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KGFA 505

The Politics and Art of Social Justice

The title “China’s Most Dangerous Man” conveys images of an autocratic political leader, inhumane and callous towards his very own people. But in the postmodern world, this title belongs to a brave, middle-aged man of considerable talent with revolutionary and unrelenting questions for the Chinese government. “China’s Most Dangerous Man” has been attributed to Ai WeiWei, a contemporary artist using his art to offend and enlighten *anyone* and *everyone* with his bold statements asking for change in China. Ai WeiWei is acknowledging through his art installations the desperate need for change in the 21st century. The discourse of this paper begins with this question: “Can art change the world by using it’s visual voice to express outrage in regard to political and social issues, or is art meant to remain a separate, a somewhat powerless entity that speaks a passive and elite language that the world either cannot or will not listen to?”

In 2011 security agents arrested Ai WeiWei at the Beijing airport, as he was about to board a flight to Hong Kong. His studio was raided soon after. This was a governmental attempt to restrict permissible expression from outspoken activists like Ai WeiWei. WeiWei has since been given a conditional release; his imprisonment and release made international headlines, earning him the title “China’s Most Dangerous Man”. He is not afraid to protest his distaste for the Chinese government and he is boldly using his contemporary art to do so. WeiWei and his controversial art have become a human rights symbol in China and throughout the world.

Ai WeiWei has been quoted to say:

“In normal circumstances I know it’s undesirable for an artist to be labeled a political activist or dissident. But I’ve overcome that barrier,” Ai says in a statement he wrote to the Hirshhorn Museum, which exhibited a collection of his work. “The suits that people dress you in are not as important as the content you put forth, so long as it gives meaning to new expression. The struggle is worthwhile if it provides new ways to communicate with people and society.” (Bougher)

Ai WeiWei accepts the hardships involved in political art because he believes that he is making a shift in cultural barriers and injustices. Consider Ai WeiWei’s most famous installation piece that was recently shown in the Tate Modern Gallery in London. One critic had this to say, “Not least, he is a kind of visionary showman. He cultivates the press, arouses comment and creates spectacles. His signature work, *Sunflower Seeds*—a work of hallucinatory intensity that was a sensation at the Tate Modern Gallery in London in 2010—consists of 100 million pieces of porcelain, each painted by one of 1,600 Chinese craftsmen to resemble a sunflower seed.” (Stevens)

The 100 million seeds were created out of porcelain using traditional methods and painstakingly painted by hand in a Chinese city that has been making Imperial porcelain for over a thousand years. This installation also spotlights the contrast of mass production in a global market versus the value of handcrafted artifacts. This installation took over two years to complete and employed over 1,600 artisans.

The sunflower seeds were symbolic of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In Chinese political propaganda, Chairman Mao had been characterized as the sun while his faithful sunflowers turn to face him. The seeds are also representative as a food source for the impoverished villages in the Chinese cultures. It is also indicative to WeiWei’s political agenda to have the viewer step on the 100 million seeds, symbolically proclaiming that the Chinese people are considered of little value. This installation poetically articulates WeiWei’s political stance.

John Jervis eloquently reviews Ai's *Sunflower Seed* installation; his writing reveals Ai's hope for change and the genuine sense of duty that he feels to society.

"Ai's vital practice utilizes such elements in his own difficult life as pieces of grit to give his work meaning to a wider audience. He is driven by a long-standing desire to encourage both freedom of thought and the strength to act, whether in the face of political repression and censorship or of such new threats to individual expression as materialism and even mass production. *Sunflower Seeds* expressed the responsibility he feels to articulate and further this struggle, and of his belief in the transformative possibilities of society." (Jervis)

Ai WeiWei believes that his work can change the trajectory of society and his artistic talent deploys him with the social responsibility to do so. Ai WeiWei also constructed two installations created out of children's backpacks. One of these installations fabricates a 55-foot long serpent created from 360 children's backpacks that commemorates the deadly 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The concept is based on the scattered backpacks left in the rubble by the thousands of children that had died in the earthquake due to poor building codes. Another one of Ai's installations features cubes that are covered with a total of 5,335 school backpacks. The work is also a response to the Sichuan Province earthquake, and the subsequent "Citizens Investigation" initiated by Ai and his studio colleagues. Ai WeiWei is using his contemporary artistry to create pieces of art that stimulate a philosophical inquiry, questioning social injustice within the political restraints of the Chinese government. Ai is eloquently posing the paramount question for the human race: Are we empathetic to the suffering that surrounds us?

Ai WeiWei is using controversy to create social and political dialogue among the Chinese people that furthers contemporary art as a vehicle for social discourse and political expression. Contemporary art is opening the minds of the masses and is questioning status quo. Ai WeiWei has ruffled the Chinese government and earned international recognition. According to the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty, we each have the responsibility

to speak up against social circumstances that are unjust and require change. Rorty's philosophical theory has hope, believing that we have the potential to become a utopian society if we are brave enough to imagine a world of social justice and we are willing to declare a re-creation of civilization. In accordance with the structuralism theory, we should behave in a civilized manner towards other people because we recognize that we all have one thing in common, the ability to think on a rational level. However, this theory of empathy based on the ability to have rational thoughts breaks down if people are able to design a caste system or hierarchy of different kinds of people into different degrees of "human-ness". In a structuralized world of empathy, one should be kind to all people (or it should be clarified), to all people that are just like you. The structuralist idea of empathy has major flaws because it allows you to justify the plethora of reasons why different people are not like you, not as dignified or not as human. Rorty is considered a Post-Structuralist because his philosophy differs systematically from the Structuralism theory. Rorty has hope that societal change can occur with courage and conviction. He believes that we *can* and *should* use our literary and political voices to start a dialogue between each other and with the elite powers that govern society.

