

TRADITION IN ARTWORKS OF AI WEIWEI

AI WEIWEI'İN SANAT YAPITLARINDA GELENEK

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Abstract

Ai Weiwei is a contradictory, modern and activist artist who interrelates his daily life with traditional arts in his compositions in an extraordinary way. He was criticized by Chinese public servants because of contradictory features of his artworks and he was obstructed. He employs unusual methods. He was influenced by previous career of Dada, Duchamp, Jasper, Johns and Andy Warhol and also with the effect of his western education, he has a conceptual approach in art. He wants to attract notice to social issues by way of combining tradition and conceptual art in humorous and ironic way. The artist that prefers contradictory way of expression has respect and loyalty to traditional Chinese art. He enlived the traditional Chinese culture by way of demonstrating traditional esthetical approach in his artworks. He commented the modern approach of his western art as critical thinking. It is clearly seen that, his materials and techniques that dominates his works are related with tradition and history. According to him, traditional art should not fade away. Nevertheless, we can see a consistent reckoning against tradition in conceptual bases in his works. For this reason, description of tradition gained different character than many other artist. He redefines the tradition in his genuine works. Furthermore, according to the artist the massive products that are sold to whole World from China have no aesthetical or genuine value as well. The vast majority of these industrial products are plastic. He thinks that these products criticize a certain hollowness upon Chinese art. The purpose of this article is to examine the traditional motifs and their contemporary usage in compositions of Ai Weiwei, in which the dramatic incidents like immigration and war turn into modern artworks. In order to achieve this goal, artworks of the artist are analysed.

Keywords: Ai Weiwei, Tradition, Contemporary art, Immigration

Öz

Sanatçı, Ai Weiwei kompozisyonlarında geleneksel sanatlar alışılmadık bir ilişki kurarak günlük yaşam öyküsünü de dahil ettiği bir çok farklı sanat yapıtları üreten, muhalif çağdaş aktivist sanatçıdır. Yapıtlarının muhalif özellikleri dolayısıyla Çin'de kamu görevlilerinin eleştirisini almış, yapıtlarının sergilenmesine karşı engellemelerle de karşılaşmıştır. Sıra dışı ve alışılmadık yöntemlere başvuran sanatçı, Dada, Duchamp, Jasper Johns ve Andy Warhol'un eski kariyerinden etkilenen ve Batı'da aldığı eğitimlerinde etkisi ile Kavramsal sanata aşına ve kavramsal bir yaklaşıma dayanmaktadır. Gelenekle, kavramsal sanatı birleştirerek ironik, mizahi yollarla da sosyal meselelere dikkat çekmek istemektedir. Muhalif sanatsal ifade biçimini tercih eden sanatçı, Çin sanatının geleneksel sanat ürünlerine karşı bağlılığı ve saygısı vardır. Çin geleneksel kültürünü yeniden canlandırarak geleneksel estetik yaklaşımı ile sanat yapıtlarında gösteren sanatçı batı sanatındaki çağdaş yaklaşımına da eleştiril bir muhalefet olarak yorumlamıştır. Eserlerinin geneline hakim olduğunu ileri sürebileceğimiz malzeme ve tekniklerin tarihsel anlamın, değer, gelenekle ilişkili olduğu açıkça görünmektedir. Geleneksel sanatın kaybolmaması gerekliliğine inancını belirtmektedir. Ancak, eserlerinde sanat nesnelere üzerinden geleneğin takdiri bulunmakla beraber gelenekle, tutarlı bir hesaplaşmanın kavramsal olarak da tartışıldığını görebiliriz. Bu nedenle geleneğin ifade bulması, betimlenmesi birçok farklı sanatçıdan farklılaşmıştır. Bu özgünleşme yapıtlarında gelenekseli yeniden tanımlamaktadır. Ayrıca, sanatçıya göre, Çin'den bütün dünyaya satılan kitlesel ürünlerin herhangi estetik ve özgün bir değeri yoktur. Endüstriyel ve kitle üretimine uygun nesnelere en çoğu plastik ürünlerdir. Ve sanatçıya göre bunlar belirli bir sahteliği Çin el sanatları üzerinden eleştirmektedir. Bu makalede sanatçının kompozisyonlarında çağdaş kurgular olarak kullandığı geleneksel motiflerin özgün bir yaklaşımla, göç, savaşa gibi insanlık etkileyen dramatik olayların çağdaş sanat yapıtlarına dönüştürülmesi araştırılıyor. Bu amaca ulaşabilmek için sanatçının eserleri üzerinden bir analiz yapılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Ai Weiwei, Gelenek, Çağdaş Sanat, Göç

Introduction

Ai Weiwei is a curator, author, video art and photograph artist, sculpturer and art critic that transforms the art of his era. He is a genuine visual artist in respect to his provocative approach in modern aesthetics. Ai Weiwei was born in the year of 1957 in capital city of China, Peking. He was awarded Chinese Contemporary Art Prize and Lifelong Success Prize. He produced artworks that he used ready made in 1978 film Academy, between 1981 – 1993 in New York.

