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BOMBS AWAY! CAI GUOQIANG'S BUNKER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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Taiwan's Kinmen Island (formerly named Quemoy), located within short swimming distance to Fujian province, China, became the site for a provocative contemporary international art exhibition, curated by artist Cai Guoqiang, that opened September 11, 2004 and runs to January 10, 2005. As September 11, or 9/11, is now known as a day of infamy, it was no coincidence that it was also the inaugural day for an exhibition that took place in abandoned military bunkers on a once heavily bombed, heavily fortified island.

Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art is part of Cai's *Everything is Museum* series, an ongoing project in which he turns unlikely settings into art sites. Spread out along the west side of the island, eighteen solo exhibitions by mainly Chinese and Taiwanese artists were installed in deserted military fortifications, which, for the local people, are filled with tragic memories and ghosts.

Under military law until 1992, Kinmen (a small island 1.24 miles from China and 250 miles from Taiwan) was off limits except to its 60,000 residents and to soldiers stationed there. Even though the bombings are long over, danger lurks, since live minefields still exist in many areas of the island.

In 1991, Cai published a proposal about turning Kinmen's bunkers into love hotels in the *Primeval Fireball* exhibition at P3, a Tokyo organization and exhibition space concerned with art and the environment. However, the impetus to get the project going came after the World Trade Center bombing, and Cai was more than determined to transform Kinmen from a relic of war and unresolved ideologies into a utopia of unlimited cultural activities by including artists whose work encompasses the visual, the aural, the historical, and the sensory. Even though Cai's objective was to "make love, not war," the accompanying promotional materials, such as booklets, T-shirts, and Kaoliang liquor bottles, were decorated in military camouflage, which could mistakenly lead one to see the project as glorifying rather than condemning military culture.

HISTORY OF KINMEN

After the famous 1958 Gunningtou Battle, artillery bombardment between Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist Army and Mao Zedong's communist troops only lasted a few months and resulted in 10,000 casualties, but the firing of metal canisters containing propaganda continued well into the 1990s and followed a regular schedule so as to avoid more deaths. Taiwan did their firing on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday while China did theirs on the remaining days, leaving Sunday as a day off. The retrieved metal casings were melted down and made into knives, and Kinmen's meat cleaver business soon grew. As there is no longer any shelling, the meat cleaver business is now in rapid decline, thus leaving the island's main industry the Kaoliang liquor made from sorghum.¹

Now that the Cold War is over, Kinmen is keen to develop the island into a cultural and tourist paradise. There are over two dozen hotels and as many travel service agencies. In addition, government and cultural planners seek to preserve one third of the military bunkers and arsenals as historical landmarks, to use one third as concert halls and exhibition spaces, and to use the remaining third for invited artists to create site-specific works. Even Taiwan's central government Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA) has a large building that can host symposiums and exhibitions on Kinmen. According to the Web site of the Kinmen County Government,

The planning of the Kinmen Bunker Castle Museum not only includes the culture and tourism development strategies for Kinmen, but also the Kinmen people's plea for a peaceful life. Therefore, the proposal of turning the abandoned castle bunkers into the Kinmen Bunker Castle Art Museum has been fully supported and reckoned by the Executive Yuan and other central government agencies since 2002. The new cultural development, reshaping the island's image and the innovative cultural creation, will build the foundation for lifestyle change for people in Kinmen. The Kinmen Bunker Castle Art Museum brings a new light for the Kinmen development and allows Kinmen to leverage its battlefield culture into a better tomorrow.

