

WANTED: AI WEIWEI and MARCEL DUCHAMP

Parallel Cases of Two Artists Reacting Against Authority

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Many of Ai Weiwei's critics claim that he is not making art, but only engaged in politics. It is my contention that politics and art are psychologically and aesthetically inseparable. Making art is a product of life, and if your life is subjected to the control of an overpowering governmental authority, then any artist who is aware of the situation has no choice but to produce works of art that are—either directly or indirectly—a product of that suppression. To a certain extent, this situation has existed at all times and at all levels of society, for no matter in which country we live, our behavior is continuously subjected to forces that are beyond our control, in most cases, some might argue, in an effort to comply with rules and regulations that are established for the common good of our fellow man. At times, however, these laws unquestionably overstep their boundaries, preventing the people they allegedly protect from exercising their inherent free will and, in some instances, preventing them from expressing their discontent when these liberties are constrained.

Much of what Ai Weiwei has produced as an artist reflects these concerns, a sensibility that seems to have first manifested itself during the twelve years

he spent in the United States (1981–1993). It was at this time that he not only encountered the freedom of expression that characterizes an American way of life, but also discovered an aesthetic and conceptual affiliation with the art and ideas of the celebrated French artist Marcel Duchamp, who by then had already been declared by many contemporary artists, critics and art historians to be the most influential artist of modern times. For Ai, it could be argued that the example of Duchamp's work represented his first liberation from the chokehold of tradition that made it impossible for him to fully comprehend and appreciate the art of his times, but once he absorbed its inherent lessons, he never looked back. "I have the highest respect for Marcel Duchamp," he recently declared. "He opened a new, boundless road to me for creation." He first saw his work on a visit to the Philadelphia Museum in 1981, but he could not understand it. To him, the *Large Glass* and the readymades looked like they belonged in a scientific museum. It was only after seeing the work of Jasper Johns and understanding how he assimilated the lessons of Duchamp that empowered Ai to do the same. "He [Duchamp] provided a very original way

of thinking and enlarged the concepts of aesthetics, morality, and philosophy. He gave a broader view about ourselves, even scientifically speaking; he always comes as a surprise."¹

Two years after having seen Duchamp's work for the first time, Ai made his first work to openly acknowledge his importance. *Hanging Man: Homage of Duchamp*, 1983,



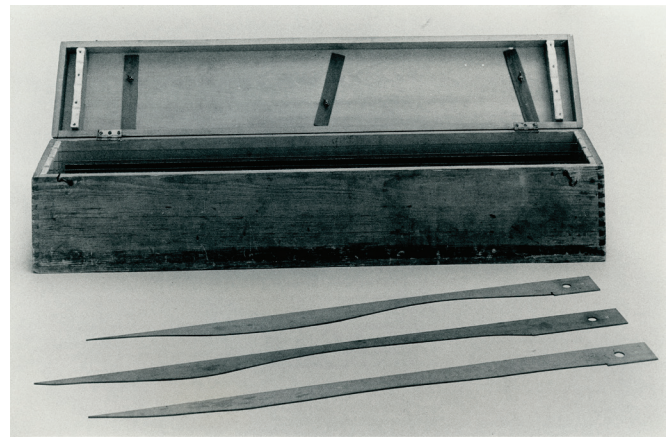
Ai Weiwei, *Hanging Man: Homage to Duchamp*, 1983



Marcel Duchamp, *Self-Portrait in Profile*, 1957

consists of an ordinary metal shirt hanger bent to mime the artist's profile—based on Duchamp's *Self-Portrait in Profile* of 1959—that is placed on a plywood board, its fore portion filled with sunflower seeds. When asked about his use of these seeds, Ai explained that sunflowers “are not only a favorite snack for Chinese people, but during the Cultural Revolution it was often said that Mao Zedong is the sun and the Chinese people are like sunflowers turning toward him.”²² This point was made all the more emphatic when he filled the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in 2010 with one hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds. The seeds were individually hand-painted by some 1600 skilled laborers Ai employed for two and a half years, an entire village. Their display for the edification of a Western audience reminds us of the ubiquitous product label “Made in China.” Moreover, the sheer quantity of these seeds brings to mind the staggering population of China: each seed would represent more than thirteen people. But when Ai Weiwei used these same elements to fill Duchamp's profile, they probably had a more personal meaning, representing the legions of artists who came to idolize Duchamp, and also the influence that this venerated French artist would have on his own work. In this sense, the sunflower seeds represent the revolutionary aesthetic that was planted in Ai just after he arrived in New York and which would flower into the artist he eventually became.

