

reclaiming art from capitalism

contemporary art has become just a form of entertainment

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CONTEMPORARY CULTURE, by which I mean the paintings, sculpture, audio-visual media, literature and poetry that have emerged since the Industrial Revolution, bears the mark of the times. Over the past 200 years fundamental changes in manufacturing, and an emphasis on the pursuit of profit, have transformed economics, politics and culture. It was a huge leap unlike anything that had previously occurred in history, dramatically expanding mankind's capabilities and resulting in global differences in wealth and development. Powerful European and North American nations plundered other parts of the world. In the post-cold-war era, a new framework of globalisation emerged, championed by the West, its political bodies and monopolistic corporations. Political and cultural discourses are dominated by the need to make profits. The national boundaries that once delineated territories seem not to exist any more.

All this is reflected in our era's culture. It is unduly influenced by profit-driven companies with inordinate power over our economic and political structures, education and media. Their pervasive impact is manifested in society's value judgments, aesthetic education and philosophy. The cultural landscape is also shaped by the framework of Western capitalism and its associated concepts of democracy, freedom and a partial dose of socialism. A complete system has been formed, spanning from the shaping of aesthetics under these conditions, through cultural education, art criticism and the curatorial processes of galleries and museums, to artworks' eventual entry into the narrative of Western art history. This system reflects the values and aesthetic tendencies of capitalism in every respect.

It is characterised by capitalism's fervent advocacy of individual freedom, its encouragement of so-called "creativity" and the idealisation of unfettered personal development. Its symptoms can be observed in the overwhelming tendency to consider art from a purely commercial perspective, neglecting spiritual concerns in favour of wealth accumulation. At the same time, societal injustices, regional inequalities, exploitation of the weak and unsustainable use of natural resources are ignored. By dodging these questions, contemporary art has become just a form of entertainment, detached from spiritual life. Art's power to shape self-awareness and assist in the understanding of identity has been compromised. The outlook is dim.

I believe that art can develop in a meaningful and rewarding manner only when it redefines the human condition. An artist, as a human being, is both an individual and a member of society. It is impossible for individuals in our era to escape from the broader political context. To be aware of one's unique existence and spiritual nature, it is vital to remain sensitive to the human condition and conscious of the origin of morality. Without consciousness, there is no morality. Over the years, my artworks have been concerned with life and death, the

bigger sociopolitical context, global environmental change and the ongoing pandemic and its impact on humanity and the human condition. They are all connected with the human condition and human dignity, which provided the inspiration for “Black Chandelier” (2021) and “A Tree” (2021). My future works will continue in this vein.

In 2022 and beyond, the prevailing aesthetic values will be questioned, but awareness and action will be needed to bring about real change. Authenticity and accuracy are the most important requirements for artists. That is why art cannot shy away from aesthetics and ethics. The core of all art lies in the sense of responsibility that artists have, both as individuals and social beings. Art is a unique form of expression and a language of its own, capable of sounding a warning for the present and the future.

A cornerstone of life

Humans’ intellectual limitations provide artistic possibilities. Despite mankind’s exaggerated self-esteem, extreme arrogance and tendency to overestimate the degree of control we have over the universe, humans have been unable to escape the fact of their own mortality. Life and death, pain and disappointment, exploitation and sacrifice—all provide the best soil in which art can flourish, awakening humanity and constantly reshaping self-awareness. Art is as vital as religion and science, an indispensable cornerstone of life. Even if it is temporarily eclipsed by human greed and desire, its re-emergence is inevitable, and all of humanity will be the better for it.

Ai Weiwei: artist and activist ■

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