After the Neo Avant-Garde: institutional critique in the works of Ai Weiwei

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The historical avant-garde sought to contest bourgeois principles of autonomous art and the role of the artist through the reorganisation of the praxis of life through art. German critic Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) saw avant-garde artists as revolutionary advocates for social change, however in discussing the post war period Bürger dismisses works of the neo avant-garde as trivial repetitions of strategies from the historical avant-garde that unwittingly affirm the institutions of art. Critics writing for *October* such as Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh recouped the term neo avant-garde from Bürger in reference to a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the late 1950s and 60s who reprised and revised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 20s. Hal Foster proposes against Bürger that rather than invert the pre war critique of the institution of art, the neo avant-garde works to extend I and therefore produces new aesthetic experiences, cognitive connections and political interventions.¹

However for contemporary art this critique has shifted. Issues such as globalisation and the demand for art to address localized audiences necessitate a rethinking of the prevailing definitions of avant-garde or critical art, which is generally understood in relation to aesthetics and institutional concerns.² Can the neo avant-garde be seen as relevant in these conditions? This question perhaps highlights some of the theoretical difficulties of Foster’s thesis. Terms like historical and neo avant-garde may be too general and too exclusive to be used effectively as they suggest theoretical problems of causality and temporality. Critical art such as the neo avant-garde must continually reinvent itself in order to recoup the compromised strategies of its predecessors to avoid cooptation.

This essay attempts to provide a coherent account of the neo avant-garde and perhaps the more recent notion of critical art in relation to the works of contemporary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Ai Weiwei’s work can be seen as returning to such avant-gardist concerns of 1910s

¹ Foster, Hal., ‘What’s Neo About the Neo Avant-Garde?’ p. 16
and 20s in its connection between art and life and probe of social differences. Theorizing his work in this manner risks falling into composing revisionist histories however his work avoids being radical or compulsive as it aspires to a critical consciousness of both artistic conventions and historical conditions. Works such as *Fairytales* (2007), Ai Weiwei’s massive living intervention as part of Documenta 12, explores how the notion of art as a ‘necessary way of living’ can be addressed in a set of cultural and political circumstances that may make such adherence dangerous or worse, irrelevant.3

The political intentions of the historical avant-garde movements were to destroy the institution of autonomous art in order to reconnect art and life, but were never able to be truly realised. This can be seen perhaps as due to the social ineffectiveness of culture; through its inability to change society it therefore remains as art. Although the neo avant-garde claims these same goals as the historical avant-garde movement, Bürger believed that the demand art be reintegrated into the praxis of life within existing society can no longer be seriously made after the failure of the primary avant-garde intentions.4 Ai Weiwei’s work can be seen as contesting this statement as he conflates arts use value, which is its necessity, with arts exchange value. Ai’s work can be seen as representing China’s self alienation, in an allegedly Marxist society in which history supposedly proceeds in the meaningful steps of dialectics. Ai explores this enforced amnesia through works largely created from historically charged materials, disfigured and reconfigured to create iconoclastic sculptures and installations. Through recycling material from China’s past Ai directly reflects on the country’s present and future. Hence Ai’s work represents China’s self alienation by merging the praxis of art and life in a localised society. However to be considered as avant-gardist one must reflect on whether his work aims to lead and change society or merely reflect upon it in an ironic and self reflexive critique.

In the mid 1990s Ai completed a ceramic series in which he vandalised 2,000 year old Han pottery and recorded the act as an artistic performance. As the title suggests in *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, (1994) Ai reinvents an urn with a painted logo. The garish paint application of household paint instantly transformed the relic into an ancient readymade. The

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3 Tinari, Phillip., ‘A King of True Living’ p. 455