Despite the visual rapport that seems to exist between the work of Ai Weiwei and Duchamp, I believe that there may be other more compelling reasons that caused these similarities to exist, sources that are more philosophical and political than purely aesthetic. Whenever I see similarities such as these, I immediately ask myself if they are simply the product of the latter artist being influenced by the former, or, perhaps, was there something more, a or common interest or shared source from which the works emerged. Between Duchamp and Ai, these commonalities assuredly exist, but they are not readily apparent and require an understanding of the environment in which each artist found himself at the time when the works were produced. In Duchamp's case, we know that when he was asked if a philosophical system influenced



Marcel Duchamp, *3 Stoppages Etalon* [3 Standard Stoppages], 1913-14, Museum of Modern Art, New York

his *3 Standard Stoppages*—one of his earliest of the readymades (begun in 1913 and completed in 1914)—he said it was the writings of Max Stirner (1806–1856), a German philosopher who was a contemporary of Marx and Engels. Indeed, his best-known book, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* [The Ego and its Own], was an outright condemnation of their socialist values, in that it maintained that the right of an individual was to be considered superior to the needs of society, an attack, more or less, on the communist principles they espoused. “I am *my own* only when I am master of myself,” wrote Stirner in his book, “instead of being mastered either by sensuality or by anything else (God, man, authority, law, State, Church, etc.); what is of use to me, this self-owned or self-appertaining one, *my selfishness* pursues.”²³ Some fifty years after his death, Stirner's philosophy would be appropriated by the egoists, a philosophical movement in the early years of the 20th Century that championed the rights of an individual over society, and at around the same time it was also used by anarchists both in the United States and Europe as the philosophical basis for their subversive attacks on governmental control of any kind.

It was Stirner's emphasis on the supremacy of an individual over all requirements of society that gave birth to Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages*, which was the artist's attempt to devise a system of measurements for himself, one that he could use in his own work and which did not conform to standard units of measurement. Indeed, he did not even want to create a system that he would have to adhere to himself, which is why he created three separate



Marcel Duchamp *Bicycle Wheel* (made in 1913 but declared a work of art in 1915), *Bottle Rack* (1914), *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915) and *Fountain* (1917)

measuring devices, all devised in accordance with the laws of chance. From the height of one meter, he dropped strings that fell into irregular conformities, thereby even defying the convention that all rulers had to be straight. From these shapes he created templates, feeling free to choose whichever one he felt was necessary for a given situation, just as painters might choose a color from their paint box. It was these personal measuring devices that would be used in determining the position of the nine Bachelors in the lower section of his *Large Glass*.

Although it is rarely acknowledged in the literature on Duchamp, he had both personal and political motives for having seized upon Stirner at this time as an influential voice from the past. As a result of an incident that had occurred a year earlier—when objections were raised by his brothers and fellow artists to his Cubist rendition of a descending nude—Duchamp consciously sought to establish an entirely new mode of aesthetic expression, one that eventually gave birth to the concept of a ready-made, where anything an artist selected from the world of everyday artifacts could potentially be considered a work of art. “Can one make works,” he asked himself in 1913, “that are not works of art?”⁴ This truly momentous question would eventually result in changing the very definition of art. Whereas these concerns confine themselves entirely to the world of aesthetics, it should also be understood that they were occurring at exactly that moment in history when political tensions were escalating in Europe, where a system of logical alliances between countries resulted in having established entrenched polarities

and boundaries that made a conflict between them inevitable. When war broke out in 1914, Duchamp made a decision to move to neutral America, and when the United States entered the war in 1917, he moved to Argentina. One could understand these actions as those of an avowed pacifist, which Duchamp assuredly was, but just as he refused to exhibit his work in an effort to find an alternative to traditional artistic practice, he left countries in order to avoid being involved in their political struggles. It is not merely happenstance that caused Duchamp to produce his most important early readymades—*Bicycle Wheel* (made in 1913 but declared a work of art in 1915), *Bottle Rack* (1914), *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915) and *Fountain* (1917)—during the years of World War I (1914–1918). Indeed, his *Fountain* was submitted to an exhibition in New York with the idea of testing the democratic principles of an organization that was designed to support the display of work by all artists who were members. It was refused from display within days of President Woodrow Wilson having announced that America would enter the war with the famous words: “The world must be made safe for democracy.” A year after the war ended, Duchamp was asked what he thought about the interrelationship between art and the war, and he responded: “I don’t weigh potatoes with shit.”⁵

