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I, Evan E. Sikes M.A., hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

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A Matter of Perspective: Anti-Authoritarian Gestures in the Political Art of Ai Weiwei

Student's name: Evan E. Sikes M.A.

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Kimberly Paice, PhD

Committee member: Maureen Buri, MA

Committee member: Morgan Thomas, Ph.D.

UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI
“A Matter of Perspective: Anti-Authoritarian Gestures in the Political Art of Ai Weiwei”

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Evan Sikes
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Abstract

Ai Weiwei has emerged as an important politically active force on the international art scene in the last 5 years. The artist’s background and his two series, *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn*, both began in 1995, played a major role in launching him to international fame as a political activist and artist. In my introduction, I will introduce Ai Weiwei and establish his place in the world as a politically active artist working in China. In subsequent chapters, I will discuss *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* in terms of how they, by offering an idea of dissensual thought towards pre-existing notions of reverence for monuments and artifacts were at the forefront of his political art-making career and his political activism.
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Introduction

Ai Weiwei (1957-) is a contemporary Chinese artist and activist, who practices in many mediums, but is perhaps best known for his recent anti-China social media campaigns. Arguably China’s most popular living artist, he has made a resounding impact in the world through his contemporary politically-based art. Ai Weiwei has had a long history of defying the Chinese government and incorporating underlying political and cultural themes in his artwork. He is an artist, writer, sculptor, architect, critic, filmmaker, curator, and activist who lives in Beijing, China. He has had solo exhibitions all over the world, including at such esteemed institutions as the Haus der Kunst (2009), Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern (2011), and the 48th Venice Biennale in Italy (1999). Most recently, his work has been displayed at the Lisson Gallery (2011-2012) and the Mary Boone Gallery (2012), both based in New York City, and also at the Haines Gallery in San Francisco, CA.

Born in 1957 to his mother Gao Ying and his father, Ai Qing (1910-1966), one of China’s most influential poets, Ai Weiwei began his career as an artist in 1978 at the Beijing Film Academy, working with well-known Chinese directors, Chen Kaige (1952-) and Zhang Yimou (1951-). He then lived in New York City from 1981 to 1993 where he began producing his first series of photographs and experimenting in forms of conceptual art.1 Ai’s first major body of work is a series of photographs titled “Ai Weiwei: New

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1 I will provide a description of Ai’s conceptual art in detail in the introduction to this thesis
York Photographs; 1983-1993,” consisting of over a thousand images of daily life in the city. In 1993, Ai returned to China because his father’s health was failing. He began to create his second series of photographs, entitled *A Study of Perspective* (1995-2003), which will serve as a key focus in the proposed study. As an extremely active artist in China, Ai assisted in the designing of the Bird’s Nest Stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. He also curated exhibitions and enjoyed several solo exhibitions in Europe, North America, and China, all of which demonstrated his growing influence in the global art world. In 2005, Ai’s reach spread through his blogging on new social media platforms, such as Twitter. This dimension of his practice helped him to become one of the most well-known artists in the world, and one of the artists who is most disliked by the Chinese government. He is probably best known for his attempt to investigate the Chinese government after an earthquake in the Sichuan Province in China collapsed government built schools and killed thousands of children. In his effort to overturn the government’s propagandistic denial of the reach of the catastrophe, Ai was detained, beaten, and arrested by the Chinese government in 2011, and was eventually released three months later. Currently he is in Beijing and continues to play an active role in world politics and Chinese culture.

In the proposed study of Ai Weiwei’s work, I will examine the work in two of his series, *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* (1995). The former series,

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2 The number of photographs in Ai Weiwei’s series *A Study of Perspective* is unknown. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City owns the majority of them, however, they are not on display currently.
completed over an 8 year period of travel by the artist, includes Weiwei’s photographs of himself holding up his own middle finger, a colloquial gesture of “giving the finger,” to some of the world’s most well known monuments, including The White House and Tiananmen Square, among many others. The series *Dropping the Urn* offers a similar anti-China anti-government position as he photographs himself destroying and defacing ancient cultural Chinese ceramics. As the proposed study will explicate, these works take a radical and dissensual view of public monuments and artifacts as symbolic political and cultural institutions. I believe these two series by Ai oppose notions of memorializing monuments and artifacts and replace them with a practice of democratic intervention. If monuments have historically involved desires to stabilize the iconicity of these institutions, Ai’s works attempts to destabilize this traditional notion of reverence and create ambivalence towards this historical thought-process. He makes political statements about monuments with his photographic series. While Ai’s work is not monumental in scale, I believe that it can be conceptually monumental in its approach. Monuments typically attempt to remember and honor the past symbolically. The Great Pyramids in Egypt are an example of the high culture of the dynasty of ancient Egypt; the Taj Mahal is a monument of love and the symbol for India, and the Statue of Liberty is the symbol of freedom for the United States of America. These monuments were commissioned and built specifically to memorialize the culture and the time frame of the people who built them. I will argue that Ai attempts to take these artifacts and monuments in *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* and figuratively destroy them as a way to forget the
past rather than to remember it. Instead, he wants to pave the way for a new type of monument, one representative of social and political change through artwork, specifically photography, in the present day. Ai seeks to take importance away from traditional monuments as representative of political and cultural institutions, and his work uses an alternative perspective of dissensus and freedom of speech as an ideal of change in contemporary politics and society.

**Chapter Descriptions**

1. In the first chapter I will discuss Ai Weiwei’s path to becoming a well-known contemporary Chinese artist, focusing on the political and cultural aspects of the place and time in China that he grew up in which played a role in his political views. I will also offer an analysis of the two studies that are the topics of this thesis paper by discussing their place within his oeuvre and how they relate to the idea of creating ambivalence towards a historically traditional manner of perceiving monuments.

2. In chapter 2, I will look at *A Study of Perspective* in an attempt to create the first body of literature written on the photographic series itself. I will analyze the different monuments that he photographs by comparing them to literature on the iconicity of monuments and show how this particular series attempts to cause an upheaval in contemporary thought about challenging corrupt government. This chapter will focus mainly on monuments as cultural and political institutions.
3. In chapter 3, I will focus on the artifacts that Ai Weiwei defaces in his series *Dropping the Urn* (This chapter will focus mainly on the artifacts as cultural and political institutions). I will show how Ai criticizes Chinese governmental practices by performing the destruction of ancient cultural artifacts to criticize the Cultural Revolution and the commodities market in China. He offers an alternative perspective to his audience by defacing these vessels rather than coveting them.

4. In the concluding chapter, I will review outcomes of the study and discuss future directions for research.

**Literature Review**

In recent years, scholars and journalists have been highly vocal about Ai Weiwei’s arrest and detainment in 2011. In contrast, there is surprisingly little attention in the form of scholarship that is dedicated to his photographic series *A Study of Perspective*. More scholarship exists that deals with his series *Dropping the Urn*, however, I plan to expand upon that body of research in the proposed study.

One of the most important resources for the preparation of my study will be *Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*. Edited and translated by Lee Ambrozy, this book offers great insight into the thoughts that drive Ai’s particular photographic style. The artist’s blog was active for three years before it was shut down and erased by the Chinese government in 2009. This publication is important for understanding Ai Weiwei’s political stances, and his basic worldview. The blog began as a simple mechanism for him to discuss photography and architecture, and eventually
transformed into a mechanism for social change. The book dedicated to the blog is crucial for understanding how Ai became enveloped in politically-based art. Another book, *Ways Beyond Art: Ai Weiwei* includes a conversation between Ai and Hans Ulrich Obrist. Herein, Obrist poses questions to Ai about what has influenced his art-making and Ai discusses why he decided to move towards political activism as an artist. The conversation also delves into the series that the artist was currently working on, *A Study of Perspective*.