BATTLES AND GHOSTS

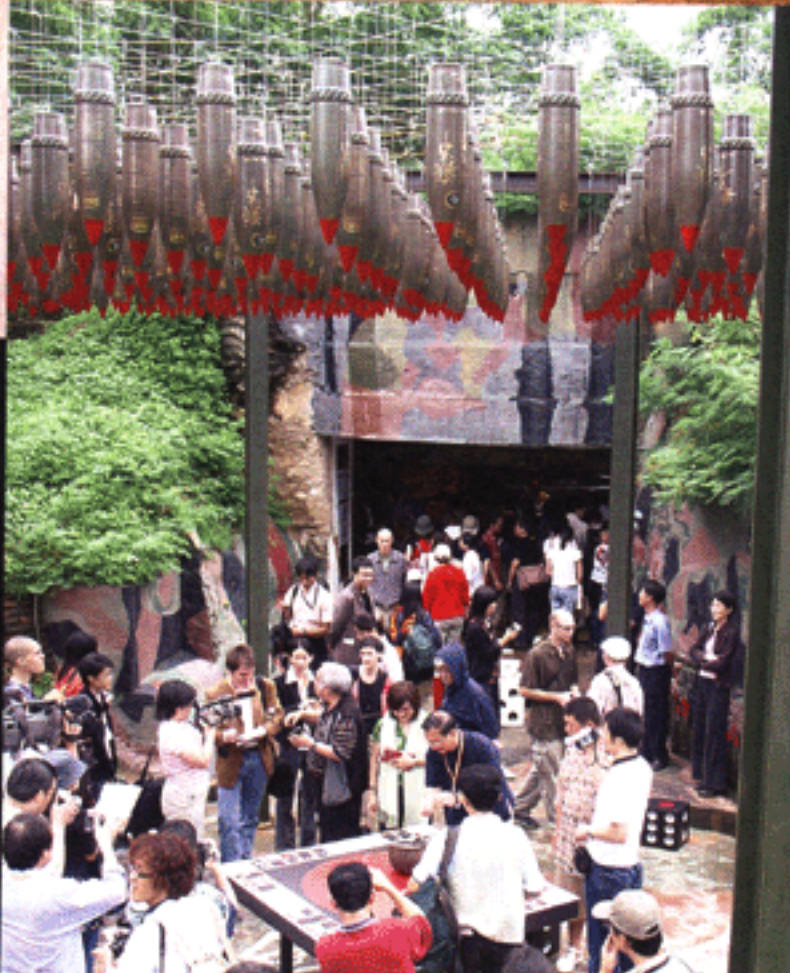
Tales abound about soldiers having their throats slit while asleep in their bunkers by frogmen from China and about how the dead soldiers' ghosts fill the bunkers with negative energy, thus making this a highly problematic site for visitors.² So it is legitimate to ask if Kinmen's haunted military bunkers, symbols of war and military aggression, are an appropriate site for an art exhibition.

In Cai's press package, he points out that prestigious art events such as the Venice Biennale take place in former military arsenals and says that his invitation to the island's eighteen elementary schools to participate in the project by having their own bunkers in which to exhibit was one way to link the community with the project and to help heal old wounds. The results revealed that a lot of in-depth discussion was taking place in the classroom about politics, war and peace, life and death, and Taiwanese identity. The children of Duonian Elementary School installed an armored tank in front of one bunker and festooned it with long-stemmed red roses, transforming a symbol of war into one of love. Jinning Elementary School had a more grim take on military occupation and had strewn their bunker with stuffed, used clothing to mimic sniper soldiers and trespassers who had been shot dead.

In spite of these war wounds, the people on both sides of the strait are linked ethnically, culturally, and spiritually. The contentious bitterness and bloody, ruthless viciousness seen in other places around the globe, such as in Kashmir and the Middle East, do not exist between Kinmen, Taiwan, and Xiamen, China, since people see each other as kin and even speak the same language. Here on Kinmen, the divide has more to do with political rhetoric rather than anything else.

This sense of having a friendly (non-threatening) enemy is best exemplified in *Opposite Shore* (fig. 1), the hilariously witty project by the conceptual duo He Shi and Yan San of the Da Lun Wei Art Squad. These two young Taiwanese artists created a walk-through wall graph containing highly detailed documentation and photographs of the mainland defectors who went to Taiwan (or Free China as it was called during the Cold War years) and the Taiwanese defectors who went to China. Both groups, even though ideologically opposed, one supposedly supporting Taiwan's democratic principles, the other upholding China's communist ideals, were hailed as heroes in their new homelands and given lots of publicity, great status, and money. A Taiwanese defector would receive wonderful treatment in his new life in China, while a Chinese defector also would receive wonderful treatment in his new life in Taiwan. Using actual documents, as found in newspapers, for example, the artists showed the absurdity of politics and the constructs of identity, borders, and ideas of freedom as they existed at that time. Unfortunately, the idea worked better as a book they had published rather than as an art installation, which gave the effect of a work in progress.

Architect Chang Yongho's *One Divided by Two* (fig. 2) was his attempt to deconstruct half a bunker to reveal its underlying structure and armature of rebar. However, this structure, jutting ghostlike out of a farm field, was made to be indestructible, and Chang was only able to scratch at the surface, which also makes a strong metaphoric statement about war and its monuments.



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Figure 1. Da Lun Wei Art Squad (He Shi, Yan San). *Opposite Shore*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 2. Chang Yongho. *One Divided by Two*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 3. Tsai Ming-liang. 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 4. Lee Shi-chi. *War Bets on Peace*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 5. Yin Ling. *Let Lovemaking Lead the World Towards Peace*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 6. Wu Tung Wang. *Surrender*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

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Figure 7. Su-mei Tse. *Some Airing*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 8. Shen Yuan. *Speaker Tea*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 9. Tan Dun. *Visual Music*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 10. Yao Chien. *Listen! Who is Singing?* 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 11. Fei Dawei. *The Children's Bookstore Exchange Program*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 12. Ying Bo. *Fei-yai! Fei-yai!* 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Figure 13. Lee Mingwei. *Shuito Legend*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

THEME OF WAR

War as a theme could not be ignored in such an exhibition, yet the participating artists chose to explore different aspects of such a controversial subject, and they often touched upon personal memory.

