La maladie de porcelaine

Augustus the Strong, elector of Saxony and King of Poland (1670–1733) was a passionate collector. During the last 20 years of his life, he amassed over 24,000 pieces of Chinese and Japanese porcelain. He described his passion for the precious and fragile material as his *maladie de porcelaine* or ‘porcelain sickness’. However, even he would have been amazed at Ai Weiwei’s *Sunflower Seeds* currently exhibiting at Tate Modern, London. In the gallery’s vast, Turbine Hall the Chinese artist has created ‘a seemingly infinite landscape’, a vast carpet of 100 million individually hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds weighing some 150 tonnes and covering 1000 m² [1]. The installation, part of the Unilever Series, opened 11 October 2010 but closed 3 days later because of greater than expected levels of dust caused by ‘the enthusiastic interaction of visitors’ [2]. A number of gallery staff complained of breathing and respiratory problems caused by the dust and a new risk assessment including ‘toxicology tests’ was requested [3].

The artist’s decision not to use a typical porcelain glaze in order to create more life-like seeds may have given them a greater propensity to generate dust [4]. After painting with ‘black slip’ (liquid clay), the seeds were fired, rumbled, washed, weighed, packed and shipped to London [5]. Almost 1600 people were involved in the manufacture at small-scale workshops in Jingdezhen (porcelain city) where pneumoconiosis is well known [6] and where NIOSH has been assisting with the measurement of silica exposure in potteries [7]. It seems reasonable to assume that it would have been relatively easy to monitor dust levels in Tate’s Turbine Hall to allow an informed judgement about risks posed to staff or the visiting public [8]. Nevertheless, the exhibition was re-opened to the public but direct access to the seeds was banned. Elsewhere the Danes adopted a much less flamboyant approach to exhibiting the seeds, which also minimises potential health risks to gallery staff and visitors [9].

In all of this commotion has the message behind Ai Weiwei’s beautiful, poignant and thought-provoking sculpture been lost, namely what does it mean to be an individual in today’s materialistic society? Weiwei himself describes the installation as ‘a work about mass production and repeatedly accumulating the small effort of individuals to become a massive, useless piece of work’. Meanwhile he (the artist), the creative force behind China’s *Bird Nest* Olympic Stadium, despite house arrest and ongoing surveillance remains defiant in the face of another more repressive *maladie* [10].

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References

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