In Alois Riegl’s essay, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and Its Development” (1903), Riegl examines historical monuments poised against the currency and values associated with artistic monuments since the Enlightenment. This essay is valuable to my argument because of its focus on the iconicity of monuments. However, Riegl’s essay has limited relevance to contemporary artistic production, partly because it emphasizes the perception of development that is implicit in historical monuments. It is the appreciation of and notion of necessary reliance upon monuments that Ai’s photographic series call into question.

In Adrian Parr’s *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory, and the Politics of Trauma*, Parr raises questions about the reasons we build memorials today. She discusses the creation and conceptualization of monuments, and offers insight into why we build them, but does not necessarily account for the kinds of resistance that Ai’s photographic series explores. I plan to expand upon Parr’s ideas of contemporary historical monuments as vehicles for collective forms of agreement. Ai’s photographic series broach the role of dissensus rather than of consensus as a model of democratic
practice. In this sense, his work is closer to Jacques Ranciere’s theory of democracy and
dissensus than to existing theories of monuments.

The exhibition catalogue *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn* date discusses the
exhibition at which institution. It includes an interview with Ai and essays about his
work, the importance of ceramics in China, and the way in which he defaces important
and ancient Chinese vessels by smashing them on the ground and painting over them for
the purposes of making political statements. Although this text is related directly to focus
of the proposed thesis-study, it merely discusses the exhibition and fails to go further in
depth with the concepts of dissensus and freedom of speech. My study will expand
further on the topic and will investigate how Ai’s work relates directly to a change of
perception, relating specifically to political and cultural institutions.

because it focuses directly on the years in which Ai created both of the photographic
series that are the focus of this study. It also includes conversations with the artist,
images, and background information.

A number of other publications will be useful to my thesis-study in that they
provide excellent images of Ai Weiwei, along with historical background on the artist
himself. These books include *Ai Weiwei: Works 2004-2007*, *Ai Weiwei, Ai Weiwei:
According to What?*, and *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993*. As I will explore in the
study, these images of the artist are keys to when understanding what Weiwei is striving
for with regards to making political statements.

Method in my thesis study will first consist of close readings and socio-political
analysis of the two series by Ai Weiwei that I will be studying. Despite the scarcity of
scholarship written on *A Study of Perspective*, I will relate these works to other studies regarding the importance of cultural and political monuments as institutions in the world. This discussion will include a brief history of monuments and artifacts, and how they represent and attempt to remember cultures in history and great political institutions. Additionally, I will examine how these historical works relate to contemporary thought placed around the preservation of monuments, and how they seek to generate a change in the perception and political thought of the masses.

In considering *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn*, I will offer an anthropological approach and look at the cultural factors that play a part in these works. I will examine Chinese thought about the preservation of culture, including views held in the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Through this process, I will demonstrate how Ai Weiwei’s works utilizes the fictional destruction of monuments and artifacts to represent the idea of destruction within Chinese thought and what he finds inherently wrong with it.

Ai Weiwei is one of the world’s most controversial emerging artists. This study will provide an in-depth examination of *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn’s* meaning as a reversal in the historical perception of what a monument represents. Ai Weiwei’s work is important to our world today because he is dealing with important contemporary issues that we all face in a more globalized world economy.
Chapter 1

Dissensus

If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus, the very kernel of the aesthetic regime: artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination. Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible.\(^3\)

-Jacques Rancière

Jacques Rancière (1940 -) is a French philosopher and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris. Recently Rancière has contributed greatly to the theoretical and philosophical ideas of politics and art within today's contemporary art society, and, with direct implications in understanding the political art of Ai Weiwei, which is the topic of this thesis study. In the quote offered above, from Rancière’s *Dissensus* (2010), the philosopher discusses the paradoxes of political art. By dissensus, Rancière not only refers to the justification of particular social arrangements, but also the demonstration of the perceptual and conceptual orders in which these social arrangements take place.\(^4\) Rancière makes the determination that art that is political should acknowledge its limitations. We cannot determine the effect on political subjects that an artwork or a performance will have. In order to explain the relation between art and politics, we must have a re-configuration in the fabric of the sensory experience of the masses. In other

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\(^4\) Ibid, 2.
words, no determinate effect of politically-based art can be inferred from the work, but such art can assist in re-shaping sensory experiences in relation to discursive settings, and art can have a crucial role in fostering this recognition. The works can affect discourses about politics, which in turn can affect the politics themselves. The works themselves may present a particular viewpoint, but the works address and form contribute the most.

In this study, I will show how Ai Weiwei’s two series, A Study of Perspective (1995-2003) and Dropping the Urn (1995-2010), work to re-configure the fabrics of traditional notions of thought regarding monuments and artifacts. To understand the political theories within Ai’s work, Rancière’s theories on dissensus offer me insight into disregarding any possible pre-determined effect that these works may have on actual political subjects and current political ideas. Furthermore, Rancière’s theories emphasize the underlying implications of these works by Ai Weiwei, who attempts to offer subversive views towards current political processes and the lack of freedom of speech in China by upsetting the historically configured discourse around respect and worship of monuments and artifacts. There is a complex of factors which Ai’s work demands that forces us to step back from the authoritarian and traditional ways of discussing historical monuments, and Rancière’s theories help to understand these factors.

A Study of Perspective is a series by Ai Weiwei consisting of photographs (unknown) in which the artist poises his middle finger in a colloquial gesture of “fuck you” towards some of the world’s most powerful political institutions (Tiananmen Square, the White House, etc.). Dropping the Urn is a series of twenty
four photographs by Ai that show him defacing, destroying and negating actual ancient Chinese ceramic vessels. These works help to change the underlying thought processes of the masses by reversing the historical notion of reverence for monuments and artifacts as political and cultural institutions, and offer an alternative perspective of destruction and hatred for these monuments. Herein, Ai plays with the ideas of doing vs. undoing, creation vs. destruction, and making vs. unmaking to create a completely new understanding of a work’s potential. While most artworks are “created”, Ai Weiwei uses the ideas of negation and destruction within *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* to symbolize freedom of speech through silent performance-based photography. He uses performance as a mode of freedom of speech, and he is using photography as his medium. With these two series of photographs, Ai forces us to change our traditional thinking of what monuments represent, and helps to reconfigure the horizon against which we understand the value of historicity as such. Thus, Ai Weiwei is able to create political art without a verbal message that focuses on the notions of freedom of speech. By doing so, these works become relevant and important in contemporary Chinese politics and culture, and Ai Weiwei has been labeled as a political dissident. “A society lacking in freedom of speech is a dark bottomless pit. When it’s this dark, everything begins to look bright.”5

Ai Weiwei has been involved in the world of politics and political dissidence since the time he was a child. He was born during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, an incredibly fierce political time in China’s recent history. The Cultural Revolution, 5 Lee Ambrozy, eds., *Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009* (London: The MIT Press, 2011), 227.
led by Mao Zedong, or “Chairman Mao,” was an attempt to restore communism to the country by eliminating traditional cultural and capitalist elements from Chinese society. This involved the destruction of books, artifacts, and buildings, and managed to hurt the Chinese economy badly. Ai’s father, Ai Qing, one of China’s most famous poets and a critic of the Cultural Revolution, was amongst the first intellectuals to be labeled as an enemy of the state and his family was sent away to a labor camp to pay for their “follies.” Already Ai was infused with anti-government ideas at a very young age.