One of Taiwan's top film directors, Tsai Ming-liang, created a theatrical installation at the Lintsuo Old Battlefield Army Base (fig. 3) and during the opening weekend presented live theatrical performances. Large, campy fake flowers loom over the bunker. A huge Chiang Kaishek statue holding a hat and cane in its hands and wearing a wistful smile gives the appearance more of a dotty grandfather than a despot. The statue faces a window and appears to gaze longingly at China while ignoring the wreckage behind. Tsai's live homoerotic performance (men in loincloths grasping hand rungs and climbing the walls in the claustrophobic bunker) was based on Eileen Chang's (Zhang Ailing) novel about a woman who falls in love with her doctor, becoming sicker the more she relies on him, her body wasting away until she eventually dies—a seemingly apt metaphor for Chiang's disastrous course of action.

Native Kinmen artist Lee Shi-chi experienced first hand the shelling and the years of propaganda. His installation, *War Bets on Peace* (fig. 4), consists of bombs—actual Kaoliang bottles in the shape of artillery shells—and a gambling machine that highlights the ambivalence and powerlessness that is firmly embedded in the Taiwanese psyche towards its political future.

The inclusion of famed Taiwanese erotic performer Yin Ling, who is now based in Japan, also suggests an underlying political message, since war-related memories and the postwar relationship between China and Japan continue to hit a raw nerve. In *Let Lovemaking Lead the World Towards Peace* (fig. 5), Yin cavorted with a skeleton on a pink bed positioned between uniforms symbolizing Mao and Chiang. This tableau of erotic kitsch was well attended, especially by local male townsfolk and the visiting male arts crowd.

Wu Tung Wang's experimental documentary *Surrender* (fig. 6) not only deals with themes of aggression, but looks to the mechanics of memory to show us that our concepts of nationhood, defense of borders, aggression, sense of self, and propriety begin in early childhood, thus making the case that it is hard to rechannel and reprogram such early ingrained thinking. Projected in Tashan Bunker No. 2, which had been a military facility, the film addresses the concept of surrender. Wu's poignant interviews with Taiwanese children who were asked important questions about life and death, dignity, and whether to surrender to a big bully conclude with a voiceover asking if it is shameful to surrender, while an image of an elderly woman begging for money, ignored by passersby on a busy city street, alludes to the various capitulations we as humans experience in our daily lives and to the idea that surrendering is something we must face constantly.

This exhibition has the potential to present a kind of gentrification of a region through art wherein famous artists came, installed their work, and left. Su-mei Tse's *Some Airing* (fig. 7) best exemplifies the uneasiness many feel about this kind of gentrification. Installed in one bunker's ceiling, an oversized propeller rotates at eye level to push fresh air into the stale bunker, but its heavy force might knock someone unconscious. The work creates a sense of vertigo in the way it draws the viewer into the space at his or her own peril, as if to say that turning Kinmen into a cultural paradise while tangible threats and unresolved issues remain is deceptive at best.

SOUND

The space between Xiamen Bay and Kinmen's coast was ideal for Cold War propaganda, and on both sides huge loudspeakers were installed that blasted agitprop and fantastic promises. Because sound was once a big political tool, Cai invited artists who incorporated it to great effect in his exhibition.

The press junket first stopped at Shen Yuan's soundless site, *Speaker Tea* (fig. 8), which consists of a huge megaphone in front of which one can sit in chairs on a long tongue-like platform to sip tea while looking at nearby China. The wind whistling in the fir trees, the beautiful beach with its adjacent live minefields, and the landscape of China in the distance are so overwhelming that they are both integrated and in competition with the art.

This exhibition was famed composer Tan Dun's first foray into visual art, and for it he created an Arte Povera-like installation, *Visual Music* (fig. 9), of smashed and reconstructed pianos, showing that rebirth can come from destruction. Upon entering Tashan Battery No. 3 Bunker and Arsenal, one hears the loud crashing and smashing of pianos and sees parts of a destroyed piano jutting out of a circle of sand. Walking past it down the bunker's long, humid passageway, one enters a cavernous space with a sacred-like atmosphere. Here, Tan shows videos of a hundred Mozart pianos (made in Shanghai) being smashed and a few actual working pianos that were later reassembled from the detritus. Strains of Beethoven and Bach create emphatic cyclic effects of destruction, creation, and redemption, an inspiring message that shows how art, music, and culture might save us.