In the book titled, *Politics Of Human Rights*, published in 1999 they have included Rorty's article *Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality*. In this article Rorty clearly suggests a sense of hope:

In the two centuries since the French Revolution, we have learned that humans are far more malleable than Plato or Kant had dreaded. The more we are impressed with this malleability the less interested we become in questions about our ahistorical nature, the more we see a chance to recreate ourselves. If we can work together, we can recreate ourselves into whatever we are clever and courageous enough to imagine ourselves becoming. This sets aside Kant's question of "What is man" and substitutes the question "What kind of world can we prepare for our great grand-children?" (73).

In that same article Rorty begins with a report from Bosnia. He is elucidating the concept of intellectual barriers that we place on each other to determine whether justice is required.

“David Reiff said “To the Serbs, the Muslims are no longer human...Muslim prisoners lying on the ground, in rows, awaiting interrogation, were driven over by a Serb guard in a small delivery van. A Muslim man was forced to bite off the penis of a fellow Muslim. The moral of Reiff’s story is that murderers and rapists do not think of themselves as violating human rights. For they are not doing these things to human beings, they are doing them to Muslims. They are not being inhumane but rather they are discriminating between the true humans and the pseudo humans. “The founder of my university, was able to both own slaves and to think it self evident that all men were endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. He had convinced himself that the consciousness of blacks, like that of animals, participate more of sensation than of reflection. Like the Serbs, Mr. Jefferson did not see himself as violating human rights.” (67)

This quote gives example to the ambivalence towards people who we consider to be the “other” and how that concept manifests itself into a psyche justification of social injustice. This indifference towards others is defended through a system of “mental grouping” of people; this classification determines whom we consider to be “like us” and consequently of a human status that deserves justice, in contrast to those who we consider to be not like us, and therefore a lower level pseudo-human that does not warrant fundamental human rights.

According to Rorty, “The Serbs, Mr. Jefferson, the moralist, The Black Muslims all use the term ‘Men’ to mean people like us.” This “people like us” theory was recently illustrated in the news when Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, who staunchly opposed gay rights, decided that he could no longer justify his conservative stance on the issue of same-sex marriage. CNN reported on March 15, 2013 an exclusive story on the interview of Senator Portman.

“In a series of interviews and an op-ed article published in The Columbus Dispatch, Mr. Portman, at times nervously wringing his hands, said that he did not want his son Will, who is 21, treated any differently because of his sexuality. “I’ve come to the conclusion that for me, personally, I think this is something that we should allow people to do, to get married, and to have the joy and stability of marriage that I’ve had for over 26 years, that I want all of my children to have, including our son, who is gay.” Portman told CNN.

Rorty would applaud this change of view and would use this change of perspective as another example for his “people like us” classification theory.

Does a change in empathy require us to be the parent of a child who is different? Do we require someone in our inner circle to be affected by an injustice or absence of rights? Rorty calls attention to our ability to somehow separate ourselves into classifications; some people should tolerate injustices because they did not make the cut for our “elite circle”. We find ourselves living in the midst of social and political injustices every day doing nothing to reverse it, or worse, cultivating the injustices through our privileged life style.

Rorty proclaims that this lack of ability to empathize can be changed through exposure to other peoples’ lives and perspectives. Can this empathy training be refined through contemporary art? Although some artists are inspired by aesthetic beauty, some contemporary artists find inspiration by the deep-seated desire to draw public attention to the crimes of government or societal acts of social injustice. The mere concept of Artist-Political Activist seems contradictory when you view the definition of the two words. *Art* is defined by the Webster dictionary as “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power”. Whereas the term *Activism* is defined as “the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about

political or social change”. These two connotations seem disparate but they have not only been overlapping in our recent history, they are in the forefront of our contemporary art and political scenes. Artists throughout the world are using their artistic prowess and media savvy to publically question social justice and governmental control, all of which may be at a danger to their personal safety. Richard Rorty would commend these artists and their courageous efforts on the basis that we put aside foundationalism and begin working on something he calls “Sentimental Education”.

The premise of Sentimental Education is the reading and interpreting of stories to acquaint each of us with different kinds of people so that we would be less likely to separate ourselves, creating “Us and Them” categories. Rorty had an interesting view on human rights and education. He believed that if we wanted universal respect for all human beings we should convince people that the justification for inalienable rights should be based on the emotional feeling of empathy, not the rational justification based on an the intellectual argument of reason. He believed if we were to convince societies to defend social justice for all people, we would have a more prominent impact if we influenced people’s empathy levels instead of people’s analytic minds.

He believed that the best way to improve empathy was to experience different perspectives through literature, stories or analyzing political art. By cultivating empathy for people outside of your circle (someone from another class, race or religion) we would provide a face to the victim. Rorty believed this sentimental education would help us to recognize that this person grieves for the death of a child just like we do; this person has the right to live without fear, and this person should be the recipient of inalienable rights.

This inclusive empathy would expand the notion of societal circles to a greater understanding and appreciation of a more universal and connected “us”. In the book titled

the *Politics of Human Rights* (published in 1999) they have included Rorty's article

Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality. In that article Rorty states:

“This empathy education is founded on the basis of imagining yourself in the other person's shoes. This he believed would achieve an Enlightenment Utopia. McGinn believed that if our youth are taught to consider the perspective of the oppressed and despised that a kinder society would be achieved. The moral utopia theory also breaks down when the students in empathy training has deep concern for the oppressed but intolerance for those people that they consider “irrational”, the religious fundamentalist, the homophobic, the wealthy republican.” (76)

Ai WeiWei is synthesizing Rorty's insistent, yet hopeful voice of empathy education with Nietzsche's post structuralism clarion call, “There are no rules”. Nietzsche's philosophy did not take into account the governmental rule in communist countries. There may not be rules according to Nietzsche but the Chinese government does not subscribe to the Nietzsche philosophy. There are Chinese regulations and artists throughout China who are breaking those governmental regulations are doing so with personal consequences to their own safety. They are guided by the belief and hope that art will be a catalyst for social change.

