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Ai Weiwei and the East-West Dialectic of Identity and Difference

“For he who can view things in their connection is a dialectician; he who cannot, is not”

-Plato, the *Republic*

In this paper, I will engage in a brief comparative analysis of the dialectic of identity and difference found in the philosophies of G.W.F. Hegel and the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, and examine how this dialectic is reflected in the artistic praxis of the contemporary visual artist Ai Weiwei. I will be referencing Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, from 1807, and Nāgārjuna’s foundational work on Mahayana Buddhism, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or *The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*, from the 2nd century C.E., and several examples from Ai Weiwei’s oeuvre. While looking broadly at their notions of self and self-consciousness, I will map intersections found in the dialectic of these two thinkers with the work of the artist. And finally, I will argue that Ai’s artistic praxis is a brilliant and relevant contemporary discourse when viewed through the lens of these dialecticians.

To resolve the differences between Hegel and Nāgārjuna in one way or another is a temptation of a non-dialectical sort. Instead, however, in this paper I will attempt a deconstruction of the identified ‘problem’, that ‘problem’ being these two thinkers’ very different notions about self and self-consciousness, and their dialectic approaches to it.

I. First, I will briefly examine the history of dialectic in philosophical inquiry, leading to an understanding of the dialectic of identity and difference. Both Hegel’s and Nāgārjuna’s approaches to consciousness and self-consciousness within the context of dialectic is, needless to say, neither a simple nor necessarily a straightforward task. But perhaps a brief

mapping of the development of dialectic over time will shed some light on this philosophical method of inquiry. The dialectic method as we know it is commonly traced back to Plato and Aristotle. Andrew Cole, however, argues that ‘the dialectic’ as it is discussed within contemporary critical theory, “is a product of the Middle Ages and not classical antiquity” (Cole 24). It was Hegel who, at no little risk to his intellectual standing, resurrected the medieval turn in the dialectic method, which would subsequently inspire an innovative and critical approach to modern philosophy going forward. Hegel’s dialectic, like that of his medieval predecessors, depends on placing *identity* and *difference* “at the center of the art of dialectic itself [in order for] the dialectic [to] work” (26-27), Cole argues.

But I turn first to Plato before moving on to the Middle Ages, so that the distinctions between the ancient and medieval forms of dialectic may be clarified. Anthony Kenny says that, for Plato, dialectic “treats its assumptions, not as first principles [as do mathematicians], but literally as hypotheses, like stepping stones or starting points on a journey up to an un-hypothetical first principle.” In other words, the dialectician, Kenny says, “takes a hypothesis, [or any] questionable assumption, and tries to show that it leads to a contradiction [through “puzzling on both sides of the subject”]. When a contradiction is reached, the [original] hypothesis is abandoned, and [the] other premises, used to derive the contradiction, are then tested; and so on, [proceeding on an upward path] until a premise is reached that is unquestionable (Kenny 128).”

For Plato, dialectic often finds its definition in “debate, the asking and answering of questions”. However, Cole suggests that the further understanding of dialectic as “the art of definition and division, as a means to ‘determine what each thing really is’, is overwhelmingly [Plato’s] most frequent explanation”; wherein, within the debate the object(s) of dialogue are sublated (Cole 28). This form of dialectic ultimately leads to a procession of ‘that which is like another’, an endless string of the same, or similar things or

subjects, 'kind by kind'. We also find Platonic dialecticians practicing a reversal of ordinary perceptions, dividing what we normally consider a unitary existent into multiple divisions and different forms as a way of getting at the definition or truth of the existent.

Plato argues that five primal forms comprise all intelligibles and existents, i.e., Being, Motion, Rest, Identity, and Difference. These last two, identity and difference, are what later thinkers, beginning with Plotinus, will appropriate to develop a new approach to dialectic. Cole cites the example of Hegel's lord/bondsman dialectic, where the identity of the bondsman is dependent upon his difference from, and reciprocity with the lord, and vice versa; this stands in contradistinction to Plato's analysis and explication of the same relationship in *Parmenides*, where the lord's identity depends exclusively upon his participation in the Form called 'lordship', and not in the reciprocity or reflexivity of his relationship with the bondsman (29).

