

Artworks that challenge china's political system



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Compare two artworks that are overtly challenging the political system.

Modern China in recent times has gone through a surplus of political changes, much like the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s through the implementation of Chairman Mao and his leadership. This essay will explore two works that question and challenge the political system in China. Ai Weiwei's "Sunflower Seeds" and Xiao Lu's "Dialogue," both of these pieces have proved to be extremely provoking by opening up a discourse about the problems within China's political framework. Usually on the topic of human rights, and economic issues that the system fails to address.

Xiao Lu is famed for her work, "Dialogue" in 1989 during the opening of the *China avant-garde* show. In this work, also known as the "pistol shot event" Lu shot at her installation for her graduate assignment. She was encouraged by her professors to explore contemporary art tactics in relation to the project. For her final project, Lu had set up an installation including two telephone poles flanking a mirror with a red telephone appearing to be off the hook. Inside the telephone poles one contains an image of a man and one a woman. To further the performance she shot two bullets at the piece, dubbing it the "pistol shot event". When this occurrence took place, there was complications with the arrest of Lu's friend, seeing as the Chinese authorities saw this as a terror attack and not artistic intent. With that said, Xiao Lu returned to China, fifteen years later and re-created her performance piece "Dialogue" with the only different being fifteen gun shots fired instead of two. To represent the number of years she was away.

The project was created on the grounds of her emotions. During her childhood, she was a victim of rape, and through out her childhood, which is the cause of her crippling relationships with men. In an interview with Monica Merlin (2018) Lu states, “ I could not talk to him about anything (her partner at the time). I felt like I could not communicate with men. *Dialogue* was about that.” The lack of communication plays into the reason for the phone being off the hook. Moreover, Lu had gone through most of her life up until 1989 keeping quiet and repressing her true feeling, as no one who understand, or possibly believe her. To which she created and named her piece “ Dialogue” in response to all of her emotions. With that said, when her piece was first made, she had difficulties in explaining what it was all about, she attempted to give it a political and social explanation but she felt that it was not true to the work and what it stood for. For which she explains that this project, has been influenced by psychology, a way to write out or perform emotions which had been silenced for a long duration of time. With that said, the piece to most people has been read as a, “ artistic reflection on modernity’s violent rupture (Borgonjon, 2017)” Which runs parallels with the shots at Tiananmen Square. With that said there has been quite the conflict in the meaning of this work, many deeming it political, whilst she claims it to be not. This creates a context of an artist versus society. On the other hand, this work can be seen as a political piece, only by the means of female and women rights. In all, Xiao Lu has created new dialogue for women in art and in China, by making them seen and heard through her emotions and experiences.

In 2010, one of the most vitally important artists in contemporary Chinese art, who is known for his contentious works, covered the floor in Tate Modern with a thousand square meters in sunflower seeds. These seeds were created by over 1, 600 artisans which resulted in over one hundred million manmade seeds and weighing 150 tonnes . Every seed was individually molded, painted and fired, rendering them nuanced from each other. Moreover they were conceived in the city of Jingdezhen, which is the city famed for its imperial porcelain from centuries past. To resume, the seeds were exhibited on the floor covering it completely, with the ability for the people to walk ovetop of the seeds, and touch them as an interactive exhibition. After a few weeks, the public was rendered impressed by the mass amount of seeds, yet instead of being natural as one may first assume upon seeing the seeds at first glance, they were all individually handcrafted. Furthermore the label ' made in China' makes one think twice about this preconceived notion. In todays growing economy may countries utilize the cheapest places to mass produce commercial goods and in most cases, that is China. With that said, " much is still made by hand in an economy where machines are expensive and labour is cheap (The Art Story, n. d)." Which is an interesting point to note, seeing as everyone assumes that everything is machine made with the cheapest materials. But Ai Weiwei's exhibit serves as a reminder of the identity of Chinas most prized export, porcelain. A craftsmanship that requires a high level of skill, and the best quality could not be created with machines of any kind.

In terms of the history of the sunflower seeds they were always in people's pockets, no matter their socio-economic status. For Ai, they are reminiscent

of the happy times with companions, but also ones of hardship and hunger for the lower class. With that said, each seed is seen as its own artwork, all 100 million of them. Suggesting that each seed is a representation of an any individual that makes up a population of China. The, “ ubiquitous discarded husks provided evidence of an individuals existence (Public Delievery, n. d.).” In regards to the metaphors that sunflowers play into Chinese politics is simple. The way that sunflowers move towards the sun, therefore, the sun represents Chairman Mao and the sunflowers are the people. Unfortunately this jubilant ideals of Mao was riddled with oppression and violence. Which Ai Weiwei had experienced, though persecution in China. Could the idea of oppression be emulated through the ability of visitors to step up and walk all over the seeds? These symbols help to shines a light on the grave nature of the sunflower seeds, having them evoke both happy and melancholic memories and realities.

On the subject of comparing these are works, they both play upon their own experiences and memories that they had in China, through they are polar opposite emotions each create through provoking pieces that create discourses about China and its policies. Ai Weiwei’s work, “ was a clever pretext for calling attention to a politically sensitive issue (The Art Story, n. d.)” Being the way China in perceived in creating commercial goods and the realities of hardship and hunger for the less fortunate in China. One of the largest difference between the artists work besides being rendered with different materials and media is the artist’s gender. Unlike Ai Weiwei and his success, Xiao Lu had struggled to gain notoriety in the contemporary art world as a female. She was dismissed when she inquired about shooting her

installation in 1989. Lu states she, “ would have talked to them (the art directors). But at the time, I was an obscure nobody in their eyes, and a woman too (Merlin, 2018).” She further goes on to say that, “ suggesting that it [the performance] does not involve politics or social impact, the work suddenly becomes worthless. This is the context for Chinese contemporary art. And if it is made by a woman, it is deemed to be worth even less (Merlin, 2018).” Lu’s ideas about the project were misconstrued. Her friend, Tang Song, had put it in a social and political meaning, but Xiao Lu denied this, which made critics and the public deem it as worthless because she is a female, and the performance was only driven by emotion. This circumstance has created arguably a new political discourse for women in contemporary Chinese art and in China. In all, both of these works have in their own way challenged and unintentionally called into question the problems and ideologies of the political and social systems in China. Giving a voice to the people who have been silenced or oppressed though out the years under China’s communist party.

With all things considered, as aforementioned. both of these works provoke the political system and call into question the problems, and injustices that need to be addressed. Through self-reflection of happy and turbulent memories. As for Ai Weiwei his work on “ sunflower seeds” is seen as a, “ unrelenting use of an optional framework for his art and his inventiveness in terms of media, ideology, and stylistic experimentalism (Molesworth, 2011, p. 29).” His work has stunning the world over with his mass produced yet handcrafted seeds, disrupting the notions people have about goods made in China. As for Xiao Lu, her work and life hasn’t not been easy. Yet through her

work in “ Dialogue” it showcases the ideology of an artist versus society, even though she may not believe that her piece is political it has opened up a discourse that ironically has become somewhat political through the viability of female artists and women in general.

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