From these days until now, he attended several international exhibitions and biennials as invited guest. He was selected for the list of “most impressive 100 person” list that is published by the *Time*

Magazine every year. He also took part in first place in the *Artview Magazine's* list of "The most powerful 100 artist".

The artist broadcasts visually and inscriptively and tries to product artistic activism by criticizing over his own web blog. He produces sculptures, photographs, performances, architectural works and writes sharp articles by using his web site, tweets and blogs in order to transmit his message. The artist has always been a social activist and his immigration and trauma takes important place in his activism. Internet is an important tool for his ideas. His studio is currently in Berlin and with his own words: "he is in exile". "Ai Weiwei is an artist, who helps us to understand the difficulties of pushing the limits of society, since 1980's via his several artistic studies." Chiu, M. (2016)

The artist acts upon objects. Aesthetic explicandum is not enough for him solely. His usage of objects has correlation with Duchamp's. This make us think he is influenced by Dadaism. "Ai's art not only bear the stamp of Marcel Duchamp, but also the subject's" Becker, T. (2011)

There are his own visuals in the monumental "space – altar" that looks like a column in addition to Wall papers that the artist arranged himself within the artwork in Sakıp Sabancı Museum. There is an extraordinary fiction performance composed of traditional ceramics vase belongs to Dynasty which describes 3 part action via LEGOS –modern toys of our day- in the shape of mosaics: throwing or leaving and crashing.

The act of throwing the vase belongs to Khan Dynasty describes devastating meaning and standing against hegemony in the works that are exhibited in Sakıp Sabancı Museum.

Lego pieces are declined by the lego firm. According to the artist, political hegemony is involved to private corporations nowadays. He criticized the lego firm's view to social and bureaucratic events that refused to give him their products and he produced a work that addresses cumbersome, pragmatic and institutional mechanism of the firm that refers to Duchamp in which a toilet clogged by lego pieces. He shared this work via social media and he provided public support. Afterwards Danish Lego Firm accepted to give him their lego pieces but the artist has already reached the pieces by grants.

"After lego's disclaim of giving lego pieces for 'political reasons', the hashtag of #legoforweiwei pervaded on Tweeter and Lego firm was forced to step back" (<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr>)

The photograph of the work had great influence in social media. The photo of the work he shared on his social account is below:

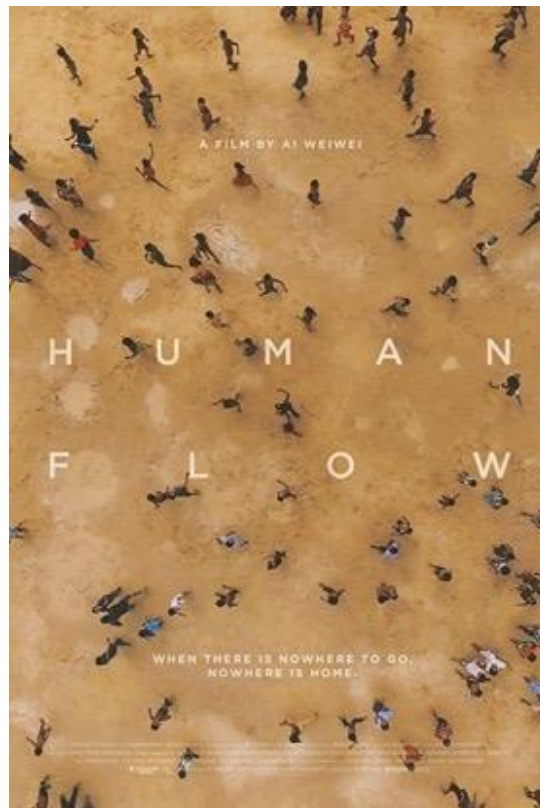


The artist supported durations of his working by several documents and recorded the images of moments and showed the artists constitutes his team, so he took the responsibility against them. He gives comprehensive information about his process of installation by video recording of craftsmen in the documentary films represented in Sakıp Sabancı Museum. The artist generally prefers to present his documentarian manner by way of video recording constantly.