The medieval turn in dialectic, moving beyond the Platonic and Aristotelian methods of rhetoric and puzzling through both sides of a subject, begins at the turn of the third century, with Plotinus (b. 204 C.E.), arguably the last of the great ancient philosophers. Plotinus expands dialectic to include ontology, metaphysics, and cosmology, creating a fresh and spacious dialectic of *identity and difference* in both its abstract and determinate forms, *emphasizing relation*, "specifically, the *nature and relation* of things". According a place of first priority to *relation* as such, points directly to a dialectic analysis of, as Plotinus says, "what each is, how it differs from others, [and] what common quality all have". This is a unique turn in dialectic, as it attempts to "*think across the void* of non-being and being, and seeks to conceptualize this transition without giving up and dismissing the [whole] problem" as, in Cole's words, "[some sort of] 'strange thing'(36)".

However, it is Nicholas of Cusa (b. 1401 C.E.) who Cole argues is the most important of the medieval German scholastic thinkers to our historical mapping. Nicholas's central project advances the idea that all oppositions are undone through the dialectic process. His embrace of *apparent* contradiction is important, and distances him further from the Platonists and Aristotelians. His premise of *dual ontologies*, of both identity *and* of difference, and of the 'coincidence of opposites', is central to his philosophical project, while predicated on the earlier dialectical turn of Plotinus. Nicholas explains this further in his *De Li Non Aliud (On the Not-Other)*:

For Not-other is the most congruent Form (ratio), Standard, and Measure of the existence of all existing things, of the nonexistence of all non-existing things, of the possibility of all possibilities, of the manner of existence of all things existing in any manner, of the motion of all moving things, of the rest of all nonmoving things, of the life of all living things, of the intelligibility of all intelligible things, and so on for all other things of this kind. I see this to be necessary, in that I see that Not-other defines itself and, hence, all nameable things (47).

Here Nicholas is proposing to inject difference into the very core or being of identity, thinking difference sublated within identity, and confronting the challenge of dialectical thinking head on with his fusion of identity/difference.

II. Hegel then set out to transform the notion of contradiction, moving from a logical basis to a metaphysical one, and making dialectic into a theory or practice not simply of arguments or distinctions, but of historical processes within the development of 'spirit'. Frederic Jameson argues that dialectic, in its Hegelian form, "set out to inscribe *time and change* in our concepts themselves, [thereby] showing how some all-too-human longing for timelessness obscured the inadequacy of our mental categories and filtered out the glare of contradictions as such". Robert Pippin adds that Hegel "argued that any attempt to categorize

anything at all must ultimately make use of the distinctions of ‘essence’ and appearance’, elements of syllogism, and finally Hegel’s own dialectical logic.” Dialectic, Hegel concludes, “is therefore involved in the being, and the coming-into-being, of anything” (75). Alexandre Kojève concludes that, for Hegel, dialectic serves as “the adequate description of the *structure* of Being, and of the realization and appearance of Being as well” (Kojève, 259).

As we approach the notions of consciousness and self-consciousness at work within the dialectic, Hans-Georg Gadamer says that for Hegel, consciousness is self-reflexive; it is *self-consciousness*. Hegel’s approach to consciousness, which is essentially a synthesis of Kant’s apperception (i.e., the indirect knowledge of self that accompanies all perceptions, but is not that perception), is not as “something previously given, but as something to be specifically demonstrated as the truth in all consciousness. *All* consciousness is self-consciousness” (274, my emphasis). Following this thread along, Michael Payne points out that Hegel is arguing that “consciousness operates not only by defining what falls within its scope, but also by breaching what it previously thought to be its defining limitations and then incorporating those sublated definitions into a newly expanded structure of thought (3).” Which is nothing less than the nature of the never-ending arising of consciousness. *Thus, a primary feature of consciousness, he says, is the dialectic which acts in “its capacity to think about a topic and simultaneously to assess critically how that topic is being thought about”* (3). This is the ever-reflexive consciousness affirming (its)self.

Early in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel posits that the cognizing subject, i.e., the self-consciousness, believes it can know an object through its mere sensory awareness of it. This he describes as ‘sense certainty’ (*die sinnliche Gewißheit*). But, failing to develop or perceive a full understanding of the object through just the sensory faculties, Hegel recognizes that the perceived object possesses qualities, or universals, as well. But as all

objects possess qualities, and in some instances what appear to be the same qualities as other, like objects, then it follows, he argues, that these observed, distinct qualities are merely our own notions or ideas -or concepts about them- as distinct from the object in-itself. From here, Hegel considers the dialectic of what we represent or believe to be the appearance of the thing vs. the fundamental, unchanging 'reality' of that thing or object, the inherent thing-ness, or being in-itself for-itself. Could it then perhaps follow that the manifesting appearances of all things are the result of some invisible, to us, force; that despite all the changes which are forever appearing to us, that there is an underlying reality that endures as a 'law of nature'? This is perhaps merely an arbitrary move, and even a manipulative move on the part of a purposive consciousness looking for a grounding reality, an *Absolute*, or a Notion (*Begriff*) which is beyond mere worldly appearances, but nevertheless gives us something to hang our hat on, or, as Hegel says, "an unessential consciousness which embodies the truth of [our] certainty of [our]self" (110).

