ARH 200 - Annotated Bibliography

Jessica Robertson

Ai WeiWei is a contemporary Chinese artist who uses various techniques including sculpture, architecture, photography, public art, and film to critique social and political issues, especially in regard to those of his home country of China. Born in Beijing in 1957 to two poets, WeiWei grew up for the first 16 years of his life in exile with his family in the northwest Xinjiang region of China. His family was exiled by the Chinese government because his father Ai Qing was considered a radical and wrote poems which were critical of the Chinese state. This early exposure to abuses of power left an impression on WeiWei, the influences of which can be seen in his works today through themes of questioning and critiquing government bodies and exploring the changes in Chinese culture as the politics of the nation shift. WeiWei went on the study film at the Beijing Film Academy in 1978 and then studied in New York at the Parson’s School of Design from 1981 to 1993, eventually returning to China. WeiWei was famously arrested on April 3, 2011 by the Chinese government and was detained for 81 days due to his outspoken criticism of the communist regime. Even during his detainment and subsequent surveillance, Ai WeiWei continued to create art that dissented against the Chinese government’s actions and spoke to the world. In analyzing WeiWei’s work, it is useful to apply Panofsky’s three levels of iconology to better understand how historical and cultural factors interplay with more subjectively interpreted visuals, especially considering WeiWei’s persistent themes of politics and social activism. Without those added levels of context, much of the meaning behind WeiWei’s work may be overlooked or misinterpreted. The chapter *The Analysis of Form, Symbol, and Sign* from Anne D’Alleva’s text outlines how this technique creates a more nuanced understanding of a work’s meaning and is helpful in trying to answer questions of how the artist creates these meanings. In Ai WeiWei’s case, a question to consider is how he recontextualizes recognizable forms and symbols in modern and often ironic ways to comment on political and social issues such as censorship, government accountability, and freedom of expression.

Art21. “Ai WeiWei in ‘Change.’” April, 14, 2012. Art21.org. Video. <https://bit.ly/2Y26MYs>

This source gives insight into Ai WeiWei’s studio and the collaborative efforts he uses to make

impactful art that is not afraid to call into question the Chinese government’s actions. The video takes place during WeiWei’s detainment in 2011 and the interviews throughout speak of the importance Ai places on not being quiet. He believes in the power of art and the controversy it can evoke to make the statements necessary for change, and this source provides a look at examples of his work such as *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* (2010). The bridging of traditional Chinese cultural forms like the zodiac with an installation that travels the world while the artist himself is detained by the Chinese government exemplifies WeiWei’s tactics of making a statement about an institution even while being confined by it. The video is helpful in understanding this balance WeiWei must maintain, and the interview with Ai himself shows how he cleverly answers questions regarding his art so there is layered meaning. In this way he can appease the PRC while still leaving room for interpretation of his work as commentary of political and social issues.

Callahan, William A. "Citizen Ai: Warrior, Jester, and Middleman." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73.4, 2014, pp. 899-920. ProQuest. Web. 15 Apr. 2019.

This journal article examines Ai WeiWei under multiple narratives to explain the complex interplay he has between art and politics. The first is “Ai as the Heroic Warrior” which looks at his social activism and its criticism of the Chinese government. “Ai as the Jester” follows, in which the ironic and playful nature of WeiWei’s work is analyzed to show how he plays with the Chinese state and other institutions of power. His social critique may be irreverent at times, but this Jester role is helpful in understanding the uneasiness WeiWei is under in creating art that so often points out the failures of the Chinese government who could so easily condemn him like they did his father. The final narrative is “Ai as the Middleman” which considers how WeiWei is a negotiator between China and the West, as well as between his own ideas of society and the People’s Republic of China’s ideologies. These narrative roles are useful in explaining WeiWei’s approach to his work and how the world perceives him, providing an analysis of the broad and complex ways the artist uses different forms to make his social and political commentaries.

D’Alleva, Anne. “The Analysis of Form, Symbol, and Sign.” *Look! Art History and Critical Theory.* Laurence King Publishing, 2005.

The chapter from this source on Iconography and Iconology is useful for answering the question of how Ai WeiWei recontextualizes recognizable forms because it offers an explanation of how we make meaning in art. By explaining how images and motifs are studied and providing a breakdown of Panofsky’s three levels of Iconography, this source offers a way to discuss WeiWei’s work in a way that combines the immediate perception of his art with the cultural and historical contexts behind it. Only through investigating WeiWei’s work through these multiple perspectives can the comments he makes about politics and society be fully understood, and D’Alleva provides a background for the methods in which to make meaning from these various images and forms.

WeiWei, Ai, and Anthony Pins. *Spatial Matters: Art, Architecture, and Activism*. The MIT Press, 2014.

This source provides an intimate look at Ai WeiWei’s early life through an interview with the artist in the beginning of the book. The interview provides a look at the influence WeiWei’s father had on him through his poetry and interest in art as well as how the politics of China became such an inspiration for the themes of censorship and freedom of expression seen in WeiWei’s works. The book explores how WeiWei found the kind of artist he wanted to be after moving to the United States, realizing he was most interested in ideas and using various forms of art such as sculpture, writing, and architecture to examine concepts of memory, juxtaposition, and recontextualization of objects we think we understand.

Ai WeiWei’s use of recognizable forms range from the mundane Lego block to the culturally significant Han dynasty vase, yet in each instance these seemingly understood objects are transformed into works that comment on social and political injustices WeiWei sees in the world. In *Colored Vases* he is able to question the Chinese government’s destruction of traditional Chinese architecture by painting over antique vases, sparking debate on why one is considered vandalism while the other “simply following orders.” Using the famous children’s toy Legos to create portraits of figures condemned by their governments for their outspoken fight for rights like free speech while under arrest himself shows WeiWei’s ingenue in the face of obstacles to cleverly use the materials he has available to resist censorship. He skillfully takes objects we are familiar with and transforms them in unique ways, mixing aspects of playfulness and cheek with the serious themes of governmental abuses of power and the suppression of free expression he faces daily. The meaning in his work often depends on the viewer’s ability to apply cultural and historical contexts to their interpretation, but those layered meanings open a dialogue about his experiences and perceptions of China and the influence that has had on the forms and themes he pursues.