In the literature on Ai Weiwei, Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages* has often been compared to his controversial *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, an action that was recorded in three sequential photographs. To my way of thinking, it is highly unlikely that Ai



Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*

had this particular work by Duchamp in mind when he smashed the urn—for it is purely coincidental that his Nikon F3 (which is capable of taking four frames per second)—managed to record the drop in three frames. Indeed, the only element these works share in common is the act of dropping, in this case, a coincidence of action and nothing more. A far more appropriate comparison, which has also been made, is to Duchamp's infamous effacement of the *Mona Lisa*, adding a mustache to a venerated Renaissance masterpiece and inscribing it with the letters *L.H.O.O.Q.*, a scurrilous phonetic pun, thereby adding insult to injury. Indeed, what both Duchamp and Ai Weiwei were doing was attacking tradition, in Oedipal and aesthetic terms, killing the father, so as to pave the way for innovations that do not depend upon the conventions of the past. Put another way, they were both attempting to express their individuality, a theme upon which Ai has often spoken. "I am an *individual*. I am an artist," he recently told a reporter. "I am living in this society which my poet father also lived in. Many other artists and writers live in it. And I just have to give out my opinion on the matters that occur in my daily life. . . . My message is very clear: to fight for *individual* freedom, to fight for democracy." There is no question that Ai's fight for the freedom of individuals is one that is inseparable from the political stance he has taken. "How can you be an artist, which I think is the most powerful position since you truly are an *individual*," Ai asked this same reporter, "and then at the same time give up

that position to attempt to become a bureaucrat? How can you not speak out, and encourage other *individuals* who also have the same potential to make independent judgments and beautiful work? Then at least you understand how important it is to be an *individual*, at its most meaningful." More recently, when he was asked what factor would most radically alter the future of China, he said it was not the economy, which everyone presumes, but rather "self-identity."⁶ Max Stirner could not have expressed these sentiments more clearly.

What neither Stirner nor Duchamp could have imagined is that modern technology would eventually develop the means by which individuals could express themselves openly and independent of political oversight, a technology that Ai Weiwei has employed to its fullest potential. "Once the internet age arrived we have had a very different kind of politics," Ai explained in the same interview quoted earlier. "An individual can bear much more responsibility and be much more powerful." Ai Weiwei feels that it is his moral responsibility to speak out against the repression enforced by his government, which consistently suppresses and censors what he believes is every citizen's right to free speech. This attitude informs virtually everything that Ai Weiwei produces. If we should take the liberty of comparing his bicycles—which are assembled in clusters of two to five hundred—and his conjoined stools—which can be so numerous that they fill a cavernous gallery space—with Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, we will all readily



Ai Weiwei, *42 Forever Bicycles*, 2003

notice that they are comprised of the same elements. What this purely formal comparison omits is the political motive that underlies the production of each work: in Duchamp's case, the individualism of Stirner that challenged the socialist ideals of Marx and Engels; in Ai's case, his attempt to challenge the entrenched communist system that makes every effort possible to repress his actions and those of his fellow citizens. Naturally, in an artist's work, these ideas are expressed visually. The numerous bicycles in Ai's various assemblies are made by Forever Bicycles, a brand that began producing bikes in Shanghai in the 1940s and became their leading manufacturer. Until recently, bicycles had filled the streets of China, although with the advance of recent prosperity, they are slowly but surely being replaced by motorcycles and cars (lending a degree of irony to the name Forever). The stools—especially when combined in massive quantity (6000 were placed



Ai Weiwei, *Grapes*, 2011, made from stools from the Qing Dynasty

on display in his recent retrospective in Berlin)—are clearly a reference to the massive population of China, and perhaps to the children who sat on them in schools throughout the country, especially to those who tragically died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Ai seizes every opportunity possible to emphasize the importance of a single individual, as he did when sending 1001 Chinese citizens and 1001 Qing Dynasty chairs—the one extra in an assembly of 1000—to Kassel, Germany, to represent his work for Documenta 12 in 2007.

