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It's entrepreneurship, not enterprise: Ai Weiwei as entrepreneur

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ABSTRACT

We challenge the obvious and easy association of enterprise and entrepreneurship. We do so by arguing that entrepreneurship is inherently social and collective, something that is concealed when held up as example of enterprising behaviour. We use as an illustrative case the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, an example of entrepreneurship that has little to do with commerce and everything to do with the social nature of creativity. We conclude by equating entrepreneurship to generosity: a social production of possibility from which all opportunities and ventures emerge.

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1. Opening

Management is not leadership. Enterprise is not entrepreneurship. Although we sometimes ponder whether there is a difference, we would at other times cling on to the precision that results from maintaining the nuances made possible by these distinctions. Our concern is with the distinct nature of entrepreneurship, that which is left once enterprise is stripped away. We think we can learn about this from the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. His work is imaginative, disruptive and also intimately collective. It is the product of individual inventiveness and alertness, there is global mobility, and commercial success: it is enterprising. Yet it speaks of collectives to collectives by opening up the social capacity of those involved in its creation. It is this expansion of social capacity that we argue is distinctly entrepreneurial.

Our paper thus investigates the relationship between enterprise and entrepreneurship by suggesting that the inevitably dynamic relationship between the social and the economic is tilted towards the latter when enterprise is our framing, whereas entrepreneurship tilts it towards the social. In an enterprise framing, there is a strong tendency to emphasize an individualistic relationship with value creation, and to associate value with produced outcomes. In an entrepreneurship framing the emphasis is upon multiple forms of social creativity without scripted ends, on bringing habits into question in a transformative way, offering possibilities for new value-creation. We suggest skewing the field toward enterprise constitutes a reduction, to economy, preventing us from grasping entrepreneurship in its full variety.

If preserved, this distinction between enterprise and entrepreneurship allows entrepreneurship studies to attend to different sources of value than those of conventional earnings. If we understand entrepreneurship socially (and contra much social entrepreneurship literature consider the social as more than something bolted onto entrepreneurship) we understand the entrepreneur as she or he whose socially enabled creativity enhances the relational capacity to act, and so enriches the

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social condition by creating possibility. Rather than a seizing of opportunity or founding a venture, we arrive at a new definition of entrepreneurship as generosity of action: the action of opening up possibility without known ends.

2. Ai Weiwei as an (artistic) entrepreneur

Concentrating on Weiwei's artistic practice – whilst undoubtedly a commercially successful one – allows us to consider value production explicitly reaching beyond the economic, but still sustaining and encouraging the kind of transformation and innovation characterized by entrepreneurship. Artists and entrepreneurs share a passion for bringing us to the fringes, for seeing virtual possibility in the actual. Art brings form to hitherto unknown activity, and “gives to airy nothing/A local habitation and name” (Shakespeare); likewise, entrepreneurs disclose new worlds (cf [Spinosa et al. 1997](#)). This sense of connection between the artistic and entrepreneurial is especially resonant in the work of artists for whom it is not just colour, form, plane and line that are of concern, but their affect and effect on how we, artist and audience alike, live. As a certain type of engaged artist intent on using his work to make viewers think about their place in the world, Weiwei's case reveals quite distinctly and acutely what we argue is at stake in all entrepreneurship – an imaginative creation of social capacity that links possibilities for living with economic productivity. It is across this threshold that newness is anticipated, and with it the social value of thinking, living, earning differently.

Recently a number of studies have considered social transformation the distinguishing mark of social entrepreneurship ([Dodd et al., 2013](#); [George, McGahan, and Prabhu, 2012](#); [Hjorth, 2013](#); [Zahra et al., 2009](#)), not its capacity to learn from commercial businesses or vice versa, and that, for [Zahra et al. \(2013: 142\)](#) this emphasis carries a long history “[C]lassical economic theory has long recognized social (societal) outcomes as key aims of entrepreneurship.” They anchor this view in the scholar who opened up entrepreneurship studies in the 1900s – Joseph Schumpeter – by adding: “[Schumpeter \(1942\)](#) saw entrepreneurial ventures as allocators of social wealth.” (p. 143). Prompted by these studies we broaden the point by suggesting entrepreneurship to be primarily a social force, The concept of social entrepreneurship would then be somewhat tautological in a framing where entrepreneurship is already understood as a social, collective creativity.