So, in seeking to understand how the subject understands itself, as an object for- and in-itself, yet distinct from other objects, Hegel moves on to consider how it is that we *achieve* self-consciousness (*das Selbstbewußstein*). We achieve this self-consciousness, Hegel posits, through our *desire*, which manifests as our will to change an object, i.e., to negate it. Through this process of consciousness and willful negation, we thereby affirm our own being-in-itself. We experience a recognition of our self to ourselves; and most directly we experience *recognition* through an intersubjective exchange with another. As illustration, Hegel invokes the master/slave, or lord/bondsman dialectic, whereby the master is willing to go so far as to risk his life in his drive to negate the other, so as to thereby affirm himself by virtue of the vanquished being obligated to acknowledge him as vanquisher. However, in an Orwellian twist, the slave achieves, through an unfolding series of transformative self-reflections, his

own self-consciousness as freedom, as his labor under the master becomes self-affirming in a way that the work of the master, as lord of the bondsman, can never achieve. This experience of true self-reflexive self-consciousness becomes liberating for the slave, a freedom which the master never experiences. The slave becomes free; not in fact, of course, but in idea.

III. A different approach to the dialectic of identity and difference is offered by the philosophical project developed by the 2nd century Indian Buddhist philosopher, Nāgārjuna, the project known as Madhyamaka, or the Middle Way. Beginning in the 7th century, Buddhism began to take root in Tibet, as successive Tibetan kings invited Buddhist scholars from India's renowned Buddhist University, Nālandā, in Bihar, northeastern India, to establish normative Buddhist scholasticism and monasticism in their country. However, with the subsequent violent suppression of Buddhism in India beginning around the 11th century by Turkic invaders, vast libraries of Buddhist texts in their original Sanskrit were lost as Buddhist monasteries and universities were sacked and burned. I outline this historical development because what survives of Nāgārjuna's writings come down to us only in their Tibetan and/or Chinese translations, and now their English re-translations.

The central thesis of Nāgārjuna's philosophy is that of emptiness (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) by reason of the dependent co-origination (*pratītya samutpāda*) of all beings and things. If we posit that all things, including ourselves, are in fact empty, that raises the obvious question, Empty of what? Nāgārjuna argues in his central text, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or *The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*, that self, or our self-consciousness which gives rise to the belief in a self, is empty of any inherent or independent existence in-itself. Nāgārjuna in fact goes further still by positing that all inherent existence, all things or substances, or anything that we might like to say has an intrinsic nature in-itself (Sanskrit: *svabhāva*

[Tibetan: *rang bzhin*]), is emptiness (*śūnyatā* [Tib.: *strong pa nyid*]). But contrary to some readings, this does not point towards a nihilistic metaphysical conclusion. On the contrary, Nāgārjuna's emptiness is not the 'Nothing' we find in Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?", nor Hegel's 'Nothing' from the *Phenomenology of Mind*, but is, rather, a luminous knowingness, which is *itself* emptiness. Khenchen Thrangu explains this as an "emptiness that gives rise to all phenomena and is continually expressive" (Thrangu 12). In other words, all is emptiness, that very emptiness is empty, and yet, we simultaneously experience appearances continually manifesting.

Nāgārjuna employs an elegant dialectic of identity/difference throughout his philosophical project. For instance, he argues that neither operations nor phenomena that appear to exist independently do, inherently, exist; however, these phenomena are simultaneously not non-existent, as they appear conventionally to us as real things and appearances. This argument for a simultaneously appearing, yet insubstantial reality turns on the dialectic of the two truths: a conventional, conceptual, empirical, or concealing truth (*saṃvṛtisatya* [*kun rdzob bden pa*]); and ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya* [*don dam bden pa*]). Nāgārjuna writes:

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth (Garfield 1995, 296, §24-8).

