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Black, White, and Grey: Ai Weiwei in Beijing, 1993–1997

The mid-1990s mark a significant period in Ai Weiwei’s career. Recently returned from a decade living in New York, he had just re-established himself in Beijing as a collector and dealer of antiquities and the chief editor of the *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books*. This series of publications introduced important translations of essays by key figures in modern and contemporary art to Chinese audiences and provided a platform for Chinese artists to circulate their own experimental works. At this moment, Ai Weiwei also produced his own breakthrough works, such as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and the *Blue and White* series of porcelain vessels. In this short paper, I track his artistic maturation within the context of the discourse established by the *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books*.

Ai Weiwei’s work is usually framed in terms of his dissident status: “Everything is art. Everything is politics,” he wrote in the 2012 book *Weiwei-isms*.¹ Yet before such aphorisms, he evinced a more nuanced understanding of art’s relationship with society. The interviews in the *Black and White Cover Books* reveal an artist grappling with modern art’s claims for autonomy at a time when the new world order of late capitalism was still settling in. Rather than interpret Ai Weiwei’s art solely in terms of the ontological questions raised by the Duchampian readymade, I would like to suggest re-framing the work in older terms informed by his habit of collecting antiquities. This reading allows for alternative systems of artistic practice to emerge. Examining Ai Weiwei’s work from his first decade in Beijing against his concurrent practices as a collector of Chinese antiquities and editor of *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books* opens up new fields of inquiry: In what ways do ideas from the past resurface in the contemporary? How do these works advance or resist the modernist program for contemporary Chinese art presented in the books? And what do they say about the role of the individual artist in a rapidly changing society?

Black Cover Book (1994)

Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei developed the concept for the *Black Cover Book* in late 1993. The publication aimed to “provide an opportunity for Chinese modern artists to publish, explain, and exchange their experimental art.”² It consists of four sections: Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei’s interview with the Taiwan-born, New York-based artist Tehching Hsieh, a “studio” section featuring photographs of recent work and sketches, statements, and plans

for new pieces by twenty-eight artists, translations of essays by Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, and Jeff Koons in the “modern art documents” section, and, finally, a section on “art news” from around the world. Financed by the artists Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun, and managed by Feng Boyi, a young editor at the Chinese Artists Association, the publication lacked an official ISBN and thus circulated through informal channels with artists themselves sharing or selling most of the book’s two-thousand-copy print run. Although the *Black Cover Book* was originally envisioned as a quarterly journal, only two further editions appeared: *The White Cover Book* (1995) and *The Grey Cover Book* (1997). Xu Bing and Feng Boyi did not participate in these subsequent volumes; the artist Zhuang Hui stepped in to fill Feng Boyi’s role.



The impetus for the publication of the *Black Cover Book* was a profound sense of social change in post-1989 Beijing. In the aftermath of the Tian’anmen Square crackdown, young Chinese artists felt betrayed by the humanistic self-searching and faith in democratic progress that had fueled the universalist modernism of the ’85 New Wave Movement. Many young artists left the provincial academies and congregated in marginalized communities in urban centres, like Beijing’s East Village. There, they experimented with installation, performance, video, and photography, alternative media that the *Black Cover Book* would go on to feature. Meanwhile, some older artists of the ’80s who had made their way abroad were beginning to reengage with China. The three editors of the *Black Cover Book*, for example, all lived and worked in New York for extended periods of time in the late 1980s and early ’90s. There, they absorbed an openness toward everyday material and process, and a conceptualist take on art making while navigating the downtown New York art scene.

Black Cover Book, 1994, *White Cover Book*, 1995, and *Grey Cover Book*, 1998.

A sense of dislocation had been a main feature of Ai Weiwei's life in New York up until that point. By the time of his first solo show, *Old Shoes, Safe Sex*, at Ethan Cohen's New York gallery in 1988, Ai Weiwei had already determined that he was a conceptual artist. The surreal reconfigurations of found objects such as men's leather shoes, violins, and hangers in the gallery fixated on familiar modernist problems of form and function, language and context, but they did not launch his career. Ai Weiwei describes being bored and frustrated during his time in New York: "You're not taking part in the same argument or discussion. No one pays attention to you. You don't have a clear target or purpose." Living in the centre of the international art world, Ai Weiwei felt, "a little bit . . . left out?"³ A year after *Old Shoes, Safe Sex*, he purchased his first pieces of antique furniture: a set of six Qing Dynasty rosewood chairs from a classified ad in the *New York Times*.⁴

Ai Weiwei, *Han Dynasty Urn with a Coca Cola Logo*, 1994, urn from western Han dynasty (206 BC–24 AD), paint, 25 x 28 x 28 cm.