Over the years, Ai has produced a series of unique works that suggest additional comparisons with Duchamp, such as his *Shovel* of 1986, in which he coated the blade of an ordinary square workman's shovel with cowhide. The object is, of course, reminiscent of *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, the snow shovel that was the first readymade Duchamp selected after he arrived in the United States in 1915.



Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale--1001 Chinese Visitors*, 2007, 1001 students and 1001 Qing Dynasty chairs sent to Kassel, Germany, for Documenta 12.





Ai Weiwei, *Shovel*, 1986

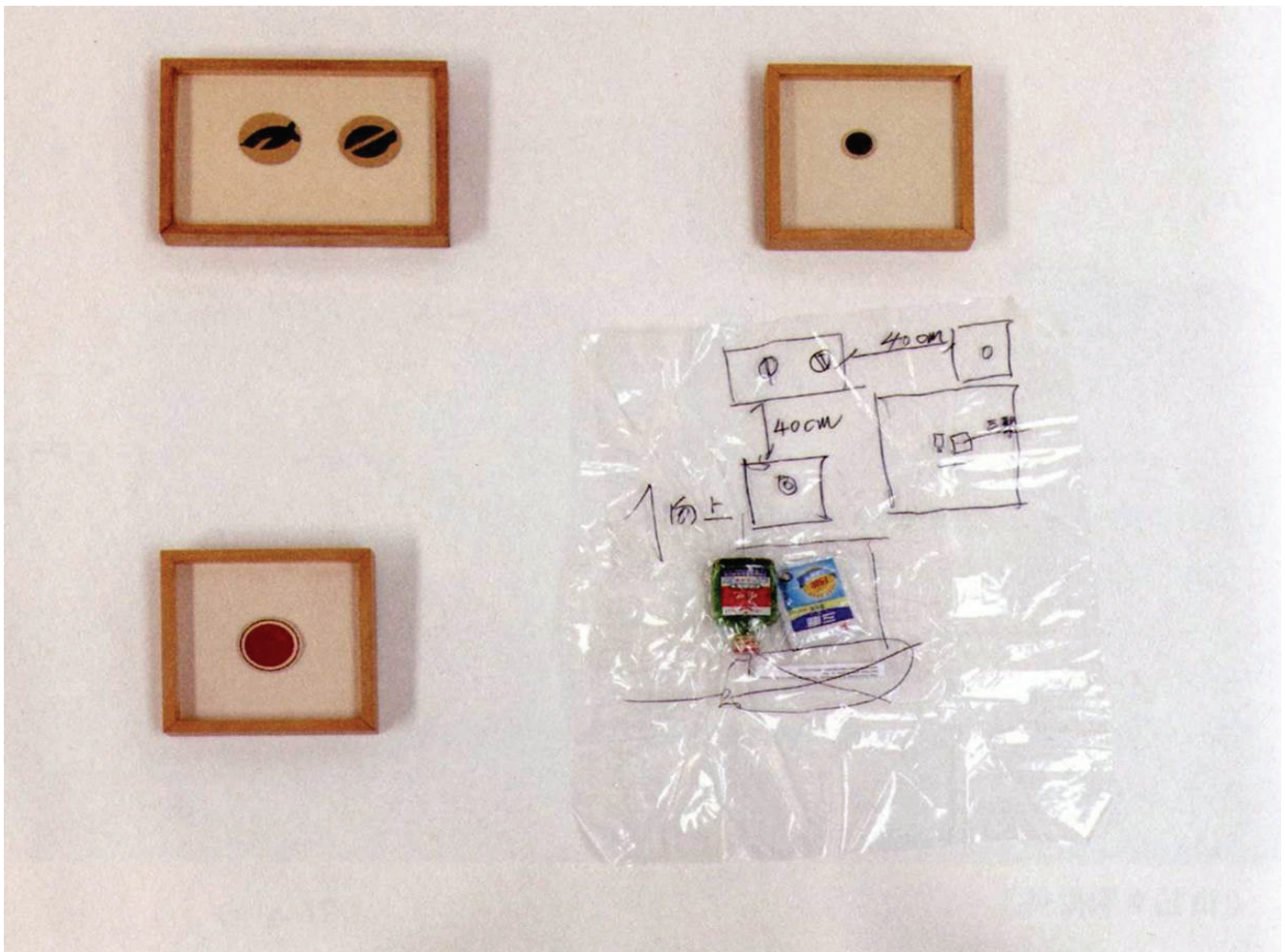


Ai Weiwei, *Château Lafite*, 1988

When he first came up with the idea of the ready-made, Duchamp wanted the title to have nothing to do with the object he selected, although, of course, a scenario could easily be envisioned where using a snow shovel could result in a broken arm. Duchamp also loved word games and puns, some of which made their way into the titles of his works. Ai has used a similar approach when naming some of his constructions, such as his *Château Lafite*, 1988, the title naturally conjuring the combined French and English words “la feet.” The work consists of a pair of Chinese cloth shoes tied to a bottle of Château Lafite, the famous French Bordeaux produced since the 19th Century by the Rothschild vineyards and known not only for its great quality, but also for its exceptionally high price. Whereas a comparison with work by Duchamp is probably valid for both of these objects, their similarities go beyond sources that are merely visual and linguistic. Rather, their meaning is more deeply rooted in a social message that is at the core of Ai’s approach to art making: coating a shovel with cowhide is as visually ironic as dressing a poor farmer in an expensive leather coat, while wrapping a bottle of priceless wine with commonplace slippers can only remind us of the fact that the average Chinese citizen cannot afford to indulge in such expensive foreign offerings.