To push at this conceptual work we now turn to an empirical illustration that itself is deliberately entrepreneurial (*viz*, it both questions that which is typically considered an opportunity leading to a venture, and asks what our own academic discourse of entrepreneurship theory/studies conceals): Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* exhibited at Tate Modern, London, 2010.

3. The growth of *Sunflower Seeds*

Weiwei, dissident, activist, artist, venture creator, finds himself increasingly at odds with the Chinese government's continued hegemony over political and social life sustained, cleverly, by a palliative policy of economic liberalization. As protests at arbitrary detention, restrictions on travel, and party and government corruption grow, so Weiwei's artistic projects multiply. There is little distinction between creative expression, craft, tradition, free speech, all of which are coordinated by an often free-forming organization of researchers, artisans, advisors, gallerists, social media, commentators and assistants. And if it is just China we think he questions we are wrong, he questions it all.

Weiwei's artistic questioning of the nature of community, politics and social space find exemplary expression on October 12th 2010 in the neat spreading of 150 t of handmade, porcelain sunflower seeds over the floor of the turbine hall gallery in Tate Modern, London (cf [Martin \(2013: 107\)](#)). To accompany the exhibition the Tate also makes a film showing how the seeds came to end up in their massive building.

The film follows Weiwei following the stages involved in making the porcelain – crushing, washing, mixing, moulding, firing, painting, glazing, firing, transporting, exhibiting, pondering. “and transported to Londont seeds”, Weiwei says to a young woman passing on the street of Jingdezhen, the small town 600 miles from Beijing that in the old days made porcelain for the emperors, and now for famous artists. “and now for famous artists seeds,” Weiwei sayafter all I did earn some money”. (12.20 min). Another person comments: “brings business” which is good since “there is nothing much to do here anymore. Basically a lot of people have gone bankrupt”. (6.30 min) – “How much effort did you put in?” Weiwei continues his questions to the young woman. – “How much effort?” she pauses, “about 2000–3000 RMB”. Nearly two thousand people have been involved, being paid slightly above standard rates (around \$1 an hour). The makers, steeped in an ancient and often inscrutable language of making porcelain, willingly make the seeds. In the film's background large, water-powered hammers crushing stone into fine powder ingredients make a rhythmic sound, somewhat of a heartbeat for the body of Jingdezhen diligently performing allotted tasks, skillfully. He asks an old lady how long she has been doing this. “More than 30 years”, she replies. – “The seeds are all individually hand painted, distinct things forming part of a multitude, each a self-sufficient life, distinct amongst myriad self-similar lives. “They are all nice people”, Weiwei remarks, referring to the inhabitants of Jingdezhen, “you feel like you might have to make some more or make some other kind of project which can meet their needs” (12.48 min).

“The quantity we made for Tate [100 m seeds] is already beyond imagination.” (13.01 min). He speaks as a manufacturer, proud of having handled the quantitative challenge, and enjoying the preposterous nature of gathering so many seeds in one place. *Sunflower Seeds* took five years to create. Each life-like seed is made in an ancient way from hand-hewn rock pounded into a paste, moulded, fired at around 1300c, then painted, and re-fired at 800c, polished and washed, then placed amongst millions of its ilk.

As a visitor to the Tate there is a generous, massive beauty to the flow of the seeds as they give way under your feet; these imperishable, hard objects made by the gestures of artisans, become a flow as you walk upon and then within them; they yield and then resist, a crisp sound edging each footprint. Politically, China is huge, the seeds are myriad. Productively, China is immense, the seeds are multiple. Walking on them like this conveys the sheer weight and scale of the place, you feel how they belong to its sheer productiveness, and you belong as well, in a very small way. Yet they are also undifferentiated, equal, democratic, millions of individually distinct voices linked virtually, easily and instantaneously in proximity to one another without any guiding authority. As a walking member of an audience you are here in this rhetorical expression, in its raw possibility, itself an overflowing. There is no message as yet, just a gently undulating grey sea of possibility, a speaking space from which further speech may take place. Grey, the colour of the seeds is uncommitted, neither one nor the other and so open to becoming something. The seeds in their patient exuberance suggest a confined force; as you walk you feel alive.