Ai’s family moved back to Beijing in the mid 1970’s, and in this period his first roots in political art are based. A wall in Beijing known as the “Democracy Wall” became a frequent place for students and artists to voice their opinions about government. Later, one of these men from the Chinese National Army, who wrote on the wall, was arrested and sentenced to fifty years in prison. At around the same time, Ai became involved with a politically active group of artists known as the Stars, located in Beijing. As a part of this movement, Ai began to notice the corruption that was involved at even the lowest forms of the Chinese government. The Stars wanted to make “art for the people.” While they received a lot of attention in China, they did not have much influence internationally, and this did not seem to be enough for the young artist. Ai decided to pack up his belongings and move to New York City in 1981. While in New York, Ai experienced the burgeoning punk movement and eventually moved away from craft to begin producing his first

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6 Ibid, xviii.
7 Ibid, xviii.
8 Ibid, xviii.
9 Ibid, xix.
series of photographs and experimenting with forms of Conceptual Art\textsuperscript{10}. Ai’s first major body of work is a series of photographs titled \textit{Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs: 1983-1993}, consisting of over a thousand images of daily life in the city. In 1993, Ai returned to Beijing, China, because his father’s health was failing. After experiencing life outside of Communist China in the democratic United States, Ai began to create his second series of performance-based photographs in Beijing. Ai began \textit{A Study of Perspective} (1995-2003), and also the series \textit{Dropping the Urn} in 1995, a pivotal period in Ai’s life as a political and cultural activist-artist.

Ai Weiwei was arrested and detained in China on March 3, 2011, and held against his will with no justifiable cause by the Chinese government for 81 days. The only reason that the Chinese government may have had is that Ai was a threat to national security. Even though Ai Weiwei had been virtually imprisoned by the Chinese government, he still managed to become one of the most influential and well-known contemporary artists throughout the world. In fact, the well-known magazine, ArtReview, named Ai the world’s most powerful artist, and placed him atop the 10\textsuperscript{th} annual Power 100 list at number one. He is considered one of the world’s most influential artists because of his anti-political anti-government based stance towards the corrupt Chinese government. As of right now, Ai is under house arrest, unable to leave the country, and allegedly owes $1.4 million in taxes to the Chinese authorities.

\textsuperscript{10} Conceptual Art is the idea in which the concepts and ideas of the artwork take precedence over how the artwork actually looks or its aesthetic values. For example, Marcel Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain} (1917) turns a simple urinal into what he refers to as a fountain. In doing so, he changes nothing with the urinal except for our pre-determined notions of what it should be used for.
The culture and time in China in which Ai Weiwei was raised certainly influenced his investment in political activism in art making. He may have not had the same political concerns if he was born into a democratic country. His series *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* are the two most important bodies of work created by Ai at the beginning of his anti-government art career and assisted in launching him to international fame. While there has been more art criticism and scholarship dedicated to Ai's *Dropping the Urn*, I believe that *A Study of Perspective* is equally important. These two series mock the demolition of ancient cultural artifacts and political institutions in a way that attempts to bring to light the wrongdoings of the Chinese government. They do so by offering us a subtle re-configuration of prior notions of what particular monuments and artifacts have historically symbolized, and this focus dovetails with Ranciere's theories on dissensus. In subsequent chapter's, I discuss the two series in depth and explain how Ai aligns with Ranciere’s theory of dissensus to non-verbally explicate his understanding of freedom of speech regarding monuments and artifacts represented as political and cultural institutions.

*A Study of Perspective* (1995-2003), as explained earlier, is a body of work in which Ai directs his middle finger towards recognizable established political institutions and monuments. Currently *A Study of Perspective* is owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and was first displayed as a typical photographic series on the wall at the Museum of Modern Art. He essentially gives us, the viewer, a dissensual tour of the world’s most popular monuments, from Tiananmen Square to the White House. Ai is changing the common views and
pictorial representations of these monuments. The viewer’s perspective is altered to focus on the middle finger rather than the monumental building which can be said to represent an entire political and cultural system. Although this can be considered a study of perspective on foreground and background, it was more so a study of perspective on the political implications of each image, and what implications may result once they were seen.\textsuperscript{11} The attempt to create an idea of dissensus and ambivalence towards a traditional manner of perceiving monuments is prevalent in this series. \textit{A Study of Perspective} and \textit{Dropping the Urn} are also the first works that Ai created with implicit anti-government notions behind them.

Ai Weiwei’s series, \textit{Dropping the Urn}, also takes an anti-government stance directed at the Chinese authorities. In this series, Ai drops and demolishes ancient Chinese ceramics or artifacts. In \textit{Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn}, Gregg Moore writes in the introduction that: “within Ai Weiwei’s oeuvre, which is characterized by an impressive span of mediums and processes, ceramics is the only target of such disdain.”\textsuperscript{12}

I believe that Moore was incorrect in his assumption that ceramics are the only target of his disdain. If you simply look at \textit{A Study of Perspective}, which was created prior to \textit{Dropping the Urn}, one can see that political and cultural monuments were also a target of Ai’s disdain. Although he cannot physically destroy these monuments as he does ceramics, the photographs conceptually destroy the ideas behind certain government practices.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, xix.
\textsuperscript{12} Joseph N. Newland, eds., \textit{Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn: Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE – 2010 CE} (Glenside, Pennsylvania: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010), 12.
Dropping the Urn is a series, consisting of twenty-four different photographs, objects and compilations of objects, made from 1995-2010. They were first displayed at the University of Arcadia’s Art Gallery in 2010, and follow a chronological progression of time through Chinese dynasties and the ceramics produced during those dynasties. Ai utilizes Neolithic (5000-3000 BCE), Qing Dynasty (1661-1722), Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), and Song Dynasty (960-1279) ancient Chinese ceramic vessels to create this body of work. The vessels are real, expensive, and perhaps even museum quality vessels, obtained by purchase. The archetypal image in this series in that which lies on the cover of the book for the exhibition, and is a photographic triptych of Ai dropping a Han Dynasty vase from his head to the ground (Fig. 1). While this is Ai’s first foray into the world of ceramics, the photographs themselves exist as artworks and will be the main focus of this study.

Other vessels in the series are defaced by Ai in different manners. For example, he took several vases and dipped them in bright colors such as pinks, whites, yellows, light blues, greens and reds (Figs. 2,3,4,5). On a number of these vessels he leaves a small portion of the original underlying paint that was done thousands of years ago (Fig. 6). Another ceramic that is a part of this series is Ai’s Coca-Cola Vase (Fig. 7). These photographs demonstrate critical art, or artworks that seek to provide the viewer with a change in their underlying thought processes of what these objects originally represented to what they represent destroyed. They show a silent, dissensual view of the importance of freedom of speech, and the value of expressing one’s opinions in a society where many people are afraid to do so. The
*Coca-Cola* vase is probably amongst one of his better-known ceramic works in this particular body of work. This photograph consists of a large Neolithic pot that rests on a table. Ai has comically painted the *Coca-Cola* emblem as it looks on television on the façade of this particular vase. Other important photographs in the exhibition consist of a clay sculpture placed inside of a Johnnie Walker bottle, a Neolithic pot is ground up and placed inside of a contemporary glass jar almost as if they are someone's ashes, and thousands of hand-painted ceramic sunflower seeds are piled up in the middle ground of a photograph in a barren room. *Dropping the Urn* is not the only work by Ai Weiwei which uses ancient vessels, another series, titled *Whitewash* (2009), takes one hundred and thirty two Neolithic pieces and completely covers or destroys them with white industrial paint. In subsequent chapter’s, I will go more in depth with Ai's *Dropping the Urn* to demonstrate its importance in his oeuvre and in his political art.

These two works lie within Ai’s oeuvre at the forefront and beginning of his political anti-government art making. This is important to note because this is the beginning of a long journey that Ai Weiwei has taken on stances towards the Chinese government that eventually lead to his arrest and detainment. These two particular series showcase the artist’s ideas of dissensus towards cherishing and respecting monuments and artifacts of culture and politics. They also express the value that he places on the idea of freedom of speech, and how important freedom of speech is within a culture. Although these works play a more important role within the context of Chinese society, these ideas are still important to remember whenever corrupt government arises.
These series were seminal in laying the groundwork for Ai’s political art and activism. With these two series of photographs, Ai Weiwei gives the Chinese government and other traditional notions of memorializing monuments a virtual, yet silent “slap in the face.”