The Artist and the Theme of Immigration

Ai Weiwei is a protest and contradictory artist. His works stem from Dadaism and conceptual art. The theme of immigration takes place as an important subject in his works. The artist received imprisonment for “81” days in his motherland. After his arrestment, his passport was seized by the state of China. The artist arranged a simple, but at the same time ceremonial protest demonstration; he put some fresh flowers to carrying basket of a bike outside his Peking studio and photographed this. According to Straaten, (2018); “For Ai, theme of massive immigration of helpless people from their home has been one of the political and humanitarian subjects for installations, sculptures, photographs, film projects.” (www.nbcnews.com). Humanitarian tragedy of immigrant crisis is a big issue for several places of the World from Syria, Africa and Iraq to Europe. He describes one of a kind immigration tragedies in his works. He also qualifies himself as an immigrant and he thinks he has no difference than the other immigrants. In his full-length documentary film named “Human Flow”, he deals with migration crisis. During his speech in his new film on Channel 4 News named “on the migrant crisis”, he says “I feel myself as a part of migrants. And feels like a migrant. I like humanity”. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LYqfpcds1Q)

He makes watch wealthy people his works personally and wants to set in motion responsible people. In his works, the exile and life conditions his family lived has great influence. He is occasionally evaluated as a provocateur by critics because of his works based on critical performance.



<https://imdb.com>

As a conceptual artist, he establishes deep connection with migration movements stem from some global reasons. He reflects screams, desperation and tragedy of people to his art works. Instead of resolution advisory, the artist has instant artistic detection. There are several means of expressions at aesthetical settlements related with migration. (empathy, exile, follow up, etc).

Tradition

“Creativity is a power of rejecting past, changing the status quo, and seeking new potentials. Simply and more importantly, besides using imagination, it is the power of moving.” Ai Weiwei

In the art of Ai Weiwei, it is possible to see forms of tradition in activist approach. Being inspired by Warhol and Duchamp, he is feeding by way of connecting tradition and contradictory roles of these artist.

“He disrupts tradition and discovers rooted connections both with his work and with tradition. Essentially Ai Weiwei revives tradition. He does not describe it. He recommends and finally recombines it. Traditional motives exist in almost every work the artist generated or defined. But, according to Ai Weiwei, the future can not be created solely with emerging the past and with creativity. Main source of creativity can be just found.” Becker, T. (2011)

There are blue-white pieces of porcelain Chinese bowl that is decorated with dragon figure in Sakıp Sabancı Museum at the beginning of the exhibition in a wooden showcase that he broke in 1996 . From criticism and destruction point of view, meaning of tradition fort he artist is important. “In fact, when a great deal of people invoked to extinguish their past including cultural catabolisms and ruins, as a comment for cultural revolution, they understand Ai Weiwei’s symbolical-plastic acts. It means ‘I always say big art is not the end, but the beginning’ “. (Sooke, 2018, www.bbc.com) And he continues: “I always regret when I see, because it’s too beautiful, too difficult to find and was crushed

just with a hammer. But at the same time, it represents some sort of manner, a declaration about finding new possibilities and changing forms.”

By this way, he both states his respect and loyalty to tradition, and makes his revenge to it on theory.

“Tradition is just a readymade. It’s our responsibility to make a new gesture and to use it as a beginning point, as a reference rather than a result. For sure, our backgrounds and our attitudes about our backgrounds are different. Our past has never been whole, it was broken, both in China and in our studies...”

He continues his studies on porcelain as a traditional material passionately. He was blended with great tradition of Chinese ceramics he met before he was 20. He says “No modern artist can respect his tradition like me” .

It can be seen that his works have certain criticism and reactivity. In 2009, the artist put forward his reaction by criticizing the role of government when thousands of children died during the earthquake in Sichuan. He was beaten by the police and was arrested, moreover, he had a brain hemorrhage. As a reaction for this incident, he transferred his x-ray brain films onto ceramics for the first time in the World and put forward as a different means of expression.



Sakıp Sabancı Museum, Exhibition 2018

He took some construction irons that were not shaped as “hook” from buildings collapsed due to earthquake, he took mould of them and he reproduced them from ceramics.