Music's healing and unifying powers are eloquently displayed by Taiwanese pop songwriter Yao Chien, who provides a public karaoke area for singing Chinese love songs (fig. 10). Yao is an EMI Records manager and songwriter who composes for some of Taiwan's top pop stars, such as Elva Siu and Coco Lee. These love songs transcend national borders, since people on both sides of the strait enjoy singing and listening to them.

ACCESS AND COMMUNITY INTERACTION

Even though the Cold War is over, certain political restrictions have yet to change. At the time of the weekend opening, some journalists and other visitors from China had not been granted visas to attend. Even though both coasts are in sight of each other, the logistical and ideological distance is at times impossible to traverse.

Zeng Li was scheduled to have Chinese opera performances for the opening, but, even as an artist, he had been unable to get a visa to attend. He, the opera troupe, and a group of journalists, all from China, were unable to secure permission to meet their obligations, and it was unclear whether he would be able to stage any performances in the future. Instead, an empty stage stood at the site as a reminder that some differences between Taiwan and China remain unresolved.

If it is up to Paris-based Fei Dawei, he will help transform all the local children into budding art critics and enthusiasts of contemporary art. Asked to write summaries about the exhibited art, the participating children were then encouraged to borrow an art book from the CCA's library, which is probably the only place in Kinmen with a collection of books on Duchamp (fig. 11). This interactive project inspires children to learn about contemporary art, and it marks the first time that Fei, who is recognized for his work as a critic and curator, assumes the role of artist.



Figure 14. Wang Wen-Chih, *Dragon's Pond, Tiger's Lair*, 2004. Courtesy of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art.

Shifting professional roles, such as from artist to curator or critic to artist, can be compared to shifting national alliances and, subsequently, national identity, one of the underlying messages that Cai strategically promotes. The inclusion of Ying Bo as a Chinese artist, illustrates this. Ying Bo gained fame in the 1999 Venice Biennale Aperto exhibition, where her video *Fei-ya! Fei-ya!* (fig. 12), which documents a rowdy drinking game among some Beijing artists, was presented. It was not the video that had sparked controversy but the fact that people did not know who this young Chinese artist was. Ying Bo is the pseudonym for Swiss artist Ingeborg Luescher. As she is neither Chinese nor Taiwanese, her inclusion in the Bunker project helps Cai provoke considerations about nationalities, ethnicities, and identities.

Buddhist and vehemently anti-military Lee Mingwei is the only artist not exhibiting in a bunker; instead he has installed his piece directly in a community. His interactive tour takes place in Shuitou, a restored ancient village (fig. 13). He provides motion-activated speakers that tell only

half of any story that residents might recount, while visitors are encouraged to ask the locals for the rest of it. Official powers are generally the ones with the authority to record history, but history is also composed of poetic, fleeting remembrances, and Lee Mingwei places this power back into the hands of the people.

Wang Wen-Chih's *Dragon's Pond, Tiger's Lair* (fig. 14) is an enormous bamboo and rattan woven structure that overtakes a bunker and merges into the surrounding natural environment, turning the abandoned bunker into a reflective place for meditation. It was built by ex-soldiers who once served in Kinmen and it was projects such as this, as well as those of Yao Chien, Lee Mingwei and Fei Dawei, that appear to most fully respond to the Cai's desire for connection and interaction with the local population. The success of these projects can be determined only over time.

STRATEGY OF CAI GUOQIANG

Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art is a major production and has the assistance of Taiwan's Ministry of Education, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Transportation and Communications, and the Council for Cultural Affairs.

But the real coup is that Cai, a mainland, was able to get permission from the Taiwan-controlled island to turn Kinmen into an exhibition space that deals with themes of war and aggression, territorialism, and borders—a grand undertaking in these politically sensitive times.

At first glance, it seems that Cai is accomplishing something entirely subversive, but it is not clear what his agenda is or where his alliances lie. This strategy of taking something that is projected onto him and then reflected back to the world is best seen in his project *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows* (1998), exhibited at the *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exhibition organized by P.S.1 in New York City.

Suspended from the air, a life-sized boat made of rice straw grown in his hometown, the ancient sea port of Quanzhou, was pierced with a multitude of arrows and a People's Republic of China flag attached to the stern that waved frantically in a breeze produced by an electric fan. The piece is based on a third-century Chinese tale in which a famous general, knowing that he did not have enough arrows to win an imminent battle, sent out straw boats to capture his enemy's arrows, which he then used to defeat his foe. Cai, in his art practice, strategizes very much like this general.

Trying to pin Cai down is like trying to catch a slippery fish in your bare hands. As soon as you think you've got it, it elusively slips away. This evasiveness is one of the most striking and fascinating aspects of Cai's work.

Notes

¹ Robert Storey, *Taiwan: A Travel Survival Kit*, 3rd edition (Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 1994), 261.

² *Ibid.*, 262.