In the following chapters I will look at both *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* as the precursors for Ai Weiwei’s culture and political art making. I will show how these photographic series place an emphasis on Rancière’s notion of dissensus with the destruction of monuments and artifacts to cause an upheaval in traditional thought and how they plead for the common man in China, and the rest of the world, to express their freedom of speech and take action against these corrupt governments.

In a society as controlled as the Chinese society, where intellectuals and artists are consistently being persecuted for speaking out against the government, Ai is a voice for the common citizen. Although he is one of China’s major dissidents, Ai has not yet been thrown in prison, and this may be because he has so much international support. He is not only creating art that contains politically important ideas, but they also weave a story, one of hope for all of those people whom are oppressed. These two series lie at the beginning of this story. Uli Sigg writes in *Ai Weiwei: Ways Beyond Art* that,

Many Chinese have been imprisoned for less. And, when reminded of where the Chinese watchdogs draw the line of what they call human rights activism – this audacious man will graciously thank you for telling him. But it will not affect him or his endeavors to help build the new Chinese society. Most Chinese people will feel
exactly the same, but so few of them dare to raise their voices in this way. He writes for them. They will owe him.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{A Study of Perspective} and \textit{Dropping the Urn} are pivotal because they are extremely relevant with what is going on with Ai Weiwei and China today. They launched his anti-government art-making career, and express the ideas that as Uli Sigg noted, many people in China refuse to say because of fear. Ai is able to express these ideas through the creation of artistic works, which speak for themselves.

CHAPTER 2

A Study of Perspective

With critical artwork that analyzes the workings of cultural and political institutions, the roles of dissensus and resistance come into play. These concepts come to the forefront when the work of art openly addresses itself to a specific institution. Ai Weiwei does not seek to begin a complete revolution with A Study of Perspective, but instead offers us a democratic appeal through the simple use of a colloquial gesture, and proffers a subtle non-verbal disagreement with Chinese political and governmental practices. A series, such as A Study of Perspective that offers such resistance, is strengthened by the construction of social formations in culture and the politics of the state, not as a total and complete system, but as a conjunction of parts, which include history and tradition. With this series, Ai produces a not so subtle criticism of government and the overarching power a single government can have on its people. The photographs and the gestures within them essentially speak for themselves. In a review of Murray Edelman’s book, From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions, Timothy Lukes notes that,

Art sets the agenda for politics. While political language is process-oriented and unequipped to consider ‘outcomes,’ the language of art punctures political hype and parochialism to focus on destinations, rather than means of transportation. Art embraces complexity and ambiguity, conditioning minds for tolerance and experimentation and offering a haven from deadly routine.¹⁴

Ai focuses on the possible future destination of democracy in China with *A Study of Perspective*. Ai’s use of performance gesture is important, because gestures are a historically non-verbal method of communicating something meaningful. With a simple gesture of the middle finger towards these political institutions, Ai’s non-verbal language dictates how he feels about government corruption, and the Chinese institution of government in particular. Ai’s political art is effective in that it is politically inspirational, it is directed towards the people more so than the institution, and encourages them to stand up for what they believe in.

To explain the importance and significance of this work, I will begin with a discussion on the iconicity of monuments and artifacts, whether they are buildings, public squares, museum pieces, etc. Monuments are built and commissioned for specific reasons, and many times they are erected to represent a culture or a political entity. What must establish first and foremost is that monuments can be icons in order to prove the importance and effectiveness of Ai’s work in destroying them. In *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, monuments are labeled as

> Built icons of identity usually in the form of public statues or symbolic buildings that are designed and executed to evoke a sense of national and regional identity and to induce in the collective imagination remembrance of specific events or people.15

Monuments can come in the form of public squares, buildings, artworks, towers, and other structures. Ai utilizes the symbolic destruction of different forms of monuments in *A Study of Perspective*. Monuments and artifacts can be used to

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inspire faith or belief, whether it is in the government, the religion, or in the common folk. From the Great Pyramids built by the Egyptians to the enormous, vast temples of the Greeks and Romans, to the public squares of Renaissance Europe and the smaller scale buildings such as The White House in the present day United States, they are used to demonstrate and show off the political power of the culture in question.

Monuments are seen as iconic. In fact, monuments can be seen as iconic images that have the ability to reproduce the ideas of collective memory, ideologies, and models of citizenship and belonging. They attempt to represent the fluidity and continuity of a culture as a whole. Monuments, such as Tiananmen Square, invoke a sense of belief and traditional values. They are very powerful. When one sees an image of the Statue of Liberty, it may immediately evoke a strong, visceral, emotional response. When Ai Weiwei undermines these monuments, he’s undermining these ideas of a collective memory and conscience, of political and cultural ideologies, and he does so because he seeks to throw into question institutions that the common people seem to follow for reasons unbeknownst to even themselves. He offers a dissensual view to those people who may not have thought about why they follow specific institutions and political systems before.

The most telling and relevant image to this study in this series in his photograph of Tiananmen Square because it is a statement aimed directly at the Chinese government, and as a result of this image in particular, the government began to watch Ai much more closely after he produced this image (Fig. 8). Tiananmen Square is a large public square located directly in the center of Beijing,
China. This public square plays an important role in the history of China and in recent Chinese history, due to what is coined The Tiananmen Square Massacre, which took place on June 4, 1989. Civilians and students pleading for democracy held protests in Tiananmen Square, and the Chinese National Army massacred many of these innocent people. Some of the estimates note that up to 7,000 innocent civilians were killed. Just six years later, and while this event was still fresh in the minds of the world, Ai took his photograph of Tiananmen Square. In all of these photographs, Ai’s middle finger attracts the viewer’s eye more so than the monument it is directed at. The photograph at Tiananmen Square has a somewhat hazy background, with a number of pedestrians milling about on the street. The viewer’s gaze is directed down the artist’s arm, which protrudes from the bottom of the photograph outward and completely envelops the foreground. The middle finger itself takes up the entire middle ground with prominence, and the background almost becomes phased out. The background contains an ethereal view of Tiananmen Square and it gives us a seemingly unimportant impression.

In Ai’s image of Tiananmen Square, he undermines an iconic monument with the use of an internationally recognized iconic gesture. He throws into question our beliefs in monuments and what they represent. While this popular and infamous square in Beijing speaks to the cultural and political history of China, Ai’s gesture signifies and speaks about potential. The direction of the finger conveys the meaning of the situation. It produces a shock effect, and in turn it has the ability to question and destroy a unilateral reading of institutions and monuments in those ways that have been previously established. The performative action of this gesture is an act
that speaks to the notions of freedom of speech vs. the absence of it. According to sociologist Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), gestures can reveal a certain sense of awakening. They reveal an awakening of the possibility of a different experience or way of relating to something that is alien to the sovereign subject. The interesting thing about this image is that Ai directs his criticism towards Tiananmen Square, which is traditionally a huge symbol in leftist history; however, he is using his performance photography and directing it towards the current political situation. Yet again, Ai plays with the ideas of destruction vs. creation in this series. In an interview with Mathieu Wellner in the book Ai Weiwei by Mark Siemons, Ai mentions that

You know, when we were growing up, General Mao (1893-1976) used to tell us that we can only build a new world if we destroy the old one. That’s the basic concept: destroying the old to contribute to the new. We were well-schooled in that.18

In an ironic twist of fate, Ai takes the original ideas from Mao Zedong and directs them towards the Chinese government that arose from the period after Zedong. It is essentially a backlash and an exclamation of what the government has become, by using a method that the Chinese people were taught by the government itself when they were younger.

The iconic quality of monuments also raises questions around what monuments and artifacts symbolize. They extend beyond mere physical presence. Many of them symbolize loyalty and membership in a culture, a sense of belonging.