Ai Weiwei, Porcelain Construction Irons, 2014

Ai Weiwei Studio, Ai Weiwei's first personal exhibition in Turkey in Sakıp Sabancı Museum: "Ai Weiwei about Porcelain, 2018"



Ai Weiwei, Porcelain Construction Iron, 2014

Detail from Ai Weiwei's first personal exhibition in Turkey In Sakıp Sabancı Museum Ai Weiwei about Porcelain, 2018"



He made a list of students died in Sichuan earthquake that involves more than 5000 name.

<https://www.widewalls.ch/ai-weiwei-audio-sichuan-earthquake-victims/>



Ai Weiwei documenting the desolate landscape after the Sichuan Earthquake. Ai Weiwei, via minhuzhongguo.org

This approach is a statement of a political protest and a social criticism on tradition. Sometimes his works includes some entertaining images about tradition and has ironic approach. He handles modern issues on tradition, so it can be said that he will constantly force possible areas.

He refers to Van Gogh and tradition with his work of sunflowers. All of the sunflowers were handled traditionally. The process was recorded to video. As a cultural image, this artwork indicates political power (sun) and crowd of people turn to it (flowers).

Sunflowers also query meaning of underestimating and ignoring of skills of people that requires speciality on traditional craft besides the phenomenon of 'Chinaware Production'... It has also a political extent which may represent leader and citizens of China, brings to mind 'images that are encircled with sunflowers' (Wilson, 2015: 22)

He also refers to value of labour in order to explain update mass production workmanship in China. Usage of human life in cheap workforce enables increase of production. This can be thought as a reference to political preferences.



Tate Modern Turbine Hall Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei's 100 Million Porcelain Sunflower Seeds *The Telegraph*

The broken million dollar vase – Ai Weiwei – Public Delivery 2nd and 3rd. Ai Weiwei’s first personal exhibition in Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Turkey ‘Ai Weiwei About Porcelain’, 2018, Installation



<https://publicdelivery.org/ai-weiwei-dropping-a-han-dynasty-urn/>

The artist also collects old products in order to make contemporary art. He discussed themes of destruction and transformation as well. Destruction and transformation are in three forms: In first step, it is vase that the artist holds, in the second image, he gives off it. In the third image, there is a broken vase, but the moment of fall was not caught by the photographer or was not included to tyrptic composition. Images of the broken vase became more valuable than essential work of arts as were other artists and has qualification of open document for a ‘different’ aesthetical experience. As a reference to work of “R. Mutt”, traditional work as an aesthetical artwork has been emerged with show ‘wide open’ and gave us cause for recommending it in very different manner.

The words of the artist mentions about the role of tradition in his scope of different relation he established with it. “Chinese culture has some sort of state full of philosophy , aesthetical morality and craftsmanship. The art was very powerful and was not mean just decoration in Ancient China (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com>, Stevens, 2012)



From Ai Weiwei’s first personal exhibition in Turkey ‘Ai Weiwei about porcelain’, 2018



*In left, Ai Weiwei's first personal exhibition in Sakıp Sanancı Museum, in Turkey, 2018, Lego artwork based on photograph of the performance,
In right, Original Photograph based on the performance*

He produced several original and fake vases and shaped them with industrial colours. This approach started discussion for differences between work of arts that are exhibited and put forward manner that both of them are displayable. This can be thought a reference to interrelation between art and politics.



From Ai Weiwei's first personal exhibition 'Ai Weiwei About Porcelain' in Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Turkey, 2018



The exhibition includes 10 pieces from his series coloured vases: Neolithic and Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) with urns dipped in garish point (Credit: Ai Weiwei Studio) bbc.Com

Conclusion

According to the artist, tradition is important. Technically, baked soil, porcelain, ceramics, all of the traditional forms take part in Ai Weiwei's art abundantly as a material. In Ai Weiwei's art, positioning of tradition is a necessity and previous service of tradition for power is a problem. As an irony, the artist criticises power upon the perfection of tradition. In many respects, when the work of art is re-evaluated, tradition does not complete its mission by existing in Ai's art, but it takes central place.

Instead of preference of aesthetical subject forming, the artist carries the tradition to center of the problem. As a part of this approach, he reflects Daily issues onto ceramics as a critical circumstance. There are political and contextual analysis and critical reflections on this Daily images. On account of colour choices, there some works he is completely attached to tradition. Tradition not only means some decorative images and some mystical meanings, but also it can be understood upon expressing modern images by figuration technique of tradition. The artist is not contented with this. He implements several repetitions and presents a monumental approach. As a conclusion, he confronts us with modern images generated by migration, massacre and pains.

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