Rorty suggests in his empathy education that the question should not be “why should I be moral?” The question we should be asking is “Why should I care about a stranger, someone who is not like me, someone who is not my kin?” Nietzsche's answer would be that you don't have a responsibility to a stranger because custom and tradition are morally irrelevant. Rorty's response would be “because her mother would grieve for her” or “he is someone's father”.

Political Activism in art does not remain on the walls of museums and galleries; it is also active in the streets in the form of graffiti art. Consider the status quo disruption created by the Guerilla Girls. This graphic design savvy, feminist group of women kicked

off their opening act to the art world in the 1980's. Their approach may be dripping in sarcastic humor, but it is a force to consider seriously. They are based in New York City and have adopted pseudonyms referring to dead female artists. They remain anonymous by covering their faces with gorilla masks at all public protests or gatherings. On February 29, 2012, Alison Cuddy in her writing for the Chicago Public Media site states the following:

But their goal has always been transparent: to point out a widespread inequity among art types. Museums and dealers mainly show – and sell – the work of white male artists. Their use of simple facts laid bare the exclusion of women and people of color from the city's major art institutions. But their sense of humor simultaneously ups the shock value and makes their message a little...easier to swallow. Take one of their most famous works, *Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum?* In the billboard-size image, a well-known nude, Ingres' *Odalisque*, wears a gorilla mask and seems to contemplate a set of facts: Less than 5 percent of the works in the modern art sections of the Metropolitan Museum are by women. But 85% of their nudes are female. (Chicago Public Media)

During an interview titled, *One Good Move*, Richard Rorty, for *Philosophy Now*, Marchetti asked Rorty, “*What is your general appreciation of the contribution of feminist thinkers?*” I think that feminism has been an extraordinarily successful social movement, one of the best things that have ever happened to the West.” (Marchetti)

The Guerrilla Girls have created media hype in a very intentional way and this hype is taking a front stage seat in political conversations. They are using their artistic creativities to spotlight the gender injustice in the affluent art world. They are asking us to rethink gender equality in the art and political world. Are the Guerrilla Girls providing us with their own version of Rorty's empathy education with their hope for gender equality?

In a published interview by Marchetti, Rorty was asked the question, “*you argue for a classless, casteless, egalitarian society. In what ways could we cooperate to realize such a social democracy?*” His response was “I don't think it's a matter of cooperation so

much as breaking the power of the rich and strong. In my country we need to arrange things so that the rich can't bribe the legislators and can't put on media blitzes in favor of candidates.”

Consider the work of Murad Sobay. Murad is a political artist in the Middle East. Murad Sobay has decided to spread a message of peace and a call to action through graffiti art as a visual response to the current political upheaval in Yemen. His “12 Hour” campaign was initiated on his Facebook page where he requested public participation. Priscilla Frank wrote an article on August 30, 2013 titled: Street Artist Embarks On 12 Hour Graffiti Campaign for the Huffington Post. An excerpt from the article states the following:

“Over the course of 12 hours Sobay held 12 public street art demonstrations, addressing 12 political conflicts on Yemen's horizon, including gun control, sectarianism, and state executed kidnappings. Murals, graffiti and stencil pieces became political weapons in this precarious moment in Yemen's history. The third demonstration, for example, addressing the government-issued "enforced disappearances," invited the public to stencil or draw the faces of those who were taken, alongside the place and date of disappearance in both Arabic and English. Sobay's project, as poetic as it is political, shows how every once in a while art has the ability to change the world.” (Huffington Post)

Sobay summoned the public to action by asking them to participate in the graffiti style protest third hour demonstration. The focus of the demonstration was the enforced disappearances and the government arrests. The Yemen police deny any involvement. The street graffiti illustrates hundreds of names, faces and the location of their disappearance. They public are more determined to question the government than they are concerned with their own arrest or punishment for speaking out.

Many of the political activists have been threatened, jailed or killed. Recently there was a public funeral for the 23-year-old Nour Hatem Zahra. Nour was an activist

protesting in Syria. He was called the “Spray Man” and was using his graffiti art to protest the Syrian government. In National Public Radio news, McEvers delivers on May 5, 2012, the following report on a Syrian graffiti artist:

“The Syrian forces started killing protesters, detaining them, torturing them. And the people started fighting back. But still, there was Nour Hatem Zahra and his friends — organizing protests, hiding activists from the dreaded security forces, ferrying medical supplies to those who were injured but terrified to go to a government hospital. Under torture, one of his friends had given up his name. Zahra later forgave the friend. He was locked up for 56 days. As soon as he got out, he was at it again. He and his friends went around spraying the suburbs of Syria's capital, Damascus, with slogans against the Syrian president: "Down with the traitor." "To the trash heap of history." Pictures of the president with the word "pig" scrawled underneath. On April 29, Zahra was going from neighborhood to neighborhood with his spray paint, jumping from car to car. He sped through a checkpoint for fear of being discovered. Security forces shot him in the leg. His friends and fellow activists say he bled to death. He was later filmed on a dark stairwell, his body stiff, his eyes still open. They called him a martyr. The body was washed, shrouded in white and covered with flowers.” (NPR).