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17 Ibid, 305.
and a sense of respect for a common set of values. However, even if the culture is oppressive and destructive, the monument still demonstrates that you belong to it, are a part of something, and have an attachment to its history and its past. In the specific example of China, the monument of Tiananmen Square symbolizes Chinese political history and the institution of communism. Although the Chinese government is corrupt and it is difficult for the Chinese people to exercise their freedom of speech against the government because of fear of repression, Ai executes his statements of freedom through the use of the dissensual middle finger gesture. Tiananmen Square is a very important aspect of Chinese culture. If the monuments and artifacts he defaces have no iconic presence or power over us, then Ai Weiwei’s art would have no meaning. His art has power because these monuments have a great importance among the masses when it comes to cultural and political institutions and historical perspectives on these ideas. *A Study of Perspective* offers an idea of resistance, which is vital and important because one must call into question the ruling powers and ideas in order to change or better the current political situation. Jacques Ranciere notes in his book *Dissensus* that

The theme of the ‘resistance’ of art is therefore anything but an ambiguity of language from which one could free oneself by relegating art’s consistency and political protest each to their own side. It actually designates the intimate and paradoxical link between an idea of art and an idea of politics. Art has lived for two centuries from the very tension by which it is as once itself and beyond itself, and by which it promises a future destined to remain unaccomplished. The problem is therefore not to set each back in its own place, but to maintain the very tension by which a politics of art and a poetics of politics tend towards each other, but cannot meet up without suppressing themselves. To maintain this tension, today, means opposing the ethical confusion that tends to be imposed in the name of resistance, under the name of resistance. The movement from the monument to the embrace to the monument can only ever be accomplished at the price of cancelling out this
tension. To prevent the resistance of art from fading into its contrary, it must be upheld as the unresolved tension between two resistances. 19

In this passage, Rancière discusses how the making of art can cause tension with regards to a current political situation. He says that art has lived for hundreds of years acting as a form of anti-governmental protest, and art will continue to do so in the future.

Ai Weiwei’s A Study of Perspective accomplishes three different things. First, it attempts to destroy our common notions of monuments as traditional icons, and utilizes contemporary art and photography as a vehicle to express social criticism. Second, gesture is used as another vehicle to express political discontent towards these monuments. Finally, Ai’s work actually derives its meaning and power not from the gesture, but from the cultural power of the monuments and artifacts he defaces or destroys. As mentioned before, if these institutions did not represent anything, then his work would have no meaning. Through a close analysis of some of the photographs within Ai’s A Study of Perspective, I will demonstrate how this work accomplishes these three facets of my argument.

While social commentary and criticism of the government is accepted, and almost expected in other countries like the United States, the Chinese government may consider these photographs by Ai to be anarchist, when, in fact, he is simply making a statement towards what he thinks is an unjust society. Ai Weiwei is one man among very few who is truly a voice of the people, and he has brought China under the world’s magnifying glass through his work. A Study of Perspective was

one of the launching pads for this scrutiny, and one of the foundations of Ai’s political art. Ai exercises his freedom of speech, something that should be at the basic foundation of any meaningful and authentic artistic practice. He struggles to bring that basic right to a great population of people who are not as fearless as he.20 His photographs in this series serve as a vehicle for social criticism because he non-verbally offers a rejection of all traditional authority, he de-radicalizes the idea of changing the current society in China, and he acts as an example to other artists or the greater populace to follow in his stead.

Ai’s work offers the idea and notion of change, and puts it in perspective. To change a historical idea, in this case, one of reverence for monuments and the current political entity, one must disagree with it, and ask the question – why? Why have we been subjected to a society in which the people’s voice holds no power? Ai, with a singular voice, creates a new form of discourse through photography. In Ai’s blog, before it was shut down in 2009, he mentioned that photography has become a reality itself, and acts as a mechanism for discussing all potential realities.21 Ai’s discourse on social criticism and change through photography gives us a new potential reality and way of thinking about historical values.

* A Study of Perspective * proposes an idea of dissensus with regard to a number value-laden precincts, namely within the realms of religion, government, culture and fine art. These various areas all play an important part in many people’s lives, and the questioning of religion and government has been a vital aspect of society and

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21 Ibid, 9.
how to change society for the better. Many of these monuments represent the religious and political ideals within a culture. French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), originally expressed the difference between the sacred and profane to be the leading factor in religion. The concept of the sacred vs. profane is also relevant with regards to monuments (what is an icon and what is simply a building) and fine art (what is considered “good art” and what is considered “bad art”). Ai successfully turns the tables, and is able to take what is considered “sacred” and turn it into something that is profane. As demonstrated in Ai Weiwei’s photography, I will explain how he embraces the radical, beginning with the realm of fine art and one of the most important paintings in history, *The Mona Lisa*.

One of the images from *A Study of Perspective* is a photograph where Ai positions his middle finger towards *The Mona Lisa* (Fig. 9). The image is fairly blurry, but a number of spectators are noticeable in the background staring at the painting. Like the other images in *A Study of Perspective*, Ai’s arm and hand take over the viewer’s perspective and rest themselves directly in the center of the photograph. In the world of fine art, *The Mona Lisa* is considered to be one of, if not the most famous painting of all time. It has become revered. While this painting has crossed over the art boundary and has become an inherent part of mainstream culture, the important idea behind *The Mona Lisa* is its representation of greatness, perfection, and sacredness. Ai Weiwei’s image acknowledges the painting, and creates a discourse that causes the spectator to question its iconicity and sacredness. His performativity poses the question as to how and why *The Mona Lisa* is considered such a wonderful painting. We accept this fact, much as we are forced
to accept cultural and societal situations that we are thrust into as human beings. Rather than accept these conditions, Ai questions them, and gestures, “Fuck you.”

Ai offends iconic religious monuments in the same manner. In an image against established religion, he directs his middle finger towards the basilica in the Piazza San Marco in Venice Italy (Fig. 10). Iain Fenlon notes in his book, *Piazza San Marco*, that “The Piazza San Marco, one of the most famous and instantly recognizable townscape in the West, if not the world, has been described as a stage set, as Europe’s drawing room, as a painter’s canvas.” Spiro Kostof describes the Piazza in his book, *A History of Architecture*, as “the showcase of the republic.” The image is rendered in black and white, and Ai’s finger is situated towards the basilica in San Marco with a view of the piazza. His hand and finger are blurry, but you can still visibly see the gesture he is making. There are hundreds of pigeons and people gathered on the threshold of the ancient building, as Ai “gives the bird” to one of Italy’s great religious and political epicenters.

Another telling image in this series is Ai Weiwei’s photograph of The Eiffel Tower, both a global icon and a cultural icon of France (Fig. 11). The Eiffel Tower, like The Statue of Liberty, is among the world’s most recognizable monuments, and was the topic of debate when it was first erected. With this image, Ai’s harkens back to the original critics of The Eiffel Tower, who claimed that it was a completely ridiculous and utterly useless monument. Although The Eiffel Tower is considered

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a man-made wonder and a spectacular piece of architecture, the tower was not originally constructed to represent anything in particular. Its critics at the same time would say that the construction of the tower and its meaning were pointless. He plays with the ideas of dissensus in this photograph by agreeing with these critics in the notion that the tower's construction was over the top. Through his performance photography, he disagrees with the concept that a tower or monument can represent an entire culture of people, and these monuments all become the target of his single finger. Ai’s image in *A Study of Perspective* of The Eiffel Tower is a satirical response towards capitalism and the notions of imbibing power by building large-scale architectural monuments. At the time The Eiffel Tower was erected, it was the largest building in the world. Ai takes this cultural icon and debases it by overturning our notions of the tower itself. We as a people revere and pay tribute to the tower as a great obelisk or monument, but we really do not know why. If we take a Marxist approach, The Eiffel Tower is essentially a waste of capital and money, and essentially serves no purpose but to just sit there.

Finally, Ai Weiwei bashes the Chinese government and government power in general with three of his anti-political, anarchist-like photographs from *A Study of Perspective*.