The one work of art that Ai Weiwei produced that most succinctly brings together his interest in Duchamp with the repressive politics of the Chinese government is entitled *Add or Subtract*, an assembly of items that he made for inclusion in a show on Duchamp and his influence among Chinese artists that was held at the Ullens Center in Beijing in 2013 (I organized the Duchamp section of this exhibition, while John Tancock organized the portion devoted to his influence).⁷ *Add or Subtract* consists of four original paper chess pieces by Marcel Duchamp placed into three separate frames: a black pawn and red king framed separately, and variant designs

for two black bishops framed together. Hanging next to these three framed works are the original plastic wrappings in which they were shipped, on which Ai has drawn a diagram in black felt-tip pen indicating their placement in relationship to two other elements that are visible below the plastic: a small bottle of liquor and a packet of powdered milk. The liquor is the type that is very inexpensive and readily available in Chinese markets, and which is considered the staple of alcoholics. The powdered milk would remind anyone living in China of a scandal that took place in 2008, when contaminated infant formula resulted in the death of six children and caused 300,000 others to become seriously ill, yet the government continued to produce the powder and make it available throughout the country. Mothers who were reluctant to give their children this formula tried to purchase canned milk from Hong Kong, which imported it from other countries. Because of the huge demand, however, the supply was quickly exhausted, causing the Chinese government to impose strict penalties and fines on those who purchased more than two cans (as much as \$64,000 per violation). This law went into effect in March of 2013, and Ai almost immediately sprang to action, creating a map of China out of 1800 milk



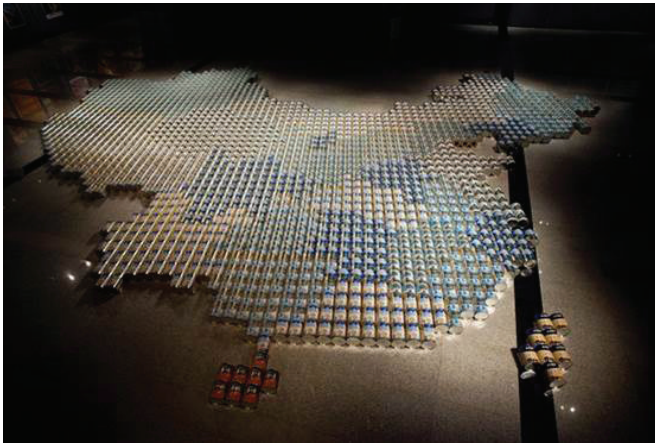
Ai Weiwei, *Add or Subtract*, 2013

cans that went on display on May 17, 2013, at the very moment when *Add or Subtract* was still on view at the Ullens Center.