Garfield explains that his translation of *saṃvṛtisatya* as '*the truth of worldly convention*' "suggests a truth dependent upon tacit agreement, an everyday truth, a truth about things as they appear to accurate ordinary investigation, as judged by appropriate human standards" (297). Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura further explain conventional truth as "a set of beliefs that ordinary people use in their daily conduct, and it is conventional (*saṃvṛti*)

because of its reliance on conventions concerning semantic and cognitive relations” (272). Chögyam Trungpa describes this conventional truth as an “ordinary sense of sanity, which means seeing things very directly and very ordinarily. There is no problem of any kind happening, just ordinary simple sanity, seeing things as they are” (Trungpa 90). (In the Tibetan Mahamudra tradition from which Trungpa is speaking, two kinds of conventional truth are identified: first, a *perverted* conventional truth (*log pa'i run rdzob*), which is the way “the world looks to a psychotic, or a person under the influence of any kind of drug, [or] strain, [or] tiredness, or [in a] dream. As far as that person’s mind is concerned, it is true and complete; [this perverted] conventional truth cannot be denied as false; it is what you experience on the spot” (90). And the second conventional truth is a *pure* conventional truth (*yang dag pa'i run rdzob*), “which is very simple and very direct, absolutely direct and simple; ordinary simple sanity. There are no metaphysical or religious fantasies involved.” (89-90).) This stands in stark contradistinction to Hegel’s description of the self-consciousness of Scepticism, which only, through negation of the object to which it stands in relation, “procures for itself the certainty of its own freedom, brings about the experience of that freedom, and thereby raises it into the truth” (Hegel 117).

Paramārthasatya [dam-pa'i don gyi bden-pa], or ultimate truth, on the other hand, points to the nature of things that is free of conventions or our imputations on their ultimate nature, that ultimate nature being emptiness. Nāgārjuna says that the emptiness which is the ultimate nature of all things, is also empty. This is ultimate truth: that the true character of reality is utterly devoid of existing entities, that it is without the hypostatization of intrinsic nature, and, that finally, “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth” (Siderits & Katsura 273). In the Tibetan Mahamudra tradition, ultimate truth (*don dam bden pa*) is translated from the Tibetan as ‘*the superior meaning of truth*’, and points towards

“experiencing reality in its fullest sense, without regarding any individual style as tangible from the ego-clinging point of view” (Trungpa 91). (There are also two types of ultimate truth according to the Tibetan Mahamudra tradition: ‘*accountable*’ ultimate truth (*rnam grang pa’i don dam*), and ‘*not-having accountable*’ ultimate truth (*rnam grans ma yin p’ai don dam*). “Everything is a completely vast experience” in the second of the two ultimate truths, Trungpa says, while the former is characterized by the experience of “the simplicity, ordinariness, transparency and nonexistence of certain issues”. The *accountable* ultimate truth, he continues, “is not vast enough yet, but at least it is workable, touchable, experienceable;” in contrast to the ‘*not-having accountable*’ ultimate truth, where one “begins to immerse oneself in the world actually and fully” (91-92).)

The paradox within the dialectic outlined above is that, while distinct, the two truths are identical. Jameson comments on a confluence and paradox of this nature, saying that “the dialectic will always begin to appear when thinking approaches the dilemma of incommensurability, in whatever form; and the dialectic henceforth seems to be the shift of thinking on to a new and unaccustomed plane in an effort to deal with the fact of distinct and autonomous realities that seem to offer no contact with each other” (Jameson, *Valences* 24). The dialectic that is happening here is further elucidated by Jay Garfield when he argues that “the ultimate truth is emptiness, and emptiness is dependent origination, which is the fundamental nature of the *conventional* world; the ultimate truth is that there is no intrinsic nature to things, only their conventional nature, and so there is *nothing other* than that nature” (Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom* 80, my emphasis). This then leads us to the conclusion that, if the only way for existents to exist is as conventional things which are empty and dependently co-arising, which is itself the ultimate truth, it follows that the ultimate truth and the conventional truth are undifferentiated. Nothing is ultimately real or true; nor untrue, for

that matter. Thus there is no reification of emptiness in the Madhyamaka stance. Furthermore, this Madhyamaka dialectic precludes any conclusion of the conventional world as unimportant or trivial, and undermines any view which eschews, as so much meaningless banality, conduct which is ethical and moral.

To conclude, it can be said that the true aim of Madhyamaka thought, as Jan Westerhoff explains, is “not simply to present an accurate account of the nature of the world [and of self-consciousness], but to bring about a cognitive change, a change in the way in which the world appears to us” (Westerhoff 8), and how we, in turn, view and interact with the world.

IV. Ai Weiwei is a fascinating contemporary artist on many levels, and especially so when viewed in the context of the east-west dialectic we are examining here. Ai Weiwei embodies, personally and artistically, the dialectic of identity/difference, imbued with the compassion born of non-dual emptiness as explicated by Nāgārjuna. Ai’s praxis is simultaneously evocative of a Marxian dialectic, which, as David Harvey explains, “understands and represents processes of motion, change and transformation” (Harvey 11).