Though approachable, the Tate audience has to learn about the resonance of sunflower seeds, especially the westerners. The seeds are *wenwu*, cultural relics, evocative of multiple readings, they tremble with meaning. They belong to an established symbolic language of Chairman Mao. Historically sunflowers were shown gathered in enveloping swathes around the base of the leader's central image, a sun feeding buoyant plants, a leader feeding his ripening people. And now Weiwei shows the seeds without need for a sun, an independent democratic mass, or maybe just as dead seeds, or as representations of seeds that can take root symbolically in this western gallery. The seeds are also a reminder of the physical austerity suffered by the Chinese under Mao's reforms when hunger abounded. Sunflower seeds were sold on streets. The seeds were shared by people gossiping, creating community space using the only snack food available in near starvation conditions. The seeds evoke a collectivity, a sense of belonging to one another, and compressed by authority. Some of these conditions might still prevail, only now less obviously, and the seeds disclose a need for change by remaining closed, refusing to be managed.

Nor do they respond so willingly to western norms. The seeds have arrived at the Tate as the culmination of an artistic venture, yet the venture does not stop with the Tate. There are 8 m spare seeds for the gallery to replace those that are inevitably taken away in the pockets and bags of visitors, the artistic expression over-spilling the gallery walls and working its way into people's homes there to be subject to conversation, the occasional glance, and perhaps then to be sold on Ebay; the venture keeps rolling. Such overflowing questions the role of the gallery itself, its curatorial authority is loosened somewhat, as is its role in guarding ostensibly valuable works of art; how to deal with an art work that encourages visitors to take it away with them, to be so generous in its presence as to invite the audience to diminish it. Barely eight days into the exhibition the seeds are fenced off, the minute ceramic dust generated from walking upon them is deemed a possible cause of chronic silicosis, a risk the workers of Jingdezhen have faced continually, for generations. The fence allows the Tate to stop people taking the seeds, preserving its investment, at the cost of diminishing the work of art. By April 2011 Weiwei is also fenced off, deemed by Chinese authorities a risk to party, state and country, he is detained for 81 days. A ton of the seeds were sold at Sotheby's New York in May 2012 for \$782,000.

4. Discussion

Weiwei's work is overtly concerned with opportunities for social transformation, both within his native China and wherever his work is being shown. In studying one work – *Sunflower Seeds* – as an illustrative case both the atmosphere of (historical) belonging from which the project emerges and the disclosure of social possibility it provokes, we find much that reveals the social value of entrepreneurship, as recently called for by [Zahra and Wright \(2015\)](#). *Sunflower Seeds* creates jobs for assistants, artisans, transport workers, gallery owners, commentators and guards. As an event of provocation it propels him as a brand into the higher echelons of the art economy where significant sums are earned. The inventive occupation of gallery space distinguishes him as a creative force, he is technically proficient in working the art markets, he is himself a willingly productive, flexible, mobile being. Economic value and material gain are important aspects of his projects. In a classic sense, he is enterprising.

Yet the seeds' transformative power extends beyond the economic. They suggest China can do better than merely produce things for the rest of the world; it can experience civic freedom and the work in Jingdezhen can become part of this social change. He is influenced by his poet fathers' revolutionary spirit and those others committed to creating the kind of civic life first envisaged by Mao and his friends, before power got in the way. Weiwei speaks well of China, then suspiciously, a suspicion extended to the West because it too is woven into the practical and spiritual fate of China, something an artist is well-equipped to reveal: "We all of us somehow have to be honest enough to face our condition and of course the artist always, always is the one who recognizes a certain reality kind of early and tries to announce it... They hear a kind of voice or they see some possibilities so clearly. But that all comes from the inner core, from the kind of nature they have. If there is anything valuable then it comes out because their nature perfectly reflects everybody's nature or instinct at that time" (in [Martin \(2013: 189\)](#)). Through questioning *Sunflower Seeds* discloses possibility, it reveals conditions, but speculatively and provocatively, both during the making of the work (where Weiwei is often unsure how 'it' will end up) and its being shown. Its transformative impact does not centre on economy or commerce, but effectively multiplies into social, political, aesthetic, cultural processes, all needed to make social change happen, and which spill back into productive economy.