A government whose defining characteristics are the destruction of personal freedom and rights is repulsive, for these are the true reasons for limits on both news media and freedom of speech. As we all know: if there were freedom of press and freedom of speech, it would be difficult to preserve fatuous monarchical motivations and to safeguard institutions that promote illicit gains, treasonous swindling, and a hopelessly devastating bullying culture. One inevitable psychological characteristic of authoritarian power is weakness. Because they are weak, authoritarian governments shun the public, forgo transparency, and evade clear explanations; because they are
fragile, they discriminate against dissension and cultivate lackeys in order to protect a false image of peace and prosperity.\textsuperscript{25}

Two of these photographs are directed towards Chinese and Russian cultural and political monuments, Tiananmen Square (Fig. 12) and Russia’s Red Square (Fig. 13), both of which were cultural and political epicenters for communistic thought in the past. The third is directed at the United States White House (Fig. 14), the beacon of democracy in the Western world. Both Tiananmen Square and the Red Square have been symbols of leftist and communist thought in recent years, and the former still is today. In the twentieth century, both communism and fascism used art in the form of propaganda to destroy art and their artistic champions.\textsuperscript{26} Ai Weiwei is searching for democracy in China, and these images are crucial when it comes to how he feels about the communist society in which he lives. These ideas are related to individual responsibility and censorship.\textsuperscript{27} The government should be taking responsibility for the problems in China. The people should elect the government, but the people have not elected the government, therefore, it does not act in the best interests of the people.\textsuperscript{28} These images in \textit{A Study of Perspective} pinpoint the epicenters of communism in Russia (which ended in 1991) and China, which happen to be iconic monuments. He stands against them as one man, with one photograph and one gesture, which subtly tells his people to not be afraid of disagreeing with the government.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 44.
Ai has said in many interviews and in a new documentary film released in 2012, titled Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry, that he is hoping for democracy in China, and his image of Tiananmen Square came in response to the pro-democratic Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, where a number of protesters and students were shot and killed while marching for what they believe in. There are a few other preeminent dissidents in China who, like Ai Weiwei, are not afraid to express their pro-democratic opinions, and one of them is Liu Xiaobo. Currently serving a 12-year prison sentence in China, Xiaobo stands together with Ai on his opinions for human rights in China, although he does so as a poet and writer.29 Xiaobo was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his advocacy for democracy and that China’s intolerance of human rights and liberties cannot go unrecognized30

One might be curious as to why Ai chooses to offend the White House and the ideas of democracy, the very thing that he is attempting to promote in his homeland. I argue Ai chose to “give the bird” to the White House and monuments other than Tiananmen Square to show the lack of reaction that his photographs would cause in a different, perhaps more democratically leaning society. While his photograph of Tiananmen Square caused the Chinese authorities to watch him much more closely, something like this goes virtually unnoticed in the United States. By comparing these two photographs, Kirby Simon in an essay titled “Truth, No Matter the Power,” in Utne, strikes a chord of truth when he says,

The basic value of contemporary thought has to be established in China. We need to create a sense of right and wrong; to learn to face our history and ourselves; to discuss what kind of nation and what kind of government we

should create. These are essential questions and they need to be addressed. Without this, no solution can ever really reach the real root of the problem.\textsuperscript{31}

It is important to show the almost comical image of Ai flicking off the White House in this series, because it demonstrates the oppressiveness of the society in which he lives. Dissensual thought and dissidence is something that only freedom of speech can assure. It is important to allow citizens to express their dissidence and disagreement with the government in order to change it for the better. Ai undermines various monuments in democratic societies in \textit{A Study of Perspective} to show that it is possible to do this in other countries without the government getting on your back. \textit{A Study of Perspective} exemplifies the ideas of freedom or speech and the use of dissensual thought to express that idea. By reproducing historical notions of memorializing cultural and political monuments as profane and non-sacred, he executes a subtle claim toward an individuals right to the freedom of speech. In the following chapter, Ai Weiwei utilizes artifacts in his series \textit{Dropping the Urn} in much the same manner as he does monuments. \textit{Dropping the Urn}, like \textit{A Study of Perspective}, is an essential and fundamental aspect representing the beginning of Ai’s political, anti-government, and activist artist career.

\textsuperscript{31} Kirby, “Truth, No Matter The Power,” 47.
Chapter 3

Dropping the Urn

Ai Weiwei hates ceramics. However, he believes that as an artist you must work with the objects that you hate.\(^{32}\)

It is not difficult to reconcile such remarks with the image of the artist dropping a Han-dynasty urn, the work from which this exhibition takes its name. The vessel sacrificed for this 1995 performance for the camera was a 2,000 year-old example of glazed stoneware, a singular specimen of the likes of which do not appear anywhere else in a practice that includes scores of earthenware vessels from the Neolithic period and hundreds of replicas from the Qing-dynasty porcelains.\(^{33}\)

Ai treats various artifacts and vessels in his series *Dropping the Urn* much as he does the monuments and buildings in *A Study of Perspective*. He utilizes the ideas of creation vs. destruction that have been an inherent part of his life as an artist to create a performance based photographic series which expresses discontent towards the ideas of capitalism, the mass production of goods, and also offers us a similar ironic argument as *A Study of Perspective* towards the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Chinese government’s previous practices of destroying important cultural artifacts. By utilizing the destruction of ceramics in this series, Ai truly launched himself into the international political art scene. *Dropping the Urn*, along with *A Study of Perspective*, were the two series at the beginning of Ai’s anti-political works.

\(^{32}\) Newland, *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn*, 11.
\(^{33}\) Ibid, 11
The images in *Dropping the Urn*, while targeting similar ideas and concepts as the images in *A Study of Perspective*, are vastly different in one primary way. Ai actually destroys the cultural artifacts that appear in this series, while he metaphorically destroys the monuments and political institutions in *A Study of Perspective*. In *Dropping the Urn*, he smashes Chinese ceramics to pieces and defaces them in other ways. As noted in the introduction to this study, many of these vessels are authentic from the period, and such artifacts are an important part of Chinese cultural history and Chinese ceramic production.

For this reason, Ai’s use of ceramics in this series is significant. Ai had previously never worked with ceramics before, but ceramic work and vessels have been an important and inherent part of Chinese culture and the Chinese economy for thousands of years. Both photographic series are about perception and perspective.


> While it may be a very casual or planned operation or, even a gesture that itself may be light or sincere, once it’s made into a photographic document, it becomes a fact and symbolic of evidence of different qualities of points of view. During this period of time I did some works that reflect a personal attitude which I call ‘perspective’ or a personal measurement that may be political or not so political.\(^{34}\)

Ai also makes the point that by changing the usage and meaning of objects, one can change their own personal foundation and can question who and what she/he is.\(^{35}\)

When Ai smashes and defaces these ancient cultural artifacts, he directs criticism at

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\(^{35}\) Ibid, 30
the communist Chinese government, its position in the world economy, and its
tradition of destroying its own culture. Ai yet again overturns the historical notion
of respect and reverence for cultural artifacts, as he demolishes them in order to
make performative statements.

In order to understand Ai’s series *Dropping the Urn* in relation to *A Study of
Perspective* and the world of political activism and art, we must first understand the
importance of ceramics and porcelain in Chinese history. Although the market for
Chinese pottery and ceramics has virtually exploded in the last three years, with
auction houses like Sotheby’s and Christie’s selling Chinese pottery for tens of
millions of dollars, it is important to remember that these pieces have more cultural
value than anything. Chinese ceramics manufacturing has been common in every
period of Chinese history.36 Chinese ceramics have also had a widespread
international distribution for thousands of years.37 Today in modern China, you can
find contemporary craftsmen and ceramics makers in every village of every
province selling their wares on the street and producing works to be shipped
internationally. One image in Ai’s *Dropping the Urn*, and later a ceramic installation
all on its own at the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern in London in 2010, is called
*Sunflower Seeds* (Fig. 15). For this work, Ai enlisted over one thousand artisans from
the small town of Jingdezhen, China to create thousands of hand painted ceramic
sunflower seeds. This town, like many other in China, has been a ceramics

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36 James Marshall Plummer, *Chinese Pottery: A Short Historical Survey* (Kessinger
Publishing 2007), 5.
37 Ibid, 5.
producing town for hundreds of years, it is ingrained in their culture, their way of life, and is a large portion of their means of subsistence.

