**Is Ai Weiwei a True Vandal?**

In Karl Ove Knausgaard’s article, *Into the Black Forest With the Greatest Living Artist*, the star of the story, Anselm Kiefer, boldly claims, “Every artist is an iconoclast!”[[1]](#footnote-2) This statement teases out an indispensable rule to determine a real vandal: the “perpetrator” would necessarily have had to be an “iconoclast.”

Ai Weiwei’s work, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (Fig.1), will too easily earn Ai the iconoclast laurel if judged by the popular understanding of “iconoclast” and its willful connection to vandalism. Etymologically, “icon” derives from Greek “eikon” meaning “likeness, image.” In the triptych-like set of photographs which presumably captures the three phases of the so-called Han-Dynasty urn dropping in real motion, the questions emerge: what is the “image, likeness” that Ai deliberately or accidentally destroys? How is the destruction (*-clast*) of the “image” related to being a real vandal if “true” is understood at face value?

Based on these questions, it is only sensible to extend the “image” to the realm of performance art and the images created by the temporal actions. The image is an imprint, a mimetic representation of worldly objects, including humans, even if they might exist otherwise. However, how we understand images as humans is essential to destroying a “likeness, image.” Only humans, as far as science is concerned, might understand the images as so. In“Cézanne’s Doubt”by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an image is already created the moment a human eye meets the world, but not in physic and optical understanding, a reflection of the object. By contrast, a processed understood image from the unknowable existence is created and imprinted in mind as an artistic collaboration between the eye and the mind, deviant from a neurotic explanation. Nevertheless, when an audience reads the resulting images as material forms (even in performance art as demonstrative photographs), the process continues and creates another image distinct from the original reference or the artist’s image when attempting at the reference.

According to Tobin Siebers, “Aesthetic forms may refer to the real, but it may be just as likely to ask its beholder, reader or listener to fantasize about an imaginary referent whose reality then becomes synonymous with the form itself.”[[2]](#footnote-3) This process applies to the audience’s reading of the performance because while he/she contemplates the photographs, the individual is likely to see a different image than Ai’s vision when the work is conceived or Ai’s vision before that. A reasonable route will emerge between the event documented by the photographs and the intact expectations of the supposedly exorbitant urn or the almost unavoidable result of urn’s breaking into pieces, thus the latter forming a causal path from the former. Even if these randomly or predictably generated images are guaranteed to be vandalized, this image-making or -inducing would not lead to vandalism yet.

“Vandal” as a term is thought to spring from the Germanic word for wandering but has come to mean senseless destruction. In an artistic context, the term’s validity is often but not always situated in the “senseless destruction” of the object in the context of either property law or social injury to widely accepted esteem and expectations. In the chapter entitled “Disability and Art Vandalism,” from Tobin Siebers’ book, *Disability Aesthetics*, Siebers claims that “vandalized images failed to represent what they represented before their injury - and yet we resist the fact. The act of vandalism changes the referential function of the artwork, creating a new image on its right.”[[3]](#footnote-4) This argument might throw some light on the work and artist. Ai’s performance and the photographic representation of it change or at least disrupt the urn's referential function and creates a new image, neither one of an intact urn nor broken, but rather a new one along with a new referent. This unforeseen consequence appends another image onto the serial process of image-creation.

The urn’s original referential function lies in the “aura” and the ritualistic value of the urn or any other materials vandalized. In Walter Benjamin’s classic essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin insightfully notes “it is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function,” in other phrases, “its basis in ritual” and “the location of its original use value.”[[4]](#footnote-5) A Han-Dynasty urn, imperial or mundane, is believed to serve as an indispensable component of the imperial or diurnal ritual for the cultivation of social and family values according to *Shih Chi* and *The Book of Rites*, considering the official status of Confucianism as the government-sponsored and thus “orthodox” ideology.[[5]](#footnote-6) Pursuant to *The Book of Rites*, different vessels serve corresponding ritual functions, and any mistake of usage would lead to severe consequences in culture and politics (“Qiyong” as the inseparable pairing of “vessel/function”). The imperial is also metaphorically represented as “Jiuding” or “Nine Ding Vessels,” symbolizing China Proper’s nine divisional districts. Unsurprisingly, in the period of the Nationalist Republic, the traditionally formed vessels, made of metal, porcelain, pottery, or other canonized materials, continued as a whole to imply and maintain the lurking yet still powerful existence of traditional Chinese identity in terms of aesthetics. The undecorated urns used by Ai Weiwei might serve as a generalized metaphor for this macroscopic identity. However, it could also suggest a different fate of the same urn during the Cultural Revolution, in which the urn would often be deemed dangerous embodiments of the backward culture of feudalism. No matter what the urn might represent as a semiotic tool, the material is possibly dropped and destroyed by gravity.