To begin to approach an understanding of how this artist developed in this way, I want to turn to a brief history of Ai Weiwei. Ai’s parents, poets and writers of note, were early targets of the Chinese cultural revolution, labeled as ‘rightists’, and subsequently exiled to the rural Xinjiang Region of northwest China from their home in Beijing a year after Ai’s birth. As a consequence, Ai remarked, “I have lived with political struggle since birth” (Horowitz 39).

Following the death of Mao Tse-Tung in 1976, and the subsequent fall of the Gang of Four, Ai’s father, Ai Qing (b. 1910), was deemed ‘rehabilitated’, and the family was allowed

to return to Beijing. Subsequently, Ai enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy, and thereafter participated in the first early art exhibitions of the emerging Chinese avant garde. But in 1981, Ai abandoned China, and embarked on a dozen-year odyssey to the US, arriving first on the West Coast, and then settling for more than a decade in New York City. This period in Ai's life was a rich period of incubation of identity in tension with the profound difference and foreignness of American culture into which he had thrown himself. For ten years, Ai copiously documented the quotidian of his life; on the street, in the subway, and in his and friends' apartments through thousands of photographs.

Ai discovered and embraced the New York art scene; most notably, he recounts, was the pop art of Andy Warhol (Fig. 1); the iconoclasm of Duchamp; Jasper Johns, and his

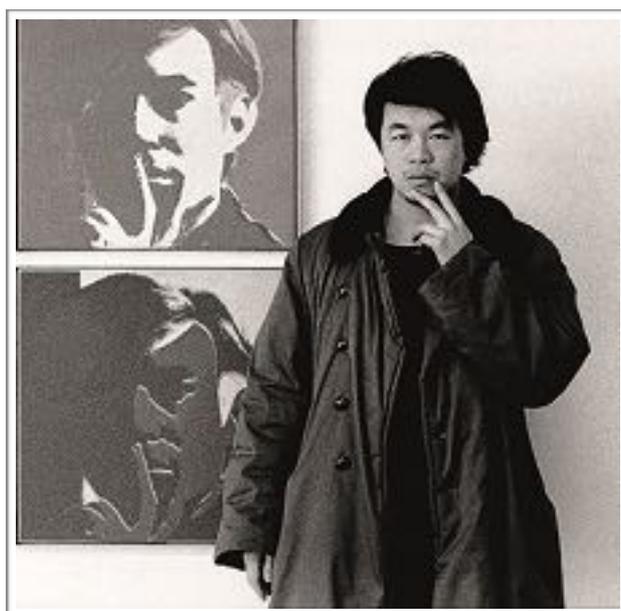


Fig. 1

“emotional detachment, or indifference” (11); Donald Judd’s simple forms and systematic minimalism; and the Buddhist-influenced Beat poet Allen Ginsburg (Fig. 2). Not long after arriving in New York, Ai created the photograph of the sculpture, *Hanging Man: Homage to Duchamp - 1983* (Fig. 3), a bent coat hanger of the appropriated profile of Duchamp’s face from one of Duchamp’s own works, with a dialectical fill of sunflower seeds. The sunflower



Fig. 2

seed is a common street snack in China, and a reference to Mao Tse-tung; a multifaceted symbol from the artist's childhood. The coat hanger, ubiquitous of the Chinese laundries