_Dropping the Urn_ is traced as a photographic series chronologically through time as a progression of Chinese history and Chinese ceramics making.\(^{38}\) Ai utilizes the concepts of doing vs. undoing more than anything in this particular series. Richard Torchia notes in the introduction to the book, _Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn_, that “Doing ceramics for Ai Weiwei results in an undoing of assumptions about a medium that is often defined by apprehensions generated by the burden of the ceramics tradition itself.”\(^{39}\) He purchases and creates ceramic replicas just so he can destroy them to make various political and cultural statements which will be discussed once we take a look at the specific objects within this series of performance photographs. By using ceramics as an avenue for destruction, Ai creates a discourse of dissensus around freedom of speech that no other contemporary Chinese artist had done before, and he uses important cultural artifacts while creating this discourse about contemporary Chinese society.

In addition to being a photographic series, _Dropping the Urn_ was Ai’s first solo exhibition outside of New York City. The most important photograph in this series, and the image for which his _Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn_ exhibition, first shown at the Arcadia University Art Gallery in 2010 is named, is a photographic triptych (fig. 16) of Ai dropping a Neolithic vase from his head to the ground. This image consists of three parts. First, Ai is holding the urn in his hand. Second, we witness the urn suspended in the air, seemingly floating, as Ai has released it from

\(^{38}\) Newland, _Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn_, 14.

\(^{39}\) Ibid, 13.
his grasp. Finally, we see the urn smashing to pieces on the ground without a thought or a look of concern on the artist's face. In essence, he is destroying the old vase in order to create a new work of performance based photographic art. In the destruction of this piece of pottery, Ai creates a new work, a photographic non-verbal dialogue that renounces and mocks Mao Zedong's idea of no creation without destruction. In a sense, this particular photograph manages to become a satire of contemporary China's relation to its past, where destruction of artifacts was a common fact of life. It is interesting to compare this photographic triptych to that of the image of Tiananmen Square in *A Study of Perspective*. Ai accomplishes his denouncement of monuments and artifacts within these two pictures. He also creates a satirical framework for other contemporaries and individuals in China to think about their past in another light. This other light could be called one of questioning. These photographs enable viewers to think, analyze, and question their current social and political situation, and also their cultural and historical past. He destroys these icons as a statement against power and authority.

Other images of vessels in this series are treated in a different manner. Instead of being smashed or destroyed, they are painted and defaced. One of the images is that of Ai's *Coca-Cola* vase (fig. 17). He began creating these vases in 1994 and continues to do so until the present day. The *Coca-Cola* Vase in this series dates to 1997 and is from the Neolithic age. Ai takes old and valuable vessel forms from different dynasties, and paints the well-known *Coca-Cola* logo on them, indicative of one of the world's monumental capitalistic enterprises. Here again Ai undermines

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40 Ibid, 33.
41 Ibid, 33.
our historical theories on the iconicity and value of ancient artifacts. He destroys the notion of respect for these vessels by turning them back into what it they were originally used for, a carrier for liquids, as the Coca-Cola bottle is a carrier for a common day to day soft drink beverage that can be bought in any local market in most places around the world.

This photograph is important and relevant to Chinese history, and speaks towards Ai’s disgust for the commodity, and China being subject to the United States commodities market. Coca-Cola has had a long history in China. Coca-Cola was the first United States Company to offer and distribute its products in China after the country was opened up to foreign investors in 1979. Currently Coca-Cola makes up for 35 percent of China’s carbonated beverage market. Ai’s Coca-Cola vase directly attacks the economic value and history of commodities and artifacts. Glenn Adamson writes in Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn, that...

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.

Ai is creating a whole new system of value with the defacement of these vessels. Although the vessels themselves were worth a decent amount of money in

43 Ibid, 52.
44 Newland, Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn, 53.
today’s current antiquities market, Ai Weiwei’s works are fiercely sought after in the contemporary art market. Because of this reason, Ai is actually adding value to the objects by defacing them. In an ironic photographic statement on commodities, Ai’s Coca-Cola vessel becomes a valuable commodity itself, much like the Warhol paintings of Coca-Cola bottles and Campbell’s soup cans, and Duchamp’s idea of the “ready-made,” which caused uproar in the art world in the early 20th century when Duchamp referred to a simple toilet urinal as a fountain.

Another telling photograph in this series is titled *Untitled* (fig. 18). This image consists of a Song Dynasty Chinese clay sculpture inside of a Johnnie Walker bottle of scotch whiskey. In much the same way as Ai’s Coca-Cola vase, this work revolves around the concept of being subject to the world’s commodity market. Richard Torchia writes in an essay titled “Doing Ceramics” in the exhibition book *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn*, that, “This suggests the capture of Chinese culture within the confines of a US. Led commodity economy.”45 Although Ai does not destroy or deface anything in this image, it is interesting to look at along with the Coca-Cola vase. The bottled sculpture toys around with the ideas of modernity vs. antiquity, unique artifact vs. modern day commodity, and craftwork vs. mass production. Both of these photographs offer the audience Ai’s views on the importance of the freedom of speech and the ability to express dissensus with your country’s government.

The next photograph in the series that I will look at is *Kui Hua Zi*, (Fig. 19) or more commonly known as *Sunflower Seeds*. As mentioned before, Ai utilized a community of artisans in the town of Jingdezhen in China to assist him in the making

of thousands of handcrafted porcelain sunflower seeds. This is an important image in the series.

*Sunflower Seeds* harkens back to the importance of ceramics and ceramic making in China. While employing hundreds of poor Chinese in the undergoing of this project, Ai is also utilizing the sunflower seed itself as a symbol. Sunflower seeds are a very common street snack in China, and Mao Zedong used to refer to the Chinese people as his “sunflowers.” This particular photograph of thousands of sunflower seeds portrays Ai’s disapproval with the Chinese governments use of propaganda and the command and authority that they exercise over the media. The seeds symbolize the loss of Chinese identity into one larger, homogenous mass of people, who are subject to the rules and regulations of the society that they live in.

Although much of Ai’s writings and works have relevance today, *Sunflower Seeds* refers back to the wrongdoings of the Cultural Revolution more than anything. While is it still important to recognize that Ai supported the subsistence for an entire village of Chinese people during the production of these porcelain seeds, the larger statement was made when the project was finished, photographed, and eventually installed at Tate Modern in the Turbine Hall in 2010. China’s history, and most importantly, the Cultural Revolution, drastically affected contemporary Chinese politics and notions of communism. When Mao Zedong called for competing political philosophies to posit their opinions towards the government during his reign, he believed socialism would win out, bringing the country closer to communism.46 However, once he received criticism, he called for over half a million

Chinese intellectuals and critics to be outcast and sent to various labor camps around the country, Ai’s father, Ai Qing was included in this group.\textsuperscript{47} During this infamous period, poverty swept throughout China, and sunflower seeds became a symbol of comfort and a typical food of the commoners. They could be obtained easily and were inexpensive. Ai chose sunflower seeds because of this reason.\textsuperscript{48}