Here the entrepreneurial is primarily social as it potentially transforms the relations we have with institutional facts we otherwise accept. Do galleries or China or individuals have property rights? Why are large quantities impressive and do they

really destroy individuality? Should art have boundaries? Is the revitalization of craft in Jingdezhen important? Are questions sufficient here? Such questions arise like tactical insinuations into habits and norms in ways that stretch, test and upset them, making visible through investigation what was hitherto overlooked, or accepted. *Sunflower Seeds* is loosening of the already organized and an incision (*entre*) holding open the possibility of differently configured relations with things we might take (*preneur*), persuaded by the performance to work beyond our norms awhile. It reveals how entrepreneurs can make others passionate in order to feed off them, working on their energy and willingness to participate and creating awareness of transformative potential. There is no scripted end point, no known output. Instead we have a serial interest in creating and sustaining fertile social spaces.

Picking up on the work of *Spinosa et al. (1997)*, we argue this opening up of new possibilities is inherently social and involves entrepreneurs first in having sensitivity to belonging to the habits and norms in which they are thrown, and second a disclosing disposition to find in these constraints a provocation to doing things differently. Understanding what is entailed by belonging and disclosing has found us looking toward artistic practice as that which most obviously considers how we create and sustain socially transformative spaces. Artists like Weiwei work with affect as well as effect, holding open to difference so as to absorb and then potentially transform the world by giving form to experience in ways that disturb the habit and norms by which experience is formed. Weiwei's art/social/entrepreneurship shows how an opportunity and then venture first arises in the adventurous capacity for working within traditions but always struggling to the edges and hence toward otherness, so always from belonging towards disclosing.

Sunflower Seeds is generative in this double sense. It finds Weiwei in the entrepreneurial setting of contestation and mobilization, but the expressive and public nature of the work gives rise to the possibility of transforming the socio-economic and cultural settings (the nature of gallery space, the government structures in China, the idea of possession) upon the work relies. In this expressive entrepreneurial act of handing over the work becomes a space for plural voices to be heard, in multiple ways, without the dominance of a single perspective – it multiplies. Such artistic/ethical/entrepreneurial work brings established relationships into questionability – for sure those of global trade, of consumption and of political community, and perhaps most pressing of all, those of enterprise. Such releasing of opportunity is characteristic of all entrepreneurship, but is revealed more readily when we attend to its social affect.

5. Conclusion

We believe this study has made a contribution to revitalizing entrepreneurship research (*Hoskisson et al., 2011*) by showing how the social side of entrepreneurship is central to its capacity to enhance people's possibilities for living. Stripped to bare form, we have argued that Weiwei's entrepreneurship helps us see clearer what is central to all entrepreneurship: that is not simply enterprise, but value-creation that changes society for the better, and can, as such, not be restricted to individuals constantly adjusting to changing conditions (cf. Schumpeter's 'adaptive response', describing a non-entrepreneurial approach to change; *Schumpeter, 1947*). Without any calculated awareness of what collective or social transformation yields, we have read *Sunflower Seeds* as a spilling over from the orthodox ways of doing things exposing entrepreneur and audience alike to possibility. We have no interest in romanticizing either art or entrepreneurship as such, but we try to learn from examples where creation processes open up new possibilities for living, and do so by making it possible for others to move beyond present limits. Not all such moves will create value, only the process will tell.

Sunflower Seeds, we believe, qualifies as such an example. It would be prioritizing a particularly poor understanding of *Sunflower Seeds* had we focused on its commercial sides; framed by enterprise it is an exciting, valuable, immense production made possible by a creative team of culturally sensitive and business savvy individuals. Framed by entrepreneurship, as a spilling over (in this case almost literally, as the seeds spill out onto the floor, and out of the gallery through people's pockets, into their homes, and the homes of others) the relationship between its economic and social force (and cultural, political and aesthetic) becomes indecisive – revealing a multiplicity that loosens the fixed condition of things (*Zahra et al., 2013*). Learning from cases like *Sunflower Seeds* we are thus exposed to possibility that springs from the social understood as a giving over to generosity; the work overflows the boundary of the cultural institution of the museum, the boundary of state authority, the boundary of ownership, but without providing a ready answer or end point. Entrepreneurship is the generous production and handing over of things that creates in others and producers alike a widened and richer sense of possibility, nothing more. It is this generosity and willingness to step back from outcomes that we feel exemplifies the entrepreneurial as distinct from enterprise, a willingness to work without a firm sense of what can be gained. This is the nature of the social, an opening up, and any individuation and so closing off erodes the entrepreneurial, posing the question whether enterprise can only ever set out to exploit, never create.

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