Buying and selling antiques—jades, beads, and small sculptures in particular—became Ai Weiwei's livelihood after his initial return to China. It also changed the nature of his artwork. In late 1993, the year he returned to Beijing, he made *Han Dynasty Urn with a Coca Cola Logo* and *Tang Dynasty Courtesan in a Bottle*. The works are conceptually similar to the pieces shown in *Old Shoes, Safe Sex*, clearly demonstrating the lessons Ai Weiwei learned from his time in New York, but the readymades are Chinese antiquities instead of everyday found objects. As Philip Tinari observes, the ceramic pieces stand in as allegories for the nation and the culture that is seen as having produced it.⁵ The gesture of desecrating a quintessentially Chinese vessel with a quintessentially American logo, or encasing a Tang tomb figurine in an Absolut vodka bottle, raises immediate



Left: Ai Weiwei, *Tang Dynasty Courtesan in a Bottle*, 1994, clay sculpture from Tang dynasty (618–907), glass bottle, 23 x 8 cm.

Right: Ai Weiwei, *Shutting Down the Museum*, 1994, black-and-white photograph of National Museum of China.



questions about how cultures appropriate one another, how systems ascribe value to material objects, and how discursive power underlies such judgments. Ancient artifact and consumer product coexist in tension, ironically heightened as Ai Weiwei has continued to produce multiples of *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca Cola Logo* for exhibitions around the world.

Yet these early experiments with antiquities did not make it into the *Black Cover Book*. Instead, Ai Weiwei published exemplary institutional critiques, such as *Shutting Down the Museum* (1994), which printed in full the contract, rules, and costs of renting out an exhibition hall at the National Art Museum of China. Also included are two pieces that confront a highly controversial municipal regulation outlawing fireworks during the Chinese New Year: *Propaganda Poster* (1994), a public safety poster altered to show an obscene gesture and *Recording* (1994), an audio tape of the eerie silence of a customarily festive New Year's Eve. All three published works from 1994 are site-specific critiques of Chinese bureaucracy, highlighting the absurdity of the rules and regulations in contemporary Beijing.

Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei's interview with Tehching Hsieh in the *Black Cover Book* chronicles the deep anxiety the artists felt about the state of modern art in the early '90s and provides the context for Ai Weiwei's institutional critiques. They discuss with some trepidation the imminent "information revolution" of late capitalism, which would usher in a new, global, pluralistic culture at the cost of individualism, and called on fellow artists to re-focus on the essence, or *benzhi*, of art itself in preparation for this unprecedented era.⁶ Questions of artistic motivation and responsibility, the role of self-critique and analysis, and the need for moral and spiritual values in society take on an urgent tone throughout the text. Three distinct voices begin to emerge as the conversation veers into meta-questions about the role of the individual artist. While all three artists agree that the "Western system"—here understood specifically as the Western art world—is in decline, they differed on how to approach it, and, indeed, whether any cultural system is worth engaging in. Ai Weiwei, motivated by a commitment to individualism and self-fulfillment, aims to exit the "average system" and

subvert it. Xu Bing, on the other hand, is more practical—“everyone must belong to a system,” he says and he remains committed to the idea of a socially engaged and responsible artist. Meanwhile, the cynic Tehching Hsieh takes the position that systems aren’t worth bothering with at all; he simply states, “We are hermits with space technology.”⁷ As art historian Lee Ambrozy has noted, throughout the conversation, the artists continue to position themselves in opposition to the West, even as they search for ways to articulate independent spiritual and moral values.⁸ Unable to break into the “Western system,” Ai Weiwei’s institutional critiques in the *Black Cover Book* attempted to subvert the “average system” in China, an act that he acknowledges can only be done with critical knowledge about that system. *Shutting Down the Museum* can thus be understood as a demystification of the status quo in the Chinese art world and Ai Weiwei’s own personal reckoning with his return to Beijing.



White Cover Book (1995)

Ai Weiwei began work on the *White Cover Book* in the fall of 1995 with Zhuang Hui as managing editor. The format largely followed that of the *Black Cover Book*, with the addition of a section of photographs called “artwork” and translated texts by Joseph Kosuth and Sol Lewitt. In interviews with Zhuang Hui, Ai Weiwei focused on the formal language of art: It was not enough to learn the characteristics of certain materials, an artist also needed to develop an individual approach to the material in order to express his or her thoughts. Ai Weiwei further elaborated on the artist’s role in society, likening it to that of an editor or designer: “All our thoughts in life are based on the idea that things never change. For example, if a 10,000-story skyscraper is being built, it is still constructed using bricks in a standard shape. If, however, a very good design can change one of those

Ai Weiwei, *Breaking of Two Blue-and-White Dragon Bowls*, 1996, fragments of two blue-and-white “dragon” bowls from Qing dynasty (1662–1722), each bowl 19 cm in diameter.



Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, gelatin silver print, triptych, 126 x 110 cm each unit.

bricks, then it can change the entire structure of the skyscraper. The power of an artwork lies in this kind of cultural and psychological subversive consciousness.”⁹ In Ai Weiwei’s view, the artist need not create anything new or original, but simply prick, pinch, or nudge that one brick so he or she can change the original structure.

While editing the *White Cover Book*, Ai Weiwei calmly and deliberately dropped two Han vessels and used a hammer to shatter a couple of Qing bowls in front of a camera. The resulting works—*Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) and *Breaking of Two Blue and White Dragon Bowls* (1995)—mark a performative turn in Ai Weiwei’s practice and an escalation of his earlier gestures of desecration. These acts of destruction are unambiguously iconoclastic, mocking the fetishistic value inscribed onto art objects while also recalling the Cultural Revolution’s widespread destruction of antiquities. Yet the works, as exemplars of the “subversive consciousness” that Ai Weiwei writes of in the *White Cover Book*, also allow for more nuanced readings. When asked whether he considers *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* a “powerful counter-gesture” to systems of power and authority, Ai Weiwei responds that the urn is powerless by itself, just a passive object beholden to its own weight and gravity. He remarks, “It’s powerful only because someone thinks it’s powerful and invests value in the object.”¹⁰ By dropping the urn, Ai Weiwei performs letting go of the social and cultural structures that impart value—and presumably also protection—to it. This camera-ready event expands on a thread in his work that simultaneously acknowledges and challenges traditional signifiers of power and authority. The iconoclastic images of Ai Weiwei giving the middle finger to politically charged monuments (the *Study of Perspective* series, begun in the same year as these works published in the *White Cover Book*), are, in his words, “my own kind of respect.”¹¹

***Grey Cover Book* (1998)**

By 1997, Ai Weiwei’s views on art had solidified into a manifesto called “Making Choices,” which he published in the *Grey Cover Book*. Here, he defines modernism as a “philosophy, worldview, and a lifestyle, [which] at its core, is a querying of classic humanist thought and a critical reflection on the plight of man.”¹² However, this modernist worldview has yet to develop in post-Mao China: “Chinese modern cultural history is a history

that rejects individual values. It assassinates human feelings and reason. It does not have a soul . . . all previous revolutions of the last hundred years begin with a dependence on foreign cultures and end with a compromise of one's own traditions."¹³ Ai Weiwei implores Chinese artists to "turn away from the 'trends' and instead pay attention to individual methods and questions, to re-direct inquiry into form, into an inquiry of the plight of existence and of spiritual values."¹⁴ In all three books, Ai Weiwei circles back, again and again, to the idea that spiritual values are in crisis, that formal concerns alone cannot aid the spiritual development of humanity, which is the true end of art. Yet spiritual values, to Ai Weiwei, are not some omnipresent will-to-form that permeates all art of a given period or culture. Rather, spiritual values are more akin to a set of personal guiding principles that influence one's choices. Works of art are simply physical traces of a series of personal decisions—choices made at a specific time and place under a given set of conditions, which reveal more about one's moral character than any direct action or speech.

Ai Weiwei's working methods at his first studio, Longzhuashu, located on a southern stretch of the Third Ring Road, demonstrate how such guiding principles might have affected his work. He began producing large-scale artworks in earnest in 1997, when the purchase of the Longzhuashu warehouse allowed him to retain a team of specialists—porcelain experts, stonemasons, classical furniture carpenters—who had all learned their trades as top antiques dealers in the market. With their collaboration and guidance, Ai Weiwei made the *Blue and White* series of porcelain and the series of reconfigured furniture pieces, works that were published in the last journal, the *Grey Cover Book*.

In creating these works, Ai Weiwei first established benchmarks of quality for the team, such as replicating the shape of a certain Qianlong era moonflask or mastering a particular Qing dynasty glaze. These benchmarks might have nothing to do with the final artwork, but, rather, help them understand the nature or logic of the material, in this case porcelain. He emphasizes that one must learn how to "cope" or work with the natural properties of the material instead of forcing one's ideas onto it. Porcelain, in its primordial state as unfired clay, has a tendency to slump or collapse. It "wants" to be shaped into round, stable forms, which result in the hard, translucent material when fired. This is what Ai Weiwei means when he speaks of learning its "language." For each finished piece, there may be years of failed experiments as Ai Weiwei and the craftsmen work within a very defined set of rules—clear, rational principles about proportion, structure, and method that follow the precedents of thousands of years of porcelain making—to test the limits of what is possible. The final piece for *Blue and White*—a perfect reproduction of a Qing dynasty vessel—turns the readymade on its head. Ai Weiwei's labour-intensive process neutralizes the original function of the craft and forces us to reconsider the conditions and dichotomies (real vs. fake, art or not) that govern the object. Only

Ai Weiwei, *Table with Two Legs on the Wall*, 1997, wood table from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 90.5 x 118 x 122 cm.



after learning the language of the material does he alter the original design to create works that push the boundaries of this material's forms, like the towering porcelain *Pillars* (2006) or the delicately curved tendrils of *The Wave* (2004–2006).