\textit{Sunflower Seeds} is a statement towards mass production and craftsmanship, and individuality vs. mass uniformity. It is a statement against communism and the concepts of mass uniformity to express each seed’s individuality amongst the millions of others. You can think of the each individual seed as one human being, fluctuating and being tossed about in the sea of human life. Ai may be saying that the Chinese government has no care for individuals in China, and that expressiveness, creativity, and individuality is repressed unlike in other societies. Individuals have been stripped of personal freedoms, even the freedom of having more than one child. Juliet Bingham, Curator of the Tate Modern, reflects on Ai’s 2010 installation of \textit{Sunflower Seeds},

\begin{quote}
The precious nature of the material, the effort of production and the narrative and personal content create a powerful commentary on the human condition. Each piece is a part of the whole, a commentary on the relationship between the individual and the masses. The work continues to pose challenging questions. What does it mean to be an individual in today’s society? Are we insignificant or powerless unless we act together? What do our increasing desires, materialism and number mean for society, the environment and the future?\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 24
\textsuperscript{49} Juliet Bingham, Curator, Tate Modern on http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds
The entire series is a fascinating undertaking, because whilst attacking Mao Zedong’s push towards communism and the loss of individuality, Ai creates a completely uniform photographic series of millions of seeds that look exactly like one another. All the while, each individual who assisted in the creation of this work had virtually similar tasks of creation. These creators are extremely important to the entire process, because while we may not know them by name, *Sunflower Seeds* has made a great impression in the international art scene from China to London to New York. Credit should be given not only to Ai for the conceptual thought, but to all of the individuals who undertook the project in their own individual way. One ton of Ai Weiwei’s *Sunflower Seeds* recently sold at auction at Sotheby’s for just under $600,000.

Another image in this series is that of Ai’s *Colored Vases* (Fig. 20) in which he utilizes different colors of industrial paint not to destroy, but to transform these vessels. Ai created a video of the process of his making of *Colored Vases*, and he systematically dips Neolithic Dynasty urns into different colors of industrial paint, allowing the paint to slide down the sides and eventually covering most of the vessels, with little remaining of the original artifact. Iconoclasm, or the deliberate destruction of a culture’s icons, artifacts or monuments, is an important concept for Ai in this work and in *Dropping the Urn* altogether. With *Colored Vases*, Ai yet again demonstrates China’s practice and historical vandalism of their cultural icons and artifacts. In an essay titled “Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast” in the book *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn*, Dario Gambini says that,

As for his (referring to Ai Weiwei) definition of the overpainting as an act of changing the understanding and perspective of an object, it is in line with
Duchamp’s definition of the readymade, while adding a palimpsestic relationship between the manifest and the latent that is evocative of the historical layers associated with the clay and the synthetic paint: you cover something so that it is no longer visible but is still there underneath, and what appears on the surface is not supposed to be there but is there.\footnote{Newland, \textit{Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn}, 88-89.}

Ai creates something new out of the transformation. The vessel is still a Neolithic Dynasty vessel, but now it is simply a different color. The ideas behind \textit{Colored Vases} and \textit{Dropping the Urn} can be compared to the backlash that Russian socialist realist artists Komar and Melamid expressed against their society’s reverence and worship of icons and monumental political figures like Stalin and Lenin. In one incidence, they suspended a statue of Lenin in the air with a crane and left it permanently suspended. It was as if they meant to take it away, however, it was still there, looming over the common people.\footnote{Ibid, 92.} In much the same way, Ai is taking away the traditional elements of design from the Neolithic vessels, stripping them of their cultural and historical importance, while still allowing the vessels to live and breathe as normal, functional objects.

These photographs from Ai Weiwei’s series \textit{Dropping the Urn} are poignant examples that are representative of Ai’s dissensual view towards China’s political history and the current government. Other images in the series include \textit{Ghost Gu} (two replica vases in the Yuan Dynasty (1279 – 1368) style), \textit{Blue and White Porcelain} (Two replica vases in the Qing Dynasty (1661 – 1722) style), \textit{Blue and White Moonflask} (Two replica vases in the Qianlong era (1736-95) style) \textit{Souvenir from Beijing} (A brick from a dismantled Chinese house inside of a wooden box from a dismantled Qing Dynasty temple), \textit{Dust to Dust} (Ground pottery from the Neolithic
era in a glass jar), and Watermelon (Two porcelain vessels with glaze in the color of a watermelon). Ai is toying with perception, perspective, and color in these other works that I did not highlight earlier in the paper. The replicas are created so masterfully by craftsmen that it would take an expert on Chinese ceramic works to determine their illegitimacy. In an essay in Dropping the Urn by Philip Tinari, titled “Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei,” Tinari writes:

In these pots a series of oppositions – the handmade and the mass-produced, the material and the semiotic, the ancient and contemporary – chase one another around in a historical loop. It is such a temporal movement, the artist seems to suggest, that ideas of relative cultural importance are produced. Faced with these ceramic detournements, we may reflect on Ai Weiwei’s true subject, which is not the value of objects, but rather the value of historical experience, for all its shifting uncertainties, perhaps the realest thing of all.52

Ai’s Dropping the Urn represents a dissensual connection between art and politics. Through the process of defacement and destruction, Ai offers us, as the individuals in different societies, a subtle and non-comformative approach towards exercising freedom of speech and expressing disagreement with our ruling political parties. This work seeps into our subconscious and seeks to reconfigure our predisposed notions towards ancient cultural artifacts as iconic and provides an underlying structural framework for more individuals to act rebelliously towards governments that can be oppressive, especially in the realm of freedom of speech. Ai accomplishes this by creating performance-based works through destruction of actual works. It is truly a wonderful series.

52 Ibid, 55.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these two photographic series by Ai Weiwei help us to gain a seminal understanding of the artist and the type of politically based artwork that he is making today. *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* are vital aspects of Ai Weiwei’s oeuvre because they laid the groundwork for his later career and his international fame and popularity within today’s contemporary art world. Ai’s artistic upbringing, his time in New York City, the society in which he lives and the current political situation in China all lend a hand to the direction of his work.

Since 2011, Ai has been a central figure of scrutiny in China. He was kept under house arrest by the Chinese government for months, and the new studio he was in the process of building in Beijing was destroyed. Ai was eventually let off of house arrest, however, the authorities constantly stand guard by his home, have tapped his telephone wires, and have placed cameras inside of his home and his compound. Whenever the artist chooses to leave, he is obviously followed by police officers, either on foot or in a vehicle. Ai’s passport was taken from him, and he is not allowed to leave the country. His first retrospective was recently held at the Hirschorn Museum in Washington D.C. through late 2012 to February, 2013, however, the artist was unable to attend due to his inability to leave the country. He has been offered numerous teaching positions around the world, and popular international artists such as Anish Kapoor have created videos in protest towards his inability to leave the country.

One of Ai’s main goals and hopes for China’s future, expressed in his many interviews and writings, is that of a democratic government. He is one of the most
important practicing artists today, and that is why it is vital to understand where and how he got started as an artist activist. *A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* are the two series that prompted these initial signs of activism, dissensual thought, and the importance of freedom of speech in Chinese society.

Jacque Rancière’s theories of dissensus are necessary to bring into account when speaking about these two photographic series, because whilst Ai’s artwork may not be able to drastically change or alter the current political situation or political figures, it can allow a reconfiguration in the sensory experiences of the masses and how they portray the current political situation. It can cause others to think differently about oppression and in turn cause them to act out against it. It certainly helps that Ai has so much international support, and this support demonstrates to other citizens that it is possible to express your freedom of speech, to speak your mind and not be thrown in prison unjustly.

*A Study of Perspective* and *Dropping the Urn* constitute the beginning of a valuable set of anti-political and anti-government notions revolving around freedom of expression within the art of Ai Weiwei. This study is the first body of scholarship on the series *A Study of Perspective*, and it is necessary because this series of photographs were the first of his with direct political implications within Ai Weiwei’s oeuvre. Both series’ emphasize the ideas of creation vs. destruction and doing vs. undoing. In these works, Ai sets out to create a new idea, a new vision, through the use of dissensus and destruction, he is able to create a new product, one representative of democracy, freedom of speech and human rights in Chinese society and in the world. One can hope for democracy in their country, but unless they act, then nothing will be accomplished. Ai Weiwei is
unafraid to act, and he is setting the course for other intellectuals and citizens in China to do the same.
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