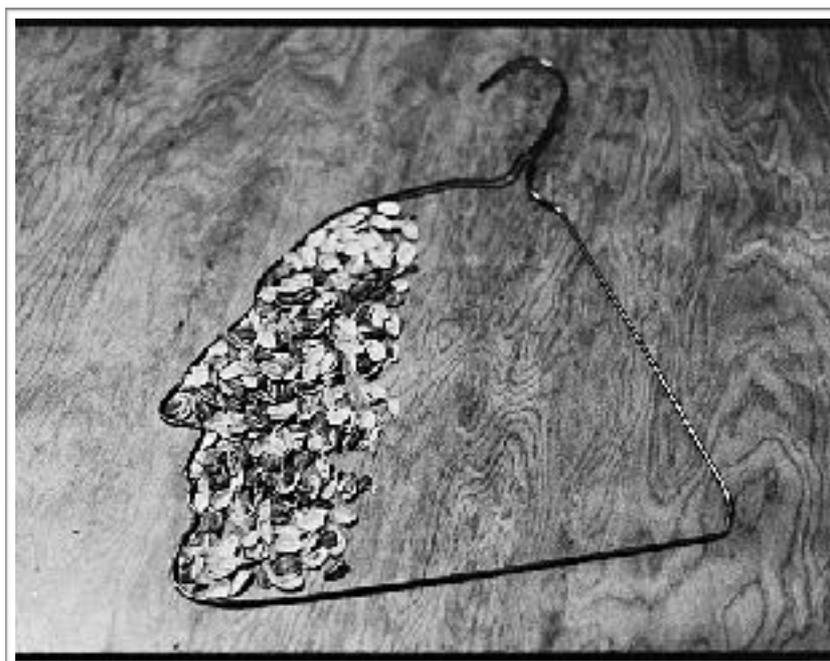


Fig. 3

found throughout New York during Ai's residency, is similarly a nod to the concept of the 'readymade' introduced by Duchamp. Duchamp here is, clearly, the *difference* to Ai's *identity*. Another staged photograph, made in 1988, is *Chateau Lafite* (fig. 4), illustrative of the potent dialectic of his life in New York: two traditional Chinese cloth shoes encase an empty bottle of expensive French wine.

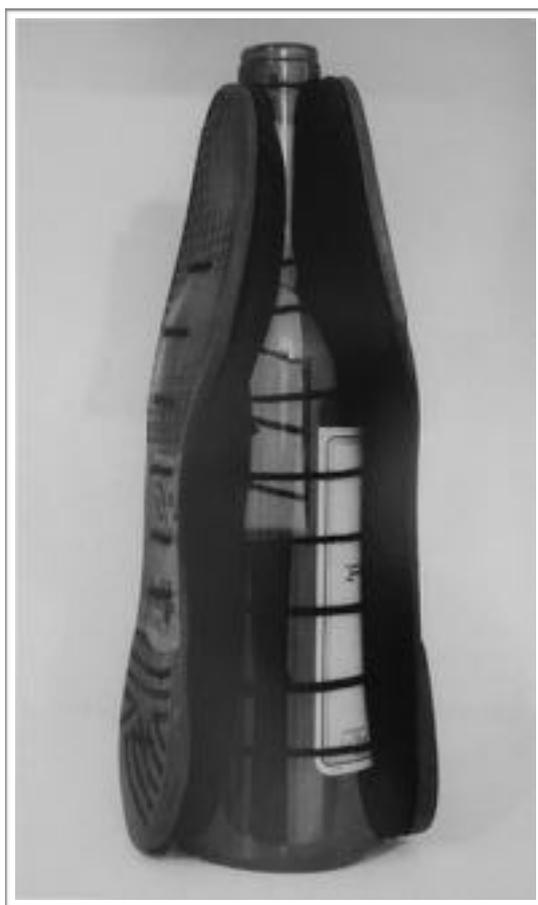


Fig. 4

Returning to Beijing in 1993 due to the declining health of his father, Ai plunged into a young and vibrant art scene unlike anything he had known in the China of a dozen years earlier. Not long before the ill-fated Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations of 1989, the 'Beijing East Village' neighborhood sprang up amidst the creative flurry of young artists.

These artists, already a generation younger than Ai, were hungry for news beyond Beijing, especially of the New York art scene, and Ai became a mediator between the latter and an emerging, dramatically new China.

The old China which his parents had inhabited, and which, no doubt, Ai absorbed at home as a child, was a synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. The Buddhism of pre-Mao China was grounded in the dialectic of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka Buddhism with an admixture of Taoism; the ethics of the society were grounded in the thought of Confucius and Mencius. This was Ai's world, and his identity was firmly grounded in it. Ai has said, in describing his praxis vis à vis his understanding of the culture and the world around him, that

thoughts about art, culture, morality, philosophy, and rationality are closely related to a judgment about value. Society's collective judgment establishes our views of reality and what is deemed acceptable. [...] To encroach on those fixed notions of the world is to question our fundamental state of mind. Art should always play on that understanding. It should create room for us to reconsider our reality (Horowitz 39).