These critical years of sustained inquiry into antiquities—his “university”—helped Ai Weiwei articulate his views on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics and grounded his subsequent work in architecture, installation, and film. His commitment to the natural properties of materials and the inherent quality of craft (as opposed to mechanical) reproducibility recalls modernist notions of truth to material found in the Constructivist and Bauhaus movements. Yet it also aligns with a Neo-Confucian desire to understand the *li*, the logic, order, or principles of nature that govern all things. Ai Weiwei describes the work that results from this investigatory process as simply “re-announcing” the logic of certain traditional materials, a practice that repeats and amplifies its properties while leading the viewer to question its seemingly natural logic.¹⁵

What I am suggesting here is a resonance—a reinforcing echo—between Ai Weiwei's understanding of modernism and classical views of Chinese art and architecture, which was integrated into the conceptual framework of experimental art in post-1989 China through the *Black, White, and Grey Cover Books*. On the whole, the selection of artists and texts in the books advance a particular strand of conceptually driven, internationally oriented art. Expressionistic paintings and sculpture are ignored in favour of art that is driven by ideas. However, a moral component is also embedded in his art and writing from this period. To Ai Weiwei, the art object is never

truly autonomous because it is an index of the artist's spiritual values and his or her contribution to the spiritual development of humanity. Just as the literati viewed the quality of a painting or a piece of calligraphy as the measure of the man, so too is it difficult for Ai Weiwei to see a work of art stand alone, freed from the burdens of authorship: "There's no such thing as a beautiful work that has been produced except by an outstanding mind."¹⁶

Reading Ai Weiwei's work from this formative period with an eye to his deep involvement in antiquities allows us to draw connections between his work and systems of artistic practice in which art is inextricably bound to moral questions and judgments. If, in Clement Greenberg's notion of the avant-garde, the artist is charged with keeping culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence, then Ai Weiwei's translation of modernism attempts to do so by re-announcing certain spiritual values in China's humanist past at a time when global concerns about American dominance, economic integration, and the coming of the millennium prevailed. Ultimately, the individual is the unit, or agent of action, in Ai Weiwei's belief system. He rejects Buddhist and Daoist ideas of the world as ephemeral, illusory, or empty. Ai Weiwei's world is very tangible. When asked about the problem of the centre and periphery in artistic discourse, he responds, "The concepts are relative. If an individual does not acknowledge the existence of God, then he or she is the centre."¹⁷

Notes

1. Ai Weiwei. *Weiwei-isms*, ed. Larry Warsh (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
2. Zeng Xiaojun, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, editors' note in *The Black Cover Book* (Hong Kong: Tai Tei Publishing Company, 1994), 159.
3. Ai Weiwei, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Philip Tinari, "Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn; Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE—2010 CE*, ed. Joseph N. Newland (Glenside, PA.: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010), 32.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.
7. "A Conversation with Hsieh Tehching from *The Black Cover Book*," trans. Jon Solomon, *Art Margins* 4, no. 2 (June 2015), 108–18. Originally published in Chinese, with an English subtitle as "Yu Hsieh Tehching Duitan (An Interview with Hsieh Tehching)," in *The Black Cover Book*, 9–17.
8. Lee Ambrozy, "Introduction to 'A Conversation with Hsieh Tehching from *The Black Cover Book*,'" *Art Margins* 4, no. 2 (June 2015), 97–107.
9. Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Zhuang Hui., eds., *White Cover Book*. (Hong Kong: Xianggang Dadi Chuban Yinshua Gongsi, 1995), 11.
10. Charles Merewether, "Changing Perspective: Ai Weiwei with Charles Merewether," in *Ai Weiwei: Works, Beijing 1993–2003*, ed. Charles Merewether (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 28.
11. Ai Weiwei in discussion with the author, January 2015.
12. Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Zhuang Hui., eds., *Grey Cover Book*. (Hong Kong: Xianggang Dadi Chuban Yinshua Gongsi, 1998), 9.
13. *Ibid.*, 10.
14. *Ibid.*, 10.
15. Ai Weiwei in discussion with the author, January 2015.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *White Cover Book*, 14.