Artists everywhere are stepping onto the social and political justice platform to courageously express their artistic points of view as a means to bring about social change. We have historically looked to reason and the logical mind during the structural period, which determined the false ideology that an analytical meta-narrative should be the guiding belief system for all. This of course, has had negative consequences. The Western culture then steered too far in post-structuralism to say that there are no rules and a personal narrative is our solo guide. We now have contemporary philosophers like Rorty who have asked us to put aside our reverence for rational thought and raise our level of empathy, not just for those people that we keep in our inner circle, but for all people in the human race, *eliminating the inner circle.*

As these spirited artists step into the museums and the streets waving their artistic flags of freedom and equality for all, the question still remains: can art change the world? Philosophers like Richard Rorty have emphasized how we have placed intellectual barriers that allow us to divide and reduce our levels of empathy, bringing with it inhuman atrocities. Artists like Ai WeiWei are forcing the viewer to break down the barriers of otherness and recognize the political injustices must be corrected to allow our society to evolve. Contemporary art is creating a deafening declaration that encompasses both the philosophy that we each have a personal voice that should speak against the injustices in anyone's life not just the injustices within our inner circles. Ai WeiWei most concisely describes this in his *According To What?* artist statement for the Hirshhorn Museum:

A friend once reminded me, saying, "WeiWei, beware of newspapers calling you a dissident. It is dangerous." In normal circumstances, I know it's undesirable for an artist to be labeled a political activist or dissident. But I've overcome that barrier. The suits that people dress you in are not as important as the content you put forth, so long as it gives meaning to new expression. The struggle is worthwhile if it provides new ways to communicate with people and society. As an artist, *I value other artists' efforts to challenge the definition of beauty, goodness, and the will of the times.* These roles cannot be separated. Maybe I'm just an undercover artist in the disguise of a dissident; I couldn't care less about the implications.

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Artist As Social and Political Activist

Post-Structuralism

Kendall College of Art and Design

Professor Diane Zeeuw

Richard Rorty's thoughts on Social Hope...

“someday human beings will be able to think of themselves as free and equal members of a global society and won't have to be afraid of one another.”

- From the October/November 2003 issue of Philosophy Now

Questions to consider”

- Which contemporary artists are using their artistic voices to manifest political and social change?
- Can contemporary artwork force the viewer to break down the barriers of “otherness” and recognize that political injustices must be corrected to allow our society to evolve?
- Does the contemporary philosophy of Richard Rorty provide a viable solution through “Sentimental Education”?

Ai Wei Wei

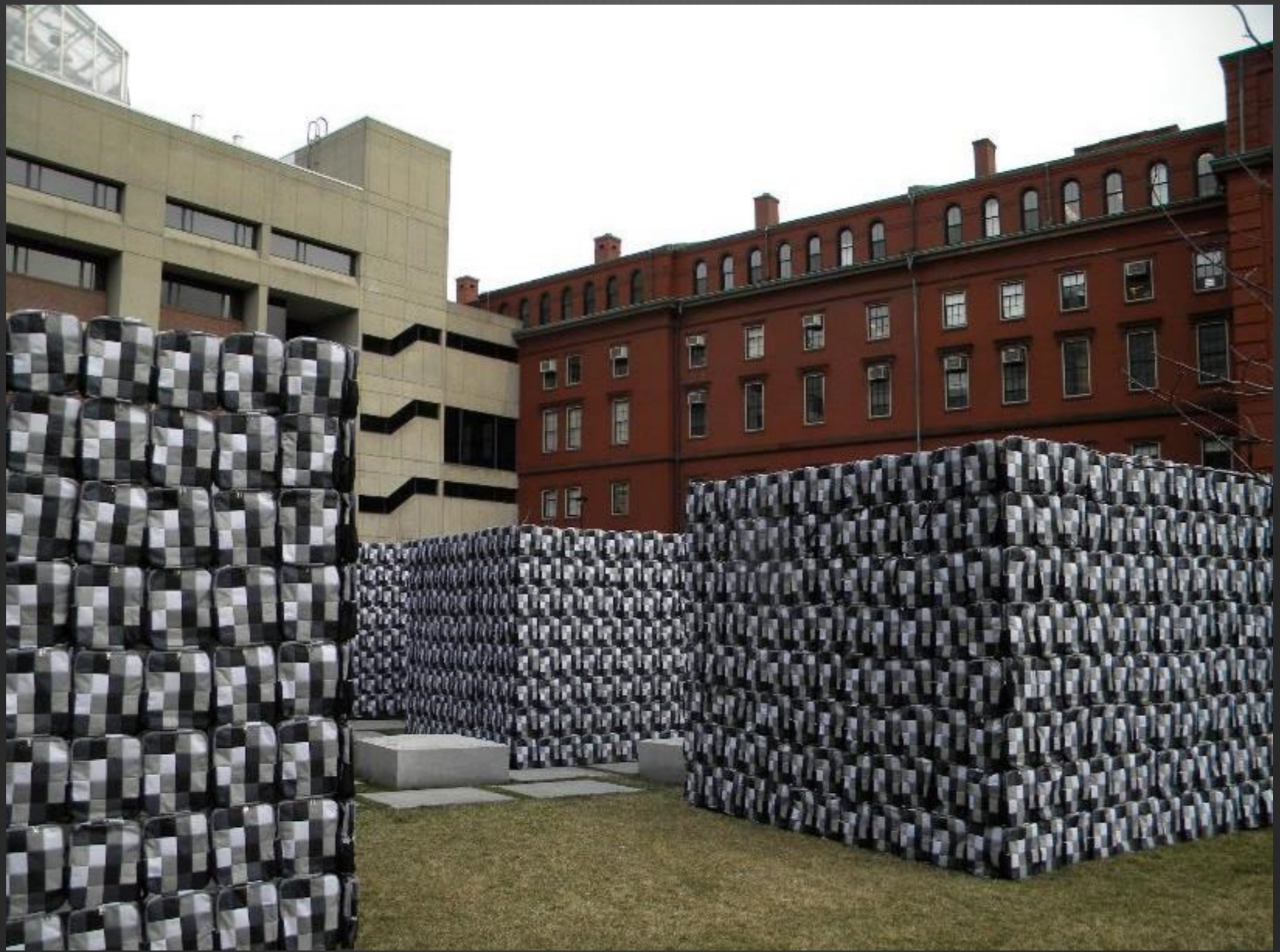
“China’s Most Dangerous Man”