There was much more at work here. Ai soon set to work on an artistic deconstruction of his identity as *Chinese*, and a rich archeology of Chinese tradition, culture, patriarchy, hegemony, truth, and freedom ensued. "I re-evaluated", Ai says, "different forms of expression and how considerations of aesthetics should relate to morality and philosophy" (39). One of his earliest works that marks this turn is a 1995 photographic triptych, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (Fig. 5), documenting his negation of China's 2,000+ years of cultural heritage. This became a signature iconoclastic statement of Ai Weiwei, embodying the dialectic at work within his emerging artistic praxis of deconstructing the Chinese identity within a rapidly changing social, cultural, and economic landscape, and



Fig. 5

highlighting the emerging tension between the truths and non-truths of yesterday, and the *aufhebung* of the old into the new occurring within contemporary China. We see in Ai's artistic practice that each object always has another meaning, a meaning which is not only other than itself, but more than itself. As Jameson says, "the hermeneutic process — changing the one thing into its more essential meaning — is prepared and indeed imperiously summoned by the very movement of dialectical *Aufhebung* itself" (Jameson, *Valences* 110).

The act of symbolic anarchy, or, as some have said, cultural desecration, in dropping the Han Dynasty urn is a clear and dramatic statement about *dialectic*; Jameson suggests that we might consider, in such an instance, that in a "metaphysical or ontological sense, Difference is here *Being itself*" (*Valences*, 114, my emphasis). Jameson quotes a passage from Deleuze which speaks to the dialectic of identity/difference which Ai and his work so strongly evoke:

Instead of one thing that distinguishes itself from another thing, let's imagine something which does distinguish itself — and yet what it distinguishes itself *from* is not distinguished from it. Lightning for example distinguishes itself from the night sky, yet must somehow draw that sky along with it, as though it distinguished itself from

something which is not distinct. It is as if the background rises to the surface, without ceasing to be a background. There's something cruel and even monstrous on both sides, in this struggle against an elusive imperceptible adversary, where what is distinct is opposed to something that cannot be distinguished from it and which continues to join with what separates itself from it. Difference is this state of determination as unilateral distinction (115).

What Deleuze is trying to do here is situate difference distinct from identity. Identity, he posits, can be “dethroned as the primary position which it has [held] in all traditional philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel” (115). This is a dramatic reversal, in which Deleuze cites Spinoza as the architect. He further argues

that identity is not first, that it does exist as a principle, but only as second principle, as one that is produced [*comme principe devenu*]; that it hovers around the Different, such is the nature of that Copernican revolution that opens up for difference the possibility of having its own concept, rather than maintaining it under the domination of a general concept already posited as identical (115).

However, in Hegel we see that Difference is *produced* by and through identity, out of itself, and the longer we comport with Difference, the more we find it inevitably transforming back into identity (i.e., subjectivity). Negation, which for Hegel “is the very motor of history — the ‘labor and suffering of the negative’ — and the heart of contradiction itself” (116), arises in this interplay or interpenetration of identity and Difference, and Ai employs this dialectic throughout, in each iconoclastic paradox within his work. For example, his installation of straightened rebar salvaged from the rubble of collapsed school buildings from the 2008 earthquake in Chengdu, Sichuan (*Wenchuan Steel Rebar, 2008-2012*, fig. 6), situates absence alongside identity, uniformity as difference from the chaos of destruction, negation of the individual, in this case thousands of school children, at the hands of anonymous political

corruption and flawed construction practices; Ai's is a Marxian method of descent into the reality of the world around us, "looking ever deeper for the concepts fundamental to that reality" (Harvey 8). Resurfacing from this subterranean excavation, Ai finds radical ways to



fig. 6

reinterpret the truths he encounters in this world.

Ai Weiwei's *Chair*, from 2008, (fig. 7) is, to my mind, one of the artist's most plaintive and personal pieces in its simplicity and extreme subtlety. Carved from marble, this unitary form is an image of a common 19th-century chair found in homes throughout China. Ai explains that this chair is a duplicate of the only piece of furniture which his father was allowed to carry with him when his family was exiled from their home in Beijing to the northwest of China in 1958. The materiality of the piece, however, i.e., marble, is the medium commonly found in Greek and Roman statuary, or in public monuments. Through the choice of marble as medium, Ai elevates his sculpture of a simple chair to that of statuary. This work is haunting in its elegance, in its solitariness, in its apparent disconnection from life. In one sense, it is a cold, lifeless form. The chair's occupant, in this case Ai's father, Ai Qing, is not just missing - he is under erasure; as is the chair's maker. The chair, in its dialectic, exclaims



Fig. 7

absence by its presence; while the elegance of the material and the craftsmanship creates an uncomfortable tension with the banality that is its representation.