4 Bürger, Peter., *Theory of the Avant-Garde* p.109
work could be seen as avant-gardist in its critique of western influence in China. It suggests a cultural hybridization has occurred, perhaps through the ambivalence of cultural imperialism. This defiant gesture’s significance lies in the scandalous nature of destroying what is commonly considered to be a precious artefact. However through it’s positioning within Chinese history this work lends itself to be read on a deeper level. The destruction is nothing worse that what China has self-inflicted on its own history. The action of desecration serves as a way of questioning and deconstructing the judgement and authority of a system in which ‘national treasures’ are nothing more than ordinary household items of cultures made obsolete by state sanctioned destruction and unregulated looting. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* Bürger argued in a changed context the resumption of avant-gardist intentions no longer has the effect which the historical avant-garde achieved. Avant-gardist works which ‘hoped to bring about the sublimation of art [with the neo avant-garde] have attained the status of works of art, the claim that the praxis of life is to be renewed can no longer be legitimately connected with their employment.’\(^5\) Ai’s work can be seen as continuing the deconstructive gesture inaugurated by Duchamp and Warhol, of art and the commodification of culture. It is the status of his product not the consciousness he has of his activity that defines the social effect of works. Hence rather than the sublimation of art the art becomes internalised in a discourse of institutionalised art and can be seen as returning back to the autonomous object.

Bürger’s defining argument against the neo avant-garde is that through repetition it institutionalises the avant-garde and therefore negates genuine avant-gardist intentions. However through recycled devices it is exactly this traditional conception of a work of art as complete, self enclosed, self sufficient entity that is called into question. Buchloh argues against Bürger in considering the practice of repetition to be the authentic meaning of the neo avant-garde. Through the investigation of actual conditions of reception and transformation of avant-garde paradigms Buchloh explores whether it might not be precisely the process of repetition which constitutes the ‘meaning’ and ‘authenticity’ of neo avant-garde art.\(^6\) In considering the localised, cultural significance of Ai WeiWei’s ceramic series the deconstruction of ‘cultural relics’ begins to remark on the loss of China’s cultural legacy.

\(^5\) Bürger, Peter., *Theory of the Avant-Garde* p.58

\(^6\) Buchloh, Benjamin., ‘Primary Colours for the Second Time: a paradigm repetition of the neo avant-garde’ p. 51
These works harp back to the vandalism of the Cultural Revolution as well as having a particular resonance with the contemporary condition in which full speed economic mandate also justifies demolition. This stance is directly presented in the photographic triptych, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), in which Ai himself makes a rare appearance, implicating himself in the process. The work consists of three photographs shot within a single second depicting again precisely what the title suggests. The priceless urn is first shown in the artist’s hands, then midair and finally in pieces on the ground while Ai remains neither unfazed by his action nor concerned with its implications. Ai’s action serves to rebel against the very idea of cultural prestige as the nihilistic act mocks any value attributed to the object as little more than symbolic capital. Reading this as following in the trajectory of the neo avant-garde consists of exclusively assigning meaning to them from outside, that is, ‘the process of their reception’. *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* in a split second re-enacts early conceptualisms dematerialisation of the art object, which is reliant on the institutions of art it render it as art. In a situation of advanced capitalism the repetition of such a gesture authenticates it as a form of institutional critique revealing and calling this reliance between cultural legitimation and the institute into question.

As Bürger suggests the self-criticism of the historical avant-garde intended the abolition of autonomous art and its integration into the praxis of life failed in both its aims and strategies. The neo avant-garde renders the movement legible as art therefore institutionalised it. As discussed above the very institutionalisation that marked this failure became the condition evident in the neo avant-garde and the premise of the institutional critique. Foster argues in *The Return of the Real* (1996) this becoming-institutional does not doom all art thereafter to so much affectation as Bürger suggests but rather prompts a critique of this process of acculturation. In *Fairytale*, Ai bought 1001 Chinese citizens, many of whom had never before left their villages, to Kassel for the duration of Documenta 12. The living intervention involved matching clothing and luggage, travel equipment including camera and video tapes and joint accommodation in an old textile mill. The visitors where then set free to wander the city for the three month duration of the show. The significance of *Fairytale* in the avant-