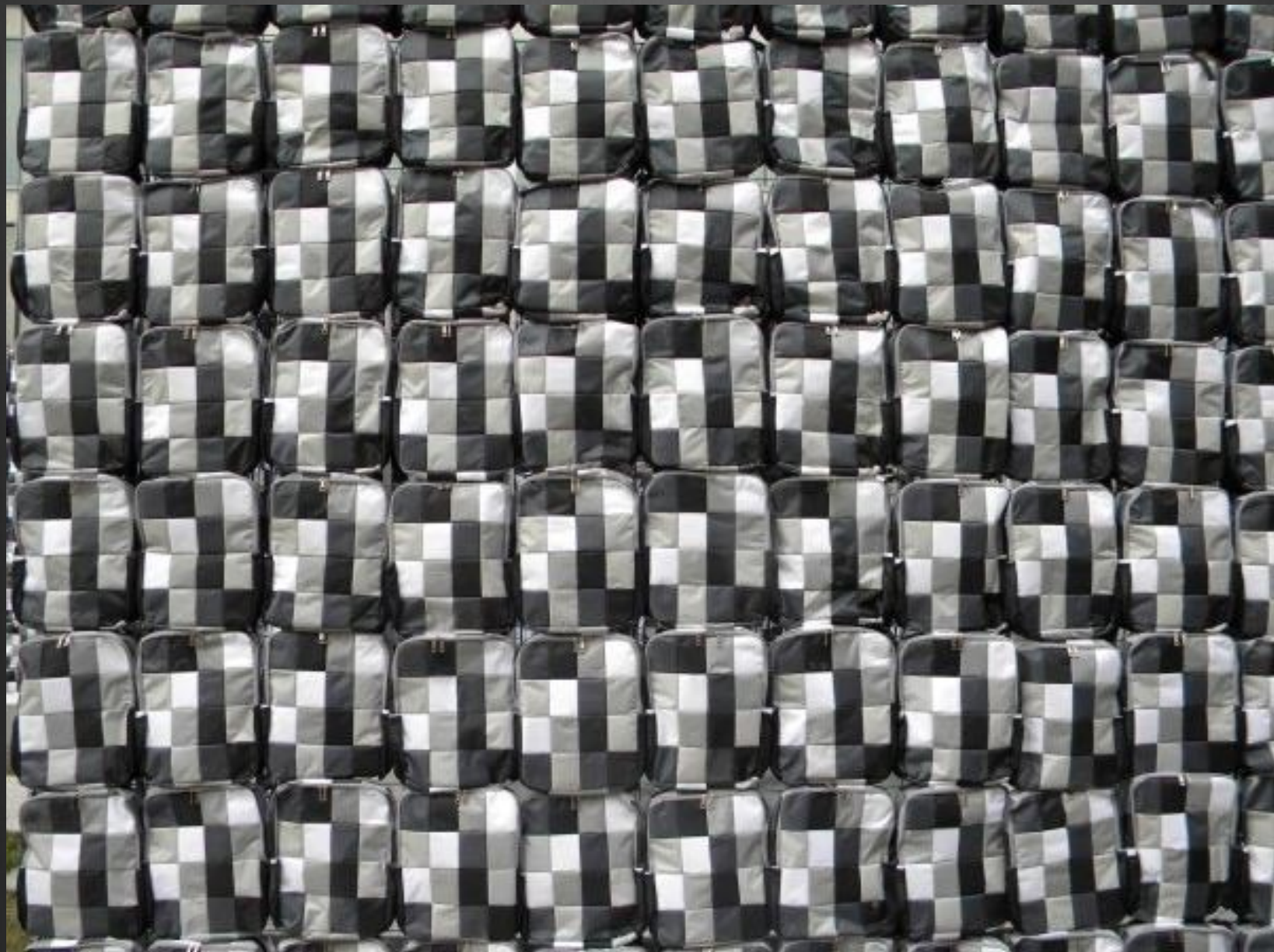












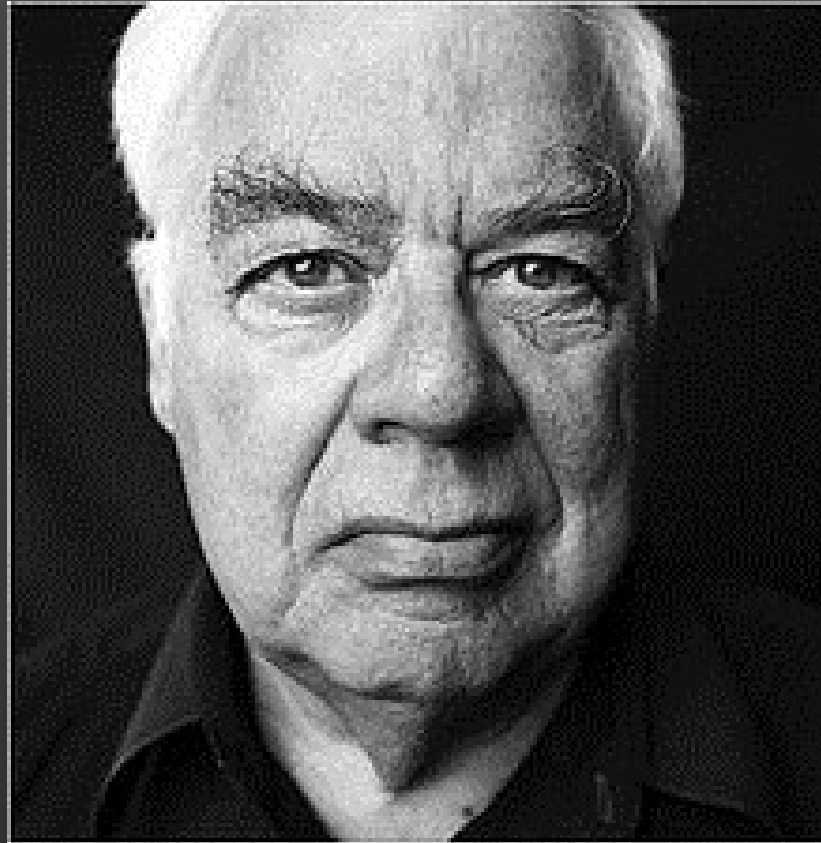




Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn 1995. This photo-triptych depicted the artist Ai Weiwei dropping an ancient ceramic vase, which smashed on the floor at his feet.