But perhaps Ai's most profound personal statement is the recent and very controversial self-portrait he made of himself lying face-down, at water's edge, on a beach on the Greek island of Lesbos (Fig. 8); replicating a photograph of a drowned Syrian child washed ashore amidst the on-going refugee crises. But the critics of this piece have completely missed, or misinterpreted, the dialectic at work here. This work erases all difference from identity for Ai, and all distance from difference. He is saying: 'I, too, am this child of our human family. I, too, am a victim of the current world disorder, and its indiscriminate violence against its own peoples'. This is the heart of Nāgārjuna's dialectical explication of emptiness: there is no 'I' that exists in contradistinction to, or apart from an



Fig. 8

‘other’; and for this reason compassion for others who don’t understand the truth of emptiness springs forth. This one work sublates all of Ai Weiwei’s praxis into a towering, iconic statement.

For Ai Weiwei, his praxis has closely followed the Hegelian as well as a Marxian dialectical method, in which the dynamic and movement of ethical and political life of humankind is under critique, in contrast to more circumscribed perspectives of mere “theoretical designs of logic and epistemology” (Schrag 731). The dialectical pragmatism evident in Ai’s work informs a diverse landscape, from the mundane (*Chateau Lafite*), to the social/political (*Wenchuan Steel Rebar*); from the human (*Fairytale* - his human installation of 1001 Chinese citizens at dOCUMENTA 2007, in Kassel, Germany; and his self-portrait on a Lesbos beach), to the cultural (*Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*). But the turn of this critique, of the dialectic in his work, is based on a personal, deeply individual identity in the face of difference; of a master/slave dialectic playing itself out on a giant Chinese stage. This was a stage that was promised to feature a production of a proletarian paradise, but instead is playing a rerun of just another tragic failure at a flawed attempt at a socialist utopia. It is the

wanton human failure in the face of a promised utopia that comes in for Ai's harshest criticism. This experiment, that has been more Mao than Marx, has produced a nightmare every bit as pungent as what Marx's archeology of capitalism unearthed.

But therein lies another paradoxical twist, a completely unexpected dialectic. Ai Weiwei's various works since his return to China in 1993 have been enormously labor-intensive, impossible except within the particular landscape of economy and socially-necessary labor value of contemporary China. The craftspeople/assistants are compensated on a scale which, from a Western point of view, is exceedingly low. But when Ai's work goes to public auction, as did one iteration of his carved marble *Chair*, in 2013, it commands a price set by the western capitalist marketplace that is unreflective of socially-necessary labor value in China (in this case, a sale price of US\$120,000). It could be argued that Ai's iconoclastic critique has simultaneously embraced the 'invisible hand' of the marketplace, resulting in a relative surplus labor value which would be the envy of every capitalist, and which had come in for such harsh criticism by Marx. Has Ai's praxis evolved to become a problematic dialectic in this instance?

Perhaps the Hegelian master/slave dialectic is playing out, albeit slowly, in contemporary China, whereby the slave, in this case the wage-laborer, will gain freedom through a reflective act of self-consciousness. But if so, it is still not readily apparent today; certainly Nāgārjuna's dialectic of the two truths is not apparent in China. For the Chinese communist party, there is but one truth: theirs. Not long ago, however, the Nāgārjunian dialectic permeated Chinese society in a cultural synthesis of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. In modern China, a dialectic remains, but it is now one full of tension between the identity or freedom of the individual and their difference from, and subservience to the State, and the new capitalist order; the same State which is, of course, alleged to be 'the

People's State'. In this regard, it is interesting to reflect on Ai's work of late, which has focused on an interrogation of the European refugee crisis, and the human tragedies that have unfolded in its wake. These works have been controversial in some circles, perhaps because Ai has stepped out of his home environment, China, and sought an engagement in an arena not his own, i.e., Europe and the Middle East. And yet, it is the dialectic of identity/difference and the two truths which imbue these recent works with such power. The tension here between master and slave, the government and the people, identity/difference, resonates with a polyphonic timbre.

In this paper, I have attempted to analyze the dialectical methods employed throughout classical, medieval, Hegelian, and Buddhist Madhyamaka thought; and to further suggest that Ai Weiwei employs dialectic to great effect in his praxis. It cannot be overstated the force that the dialectic method of identity and difference brings to his work. The degree of compassion which Ai demonstrates for his fellow human beings is unmistakable in the themes he develops. This signals a pervasiveness of Buddhist ethics and dialectic deep within Ai Weiwei, if not reflective of an albeit fading Chinese culture in large measure. There are Marxian turns, as well, in his commentaries on the social and economic developments within China since the early 1990s, which we have not been able to plumb here. But always there is the human element, the human twist, the human identity. It is to this identity, this individuality, that Ai Weiwei strives to give a voice, indeed a freedom, through his praxis.

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