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7 Buchloh, Benjamin, ‘Primary Colours for the Second Time: a paradigm repetition of the neo avant-garde’ p. 48
8 Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* p.68
gardist trajectory lies in the factualness of the work. The piece was not a conceptual proposition. The Chinese visitors did indeed travel to Kassel and were given not only the opportunity to travel abroad but also to be on the inside of an art spectacle they were simultaneously apart from. Could this be the interfolding of the praxis of life and art the historical avant-gardes sought? The other aspect of the work, which can also be seen as an amenity for the Chinese and also other visitors, involved 1001 Qing Dynasty wooden chairs placed around the mill dorm and Documenta exhibition sites. These chairs immediately became a motif of the project, at once familiar to the Chinese visitors and a physical reminder to the Documenta audience of the presence of the visitors. Due to their varied placement they also offered places for reflection and solidarity as well as discussion. Hence the entire project encouraged new ways to communicate and perhaps more importantly to participate. The work focused on the balance between individualism and group identity much the same as the balance between an individual work of art and its position within the institution. Not unlike Foster argued with the neo avant-garde it prompts new modes of institutional analysis through its causality, temporality and position in the institution.

A large part of this work does however remain invisible as the public could not enter the living areas. Although not for public display these dorms where elaborately set up. White sheets hung from translucent string acted as temporary walls subdividing the space into a series of rooms. Each room contained ten bamboo bunks covered in colourful fabrics. Larger living areas with communal tables provided places where people could eat or drink tea and play cards. Hence the emphasis became on the change of individuals through the changing of their material circumstances (which could also be seen as resonating with Chinese political ideology). However before one gets carried away in the utopian ideal of Fairytale, or indeed before its aura takes the place of the art one must consider its position in a contemporary art institution. The work has a sense of enlightened self-consciousness as though its position in an alternative art space is nonetheless implicated in the nation’s larger art economy. Such a large scale and costly work could never exist outside the institution of art. This is the ironic, inevitable position of many contemporary works as the critical pressure from historical devices permits nothingless. Foster argues the so called failure of the historical avant-garde and the neo avant-garde to destroy the institution of art had enabled the deconstructive testing of this institution through the form of institutional critique. This critique however can be turned on, targeted through the exclusivity not only of art institutions but of critical discourses as well. As a result contemporary artists concerned to develop the institutional
analysis of the neo avant-garde have moved away from grand oppositions to subtle displacements or strategic collaborations with different groups. In this way works such as *Fairytale* can be seen as a way in which the critique of the avant-garde continues.

There is an element of historical irony that the change in the institutions of art in turn demands the continual transformation of its avant-garde critique as well. The institution of art in the contemporary condition is not external to any work but rather it is the condition of its existence as art. There is no longer an outside or an external. No mater how immaterial, transient or invisible art remains institutionalised through its participation in the discourse of art. The social element of *Fairytale* moves from an understanding of ‘the institution’ as specific individuals, organisation and places to a conception of it as a social field, where its institutionalisation is a social determination rather than an aesthetic one. There have been discussions around the relational and community based art of the 1990s as a new mode of artistic production removed from self-referentiality and arts reliance on the institutions of art. *Fairytale* shares these relational aesthetic qualities in its emphasis on a specific, localized audience and the causality of the issues that impact their own lives through the work. However this literal attempt to resolve the separation of art and life remains internal to the institution it critiques.

The neo avant-garde and critical art awareness is set up to be complicated as it received through the very institutions that it often attacks. So how can artists who have become past of art historical institutions themselves claim to critique the institution of art? Indeed Ai Weiwei remains a critic of the milieu he’s very much a part of. The inescapability of institutionality has emerged from within the neo avant-garde trajectory and the institutional critique. The recognition of the failure of the avant-garde movements in its inability to sublimate art and to destroy the institution has resulted in the extended framing of art. With each attempt to move around the determined limits of the institute, to redefine art or reintegrate it into everyday life in order to work in the real world the boundaries are further expanded. Ai Weiwei’s works such as *Fairytale* find in the institutional critique its own paradoxical resolve and so continues the project of the neo avant-garde.

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10 Foster, Hal., *The Return of the Real: the avant-garde at the end of the century*, p. 25

11 Fraser, Andrea., ‘From the Critiques of Institutes to an Institute of Critique’ p. 278
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Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo, (1994)

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, (1995)
Fairytale, 2007
as installed in
Documenta 12