Richard Rorty –
1931 - 2007



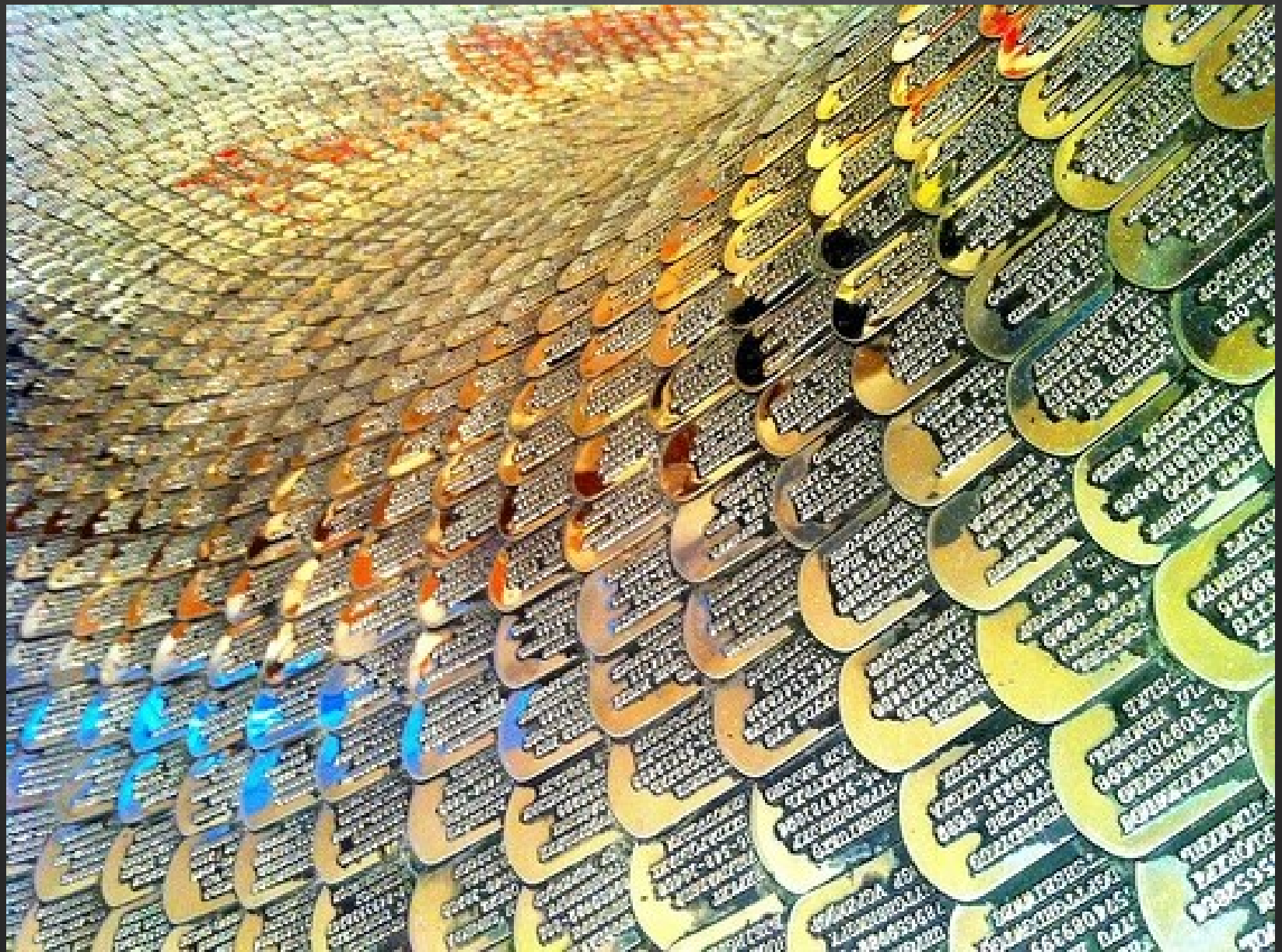
Rob Portman and son



Do-Ho Suh























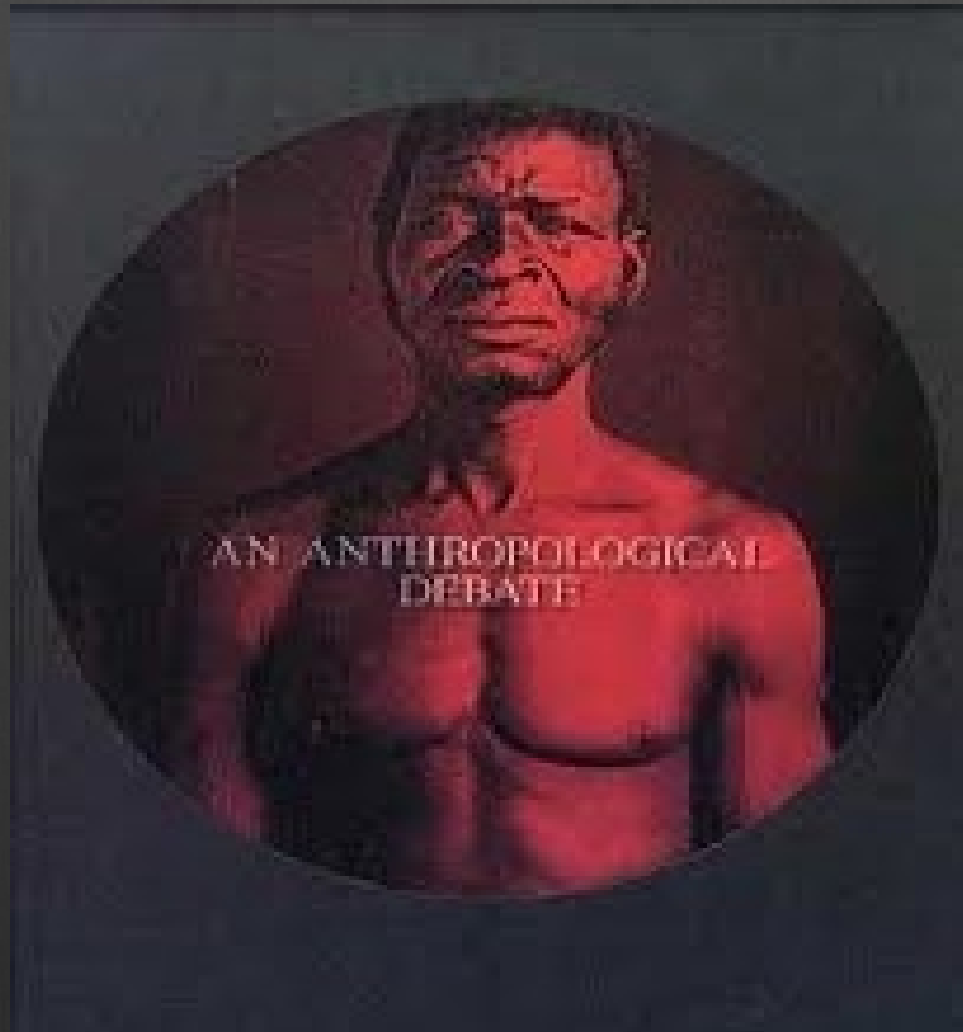
- RICHARD RORTY: Well, at this point you have to quote Gramsci: “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” If I had to lay bets, my bet would be that everything is going to go to hell, but, you know, what else have we got except hope? *The Believer*, June 2003
- CHARLES FIDAL: “We are not in an educational race against China or North Korea, we are in a race against human kind; I predict we have just two decades to figure this out.” Midwest Conference, 2013

