

Laudatio, Ai Weiwei, Zurich, October 30, 2019, Award of the Schirrmacher Prize

« As an artist, I have to relate to humanity's struggles. I never separate that from my art. »

Humanity, Ai Weiwei, Edited by Larry Warsh, 13

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to ask you a few questions:

Who do you think decides on war and peace in a world where there is no longer a declaration of war, where the rules of humanity are ignored, in a world where people kill from a distance, with drones, as if in a video game?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Here, suicide bombers are killing innocent people and civilians are dying under bombs dropped by hyper-equipped armies. There, power-hungry leaders recruit children to wage war and soldiers rape women in conflict areas. And we have to ask: has humanity lost its values?

Who is to blame, if millions of men and women do not have food, and if tens of thousands starve to death every day? If the world is overheating? If even the most basic needs are not met, and if injustice prevails?

A newspaper reports: on the beach on the Tunisian Island of Djerba, there were more corpses than bathers at the beginning of July 2019. A boat that had left Libya at dawn with 86 people on board had sunk offshore. Three people were found alive. The sea returned the others one by one. Who should we blame if thousands of migrants fleeing war and poverty die in the Mediterranean because we deny them asylum? Have we become deaf and blind?

If we are looking for answers to these questions, we are bound to cross paths with Ai Weiwei.

Born in Beijing in 1957, son of the famous writer Ai Qing, Ai Weiwei studied filmmaking at the Beijing Film Academy. A pillar of the first Chinese avant-garde movement, he became involved in various art and literature groups. In 1981, he left China for the United States. In 1982, during his short stint at the *Parson School of Design* in New York, he came into contact with the ideas of Duchamp and Warhol. Duchamp's ideas about the artist who conducts his work as an artistic project, the artist's existence as an attitude, a lifestyle, helped Ai Weiwei to reconcile himself with his own identity. He, who until then had considered himself a "postimpressionist" painter, realized that using the support of painting and more generally a material support in order to be able to transmit his imagination and creativity, all this, was no longer for him.

In 1993, he returned to China and opened his own studio in Beijing: *Fake Design*. He is interested in China's social and urban transformations. He photographs urban developments in Beijing but also in the various Chinese provinces. He became the artistic advisor to the architects Herzog & de Meuron for the design of the Beijing stadium, the "Bird's Nest", built for the 2008 Olympic Game.

Ai Weiwei is the artist of all superlatives, a major figure in contemporary art, at once visual artist, photographer, sculptor, blogger, film producer, iconoclast and provocateur. In its annual ranking, *Art Review* magazine in 2011 named him the most powerful figure in contemporary art. Ai Weiwei was arrested by Chinese police on April 3rd, 2011 for his increasingly harsh criticism of the Chinese regime and then released after protests from around the world. He was allowed to leave China in July 2015.

« I became involved with the subject of refugees because I am conscious of how these people have been mistreated, neglected and displaced. I know what it is to be viewed as an outcast. »

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The same year, Ai Weiwei stayed on the island of Lesbos to show the daily life of the migrants and refugees passing through. For some time he shared the daily life of the refugees trying to reach Germany and collected their testimonies for a DVD.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In each of his works, we find a part of his life experience.

*Blossom*, a huge carpet of porcelain flowers, refers to Mao's 100 Flowers campaign, a wave of repression that has led to the exile of large number of artists, including his father's. In an interview with a Swiss newspaper in 2017, Ai Weiwei said (and I quote) "...I always go back to my father. To his life. That of a poet who studied in Paris and who, upon his return to China, generated a revolution through words, which resulted in him being ostracized for twenty years and his family with him. I grew up with him, in exile, while he was reduced to cleaning the camp toilets. A place where, every day, it took immeasurable courage to enter, but which, every day, he devoted himself to making the cleanest space in the world, to the point that it almost became a work of minimalist art. I don't think I've seen anything so beautiful since then. It can be understood as a metaphor, but I keep the example of this fierce wisdom as a force, as an unconditional desire for justice in the face of ignorance, stupidity and blindness. And even more so as a desire for beauty. »

When I told my granddaughter, Ludivine, that I would be meeting Ai Weiwei, she exclaimed: " Ah, I know him, he is the one who gives the finger at Tian'anmen Square!". Only Ai Weiwei's outstretched finger is visible, addressing a finger of honor to emblematic sites of power and culture such as Tian'anmen Square, but also the White House, the Sydney Opera House, San Marco in Venice, the Eiffel Tower and the Federal Palace. By this gesture, he expresses his rejection of icons and established values.