What is also destroyed may be called “symbolic capital” by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu - prestige, authority, an aura of purity and authenticity - which helps the artist sell his/her product.[[6]](#footnote-7) In the case of Ai Weiwei’s urn-dropping, the urn might signify a coalescence of symbolic capital - aesthetic prestige, political authority, an aura of purity and authenticity. In making the triptych-like photographs, Ai admitted that the second photo was taken with a different but identically shaped urn, thus demystifying the work to be a discontinuous performance rather than a real-time document of the process. Fundamentally, the work is only remotely or skeptically vandalism because the urn’s authenticity is highly doubtable. In Chinese connoisseurship, the appraisal value is mainly determined by the dating and the appraised object’s condition. If the second urn devalued the object by the lurking fact of reproduction, then the fallacious dating of the urns will utterly call into question the binary valuing of the urn as the object of vandalism - zero value as the fake, or unimaginable value as the real. The question remains: Is Ai Weiwei still a vandal if the object vandalized is fake art? Tobin Siebers also raises the same question in “Diasability and Art Vandalism” by using the example of “Offending Images” – the emotional impact of art vandalism is blunted by using forgeries and copies.

It is ascertainable that Ai Weiwei is more recognized as an artist than as a vandal. The definition of “vandal” always emphasizes “senseless” destruction, and this adjective reminds us of an underlying “consensus” that if the destruction is not senseless, there could be other forms and discourses around the act of destruction. What is a sensible destruction? Are there any truthfully sensible destructions existing to be convincing samples? Maybe in an artistic one, the artist has sovereignty to “decide on the exceptions” even if this exception is a senseless destruction.[[7]](#footnote-8) Ai Weiwei’s performance is more scandalous in its content than the urn(s)’ fraught identity, and this work is still a prominent asset to have in any prestigious collection like that of the Whitney or SFMOMA. A new aura is established by breaking the urns’ aura even if the performance is ephemeral or even if the urn(s) are suspicious in their authenticities and thus values. In this fashion, the urns’ authenticities become irrelevant, but the artist’s aura continues to be necessary for this new appropriation and presentability.

In Ben Lerner’s essay“Damage Control”, Lerner invokes a crucial argument of art vandalism by exemplifying Andy Warhol as “the more powerful witch” in the case of *Shot Orange Marilyn* and *Shot Red Marilyn*.[[8]](#footnote-9) The artist who shot the painting did not make a name herself by the action, but it was Andy Warhol who gave the shot painting a new name and turned it into a successful spectacle. Likewise, it is imaginable that humans could be dropping nameless, valueless or valuable urns and containers every second, but it was Ai’s dropping and other performance of similar kinds produce enough shocking, disturbance, awakening and aesthetic value.

Just like Warhol, Ai underwrote Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, and vandalism never occurred. Ai was the sovereign figure to make the identity of the urns disappear. The Han Dynasty and the urns are subjects for collective amnesia, but Ai’s performance is well sold year after year.

If we return to Anselm Kiefer’s statement about iconoclasm, we are likely to see the difference between artists’ iconoclasm and vandalism – most vandalism involves the destructions of *icon-*ographies or at least the powerful symbolism of them, yet the well-known iconoclast works require not only the destructions of the original icons, but also the creation of new ones. It is through a dialectic process that Ai replaced the symbolic icons of the “ancient” urns with his image as the new icon, and after all, the aura stays.

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**Figures**

Fig.1:

A picture containing text, outdoor, sport

Description automatically generated

1. Karl Ove Knausgaard, “Into the Black Forest With the Greatest Living Artist,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/magazine/anselm-kiefer-art.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in: *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. K’ung-fu Tzu, The Li Chi or Book of Rites, Part I of II, trans. James Legge (Forgotten Books, 2018), 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ben Lerner, “Damage Control,” Criticism, *Harper’s Magazine,* December 2013, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Carl Schmitt, *“*Definition of Sovereignty,” in: *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago:The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ben Lerner, “Damage Control,” Criticism, *Harper’s Magazine,* December 2013, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)