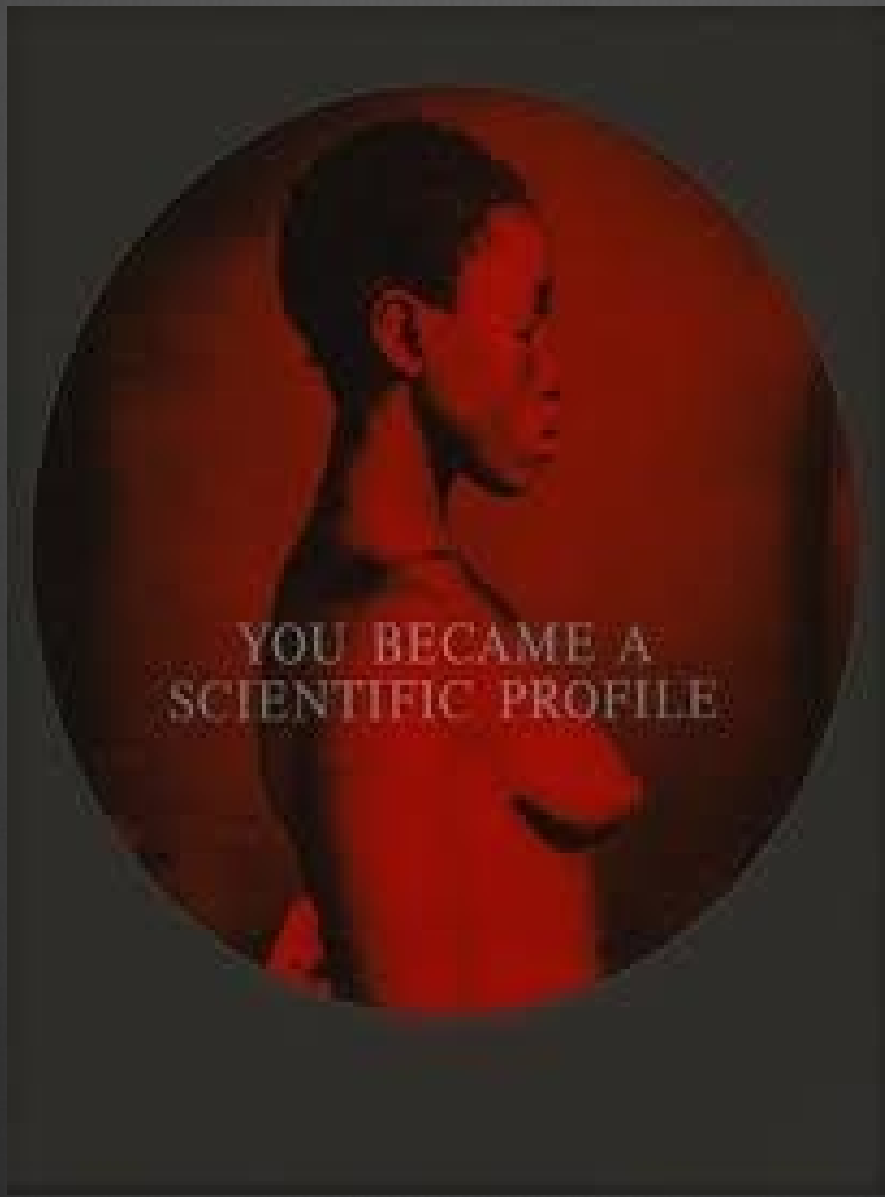
Carrie Mae Weems



- “We think of the Muslims or Jews being herded into the concentration camps as animals, because cattle are animals. Neither sort of animal is much like us and there is no point of human beings getting involved in quarrels between animals.” Rorty
- “Blacks, the whites used to say are like children. That is why it is appropriate to address a Black male, at any age as “Boy”.
Rorty

Carrie Mae Weems





YOU BECAME A
SCIENTIFIC PROFILE



YOU BECAME
PLAYMATE
TO THE
PATRIARCH



AND THEIR DAUGHTER



BLACK AND TANNED
YOUR WHIPPED WIND
OF CHANGE HOWLED LOW
BLOWING ITSELF-HA-SMACK
INTO THE MIDDLE OF
ELLINGTON'S ORCHESTRA
BILLIE HEARD IT TOO &
CRIED STRANGE FRUIT TEARS

Gorilla Girls



Gorilla Girls



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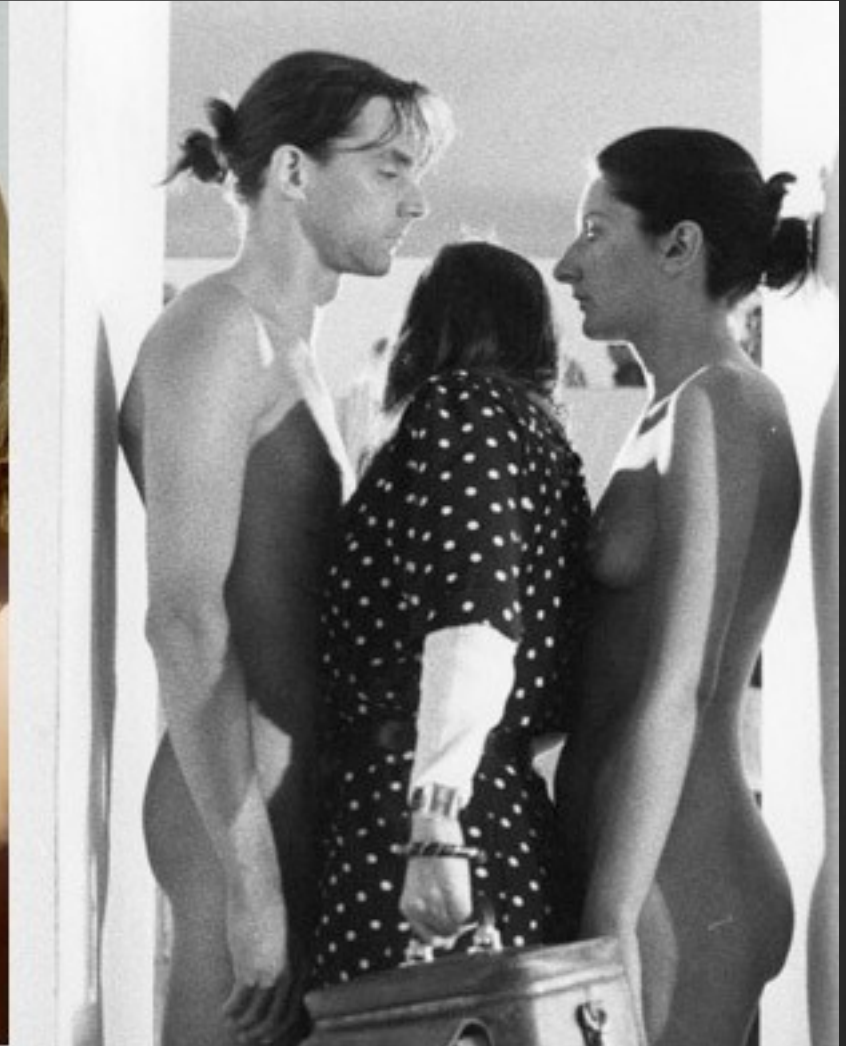
I want to live
in peace.







Marina Abramovic







- “This progress has brought us to a moment in history in which it is plausible to say that the human rights phenomenon is a fact of the world. It may mark a beginning of time in which gang rape brings about as strong a response as it does when it happens to foreigners as it does when it happens to *people like us*.” Rorty



Marina Abramovic



“A friend once reminded me, saying, “WeiWei, beware of newspapers calling you a dissident. It is dangerous.”

In normal circumstances, I know it's undesirable for an artist to be labeled a political activist or dissident. But I've overcome that barrier. The suits that people dress you in are not as important as the content you put forth. So long as it gives meaning to new expression. The struggle is worthwhile if it provides new ways to communicate with people and society. As an artist, I value other artist' efforts to challenge the definition of beauty, goodness, and the will of the times. These roles cannot be separated. Maybe I'm just an undercover artist in the disguise of a dissident; I couldn't care less about the implications.”

Questions to consider”

- Which contemporary artists are using their artistic voice to manifest political and social change?
- Can contemporary artwork force the viewer to break down the barriers of “otherness” and recognize that political injustices must be corrected to allow our society to evolve?
- Does the contemporary philosopher, Richard Rorty solution of “Sentimental Education” offer us a solution to a more empathetic society?