Federal Palace, Finger of Honor.

With his films and his gigantic montages around the refugee crisis, Ai Weiwei is a master of communication. He claims being active in the media and social networks is a practice of art in its own right. As soon as the demonstrations began in Hong Kong, he put three of his colleagues on a plane with cameras in their suitcases to understand what was happening. Today he denounces a society that does not accept democracy, that does not accept freedom of expression, nor the independence of the judiciary. And in the face of European inertia, he wonders whether Europeans still retain Western values such as the defense of humanity as their civilization's main legacy.

"It is the duty of an artist to connect himself or herself to social change, to bear responsibility, to be part of the change."

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And yet we know that there are values on which individuals and nations do agree, which can form the basis for moving forward together, while still respecting personal, religious and social differences. But these values need to be constantly defended. They do not grow on trees. Values are born in thought and debate, make their way into public policy, and evolve over time. We have to debate them, study them, nurture them, transmit them, and, when necessary, take responsibility for them. The need for values to guide us, to live our lives by, and to uphold our human dignity is a profound and universal

human need. Each in their own way, societies and individuals strive towards this ideal. And these values apply to each and every one of us, in Beijing, in Zurich, in Lesbos or Lampedusa.

This is what we are talking about. This is what Ai Weiwei is talking about.

For decades, his work has surprised, questioned and shocked people beyond the conventional limits of art: painting, misappropriation of objects, performances, photographs, films and videos. He seeks to mix art and life, opposes the symbols of established power, resorts to provocation, to parody. His friend Uli Sigg has noted how in speech and writing, Ai Weiwei constantly uses words relating to arguing and argument. Argumentation is his defining feature. It may be well that he was born a troublemaker. Arguing, listening to others, responding to them is a difficult art, even in our European countries. You have to receive the argument, be open to it, be willing to answer and perhaps agree with it. Argument, expression and exchange are only possible in a particular and precise environment, that of freedom of expression. At this point appears the rupture with a Chinese regime where orders rather than arguments are given.

Artists not only have to struggle against all-powerful states or markets, but they also have to constantly exercise their critical function, explore alternatives, experiment, speak out, awaken consciences and entertain doubt. This does not make it necessarily possible to agree with a consensus view of politics. It implies channelling conflict and contradiction, taking part in and questioning social movements and sometimes challenge the dominant order.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Why express oneself as an artist? Who are these beings who want to make their lives a work in itself, who spend all their time imagining, creating, arguing, resisting?

Ai Weiwei is an activist artist. He is an internationally renowned man, he travels the world, gives interviews, takes a stand, exhibits in the most prestigious places, receives commissions, produces films. What kind of person can do all this?

Part of the answer lies in his work: he annoys his audience by projecting 50 images at high speed that are still seen long enough to register, impress and raise questions.

### *Provisional Landscape*

His art, as we can see, produces ambiguity and Ai Weiwei is careful not to remove the ambiguity. He does not affirm or deny anything. Perhaps he is just having fun... And to add to the complexity, his force is rooted in a particular strength of Chinese culture, namely the ability to fuse contradictions in the same proposal. While in our minds as Westerners responding to a Cartesian logic, one thing is either this or that, for a Chinese mind, the same thing can be both this and that.