When I questioned Ai Weiwei about *Add or Subtract*, I noticed that the bottle of liquor was empty, and he explained that he had carefully poured it out around the edges of the three framed Duchamp chess pieces. Although we may never know what prompted his decision to do this, the result is clear: just as he appropriated the pieces by Duchamp into his work of art, the liquor—which quickly evaporated so that only a trace of residue remains visible on the glass—was used to physically lay claim to the pieces by Duchamp. A clue as to the potential meaning of this work might also be provided in the names given to the elements he added: the liquor is called *erguotou*, and is identified on the label as the product of a “second distillation,” while the powdered milk is Sanlu, which translates

as “three deer.”⁸ It could be reasoned that if Ai were adding to the Duchamp, you would have the number two (his work plus the Duchamp), or, when the whole is considered, the result is yet a third element (his work plus the Duchamp comprise the final product). However, the title—*Add or Subtract*—makes you ask yet another question: when using another artist’s work to create something entirely new out of it, do you add or subtract from its value, either aesthetically or, for that matter, financially?

No matter how this work is interpreted, its underlying message is clear. In his critique of the Chinese government, Ai has found himself entrapped in a chess game, carefully weighing what he has to say about a given issue against potential repercussions, which can range from being physically beaten by the police, spending eighty-one days in jail, or having his passport withheld indefinitely, in effect putting him under country arrest. Only time



Ai Weiwei, *Map of China*, 2013

can tell who will win this game, but if history is any indication, Ai Weiwei stands a pretty good chance of prevailing. What will happen at that point is anyone's guess. When he was asked how a victory of this type would affect his work, he responded: "Perhaps then I'd finally be able to become the kind of artist who deals with the form, color and texture of things," an intentionally condescending indictment of artists who produce work that is purely aesthetic, without

meaning or content.⁹ We can be fairly certain that Ai's work will never descend to this level, not so long as he continues to rigorously challenge the moves of his opponent, an overpowering and oppressive government that never seems to tire in its endless quest to suppress the individuality of its people.



Ai Weiwei and Francis M. Naumann playing chess, Beijing China
April 25, 2013

The inspiration for this essay and its title came from John Tancock, who served as curator of an exhibition of work by Ai Weiwei that was held at my gallery and Chambers Fine Art in the fall of 2014. He suggested that my portion of the show emphasize the commonalities that exist between the work of Marcel Duchamp and Ai Weiwei, concentrating on the latter's politics. In this respect, he suggested that the show include Duchamp's WANTED poster.

¹ Cristina Carrillo de Albornoz Fisac, *Ai Weiwei* (New York: Assouline, 2014), pp. 13-14.

² Interview with by Mami Kataoka, October 2008, cited in Kataoka, "According to What?—A Questioning Attitude," in *Ai Weiwei—According to What?*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., 2013, p. 13.

³ Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority*, trans. Steven Byington (London: Rebel Press, 1982), pp. 222-23; see Francis M. Naumann, "Aesthetic Anarchy," in Jennifer Mundy, ed., *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia*, The Tate Gallery, London, February 21–May 26, 2008, pp. 58-75; reprinted in Naumann, *The Recurrent, Haunting Ghost: Essays on the Art, Life and Legacy of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Ready-made Press, 2012), p. 355.

⁴ This question was innocently jotted down on a scrap of paper in 1913, but only published for the first

time in Duchamp's collection of notes called *A l'Infinitif* (New York: Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery, 1966), trans. by Cleve Grey.

⁵ Duchamp's response to a questionnaire circulated by Curnonsky, ed. *Huit Peintres, Deux Sculpteurs, et un Musicien très modernes* (Paris: Privately printed, 1919), n.p.; quoted in Francis M. Naumann, *New York Dada 1915-25* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 51.

⁶ Interview with Dorinda Elliott, Beijing, July 6, 2014, "Through a Hole in the Wall," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, posted July 21, 2014. All other quotations (with emphasis added by the author) are from En Liang Khong, "An Artist's Duty: An Interview with Ai Weiwei," January 6, 2014, published by *openDemocracy* (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>).

⁷ *DUCHAMP and/or/in CHINA*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, April 25 - June 16, 2013.

⁸ This observation was made by Paula Tsai, a curator at the Ullens Center, who graciously relayed the information to me in an email message dated July 16, 2014.

⁹ Mami Kataoka, "Artist Interview," *Bijutsu Techo* 61, no. 930 (November 2009), p. 163; quoted in Kataoka, "According to What?," p. 20.