, old customs, and old culture. David Spalding wrote that Ai “remarked on the loss of China’s cultural legacy by reenacting its destruction” (“Ai Weiwei: Galerie Urs Meile,” Artforum 45:1 [September 2006], 395). On the iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution see, for example, Pema Konchok, “Buddhism as a Focus of Iconoclasm in Asia,” in Latour and Weibel, Iconoclash, 40–59.


iv Ai Weiwei interviewed by Virginia Trioli.

v See Pierre Bourdieu, “La production de la croyance; Contribution à une économie des biens symboliques,” Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales 13 (February 1977), 4–43.