### *Whitewash*

132 Neolithic vases, each one being a unique and valuable piece. A quarter of them were entirely covered with white industrial paint and therefore destroyed. The work brings together two contradictory paradigms of artistic creation: a Western paradigm of "avant-garde" art that seeks to destroy traditions, break with the past to create spaces for new thoughts and projects; and a classical Chinese paradigm that shows great respect for tradition and allows artistic creation to seamlessly evolve from China's cultural wealth. Then add to that the dimensions of China and its production processes, the cost of which is so low that it is possible to think big, and we are as close as it is possible to be to the Ai Weiwei method. Elements of this method are recognizable in the installation

## *Sunflower Seeds*

*Sunflower Seeds* is a work commissioned by Tate Modern. It includes 100 million hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds, 10 cm deep, over 3,400 square meters. *Sunflower Seeds* exposes the complexity of the individual's relationships with society, authorities and tradition.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What struck me, but also moved me, is Weiwei's immense love for his country, China. He is deeply Chinese in the dimensions of his work, in the use of Chinese materials and craftsmanship and in his way of thinking. And of course his work questions and raises the problems facing contemporary China such as the exercise of autocratic power, the disappearance of traditional culture and crafts, the human rights situation and poverty. Orders and injunctions rather than democracy and social contract, according to him, have characterized the Chinese system for millennia and the dictatorship of the people is no different. His perception of Chinese governance underlies his political activism, the struggle for freedom of expression, the rule of law and human rights.

« When I fight for human rights in China, I never think only about human rights in China. I think about human rights everywhere. Human rights is the value which I believe is universal. »

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But it would be adding insult to injury if Ai Weiwei were to be confined to the role of Chinese dissident. Since 2011, the year of his incarceration, his artistic language has continued to evolve and to become more and more direct and universal. Today his art is no longer limited to criticism of the Chinese regime: the strategies of its art coincide with its political activism. He fights for humanity. He commits deeply, passionately, angrily, never simply commenting TV footage. In films and videos, he explicitly denounces the scandals of our time: the murder of 43 Mexican students, Lampedusa, the Rohyngas.

Human flow, (show 1 min. of the film)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The beginnings of human history were marked by property disputes and wars, dictatorship, despotism, slavery and serfdom, injustice and lack of rights. Economically speaking, slavery is the foundation of the Greek city that we admire so much and that has produced such important theorists of political thought as Plato and Aristotle. It took some thirty-seven centuries for this same humanity to condemn slavery.

Our time is also one of civilization and culture. We have enshrined human rights in law and we are celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. We work for peace. Unfortunately, what we know today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is that evil, that old poison of humanity, has not been eradicated. Human beings continue to starve to death, wars follow wars, groups vow endless hatred to other groups. Democracy, the rule of law and human rights are being challenged. Worse still, one might think that we come back to the time of the wars of religion. It is this evil that Weiwei faces, against which he fights, also through his work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

despite some progress that has been made, the problems we face today are no different from those faced by past generations. Men and women still want to live in peace and freedom. They still want to support themselves and their families, they still want to live without fear. Each era must meet these recurring challenges. The many hotbeds of crisis show us that when politics (or policies) challenge or undermine the foundation of norms by pretending to ignore them, and when the minimum principles of civilization collapse, legality and legitimacy are over, the rules we have set for ourselves implode and no one respects them anymore. Art can be effective in highlighting reality and its appearances, inventing new modes of representation, making us doubt, awakening our consciences.

« Today the whole world is still struggling for freedom. In such a situation, only art can reveal the deep inner voice of every individual with no concern for political borders, nationality, race or religion. »

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Dear Ai Weiwei, you are awarded the Frank-Schirmacher Prize for your multi-layered, reflective work, which illuminates our present and its sensitivities with artistic power, intellectual intensity and critical awareness. Congratulations.

**Ou bien en allemand comme prévu :**

Cher Ai Weiwei, Sie erhalten den Frank-Schirmacher-Preis für Ihr vielschichtig nachdenkliches Werk, das unsere Gegenwart und deren Befindlichkeiten mit künstlerischer Kraft, intellektueller Spannung und kritischem Bewusstsein ausleuchtet. Ich gratuliere.

mcr, october 2019



