

Bunker Plot: CAI Guo-Qiang's Battlefield Art Attack

NI Tsai-chin

Reviewing the creative process of Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art, we find that it originated from Cai Guo-Qiang's *Primeval Fireball* solo exhibition in 1991. At the time, the idea was to convert bunkers into love hotels. Presented as an ink-drawing sketch as a part of the artist's concept notes, the idea was not given much public notice, since it was not a part of the main *Primeval Fireball* installation.

I. Love Hotel

Bunkers are strange structures, easily seen in Taiwan, even more so in Kinmen. Cai Guo-Qiang grew up across the Taiwan Strait in Quanzhou, where bunkers are also a common sight. Having been to Dadeng and Xiaodeng islands to entertain the troops, he is familiar with the "bombing on odd days, not on even days" policy. With his limited knowledge of the bunkers (as he never held post inside a bunker), Cai, who is known for his reckless daydreams, thought up the most anti-war act possible. Love hotels amid the bi-strait bunkers are outrageous.

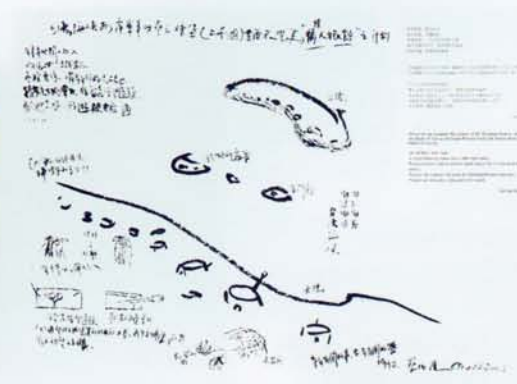
Because of the fear of being bombed or exploded (Cai's specialty), bunkers are always built in mountains and hills or barren fields, secretive and solid. Aside from tiny port-holes, they are metal and concrete. Green camouflage may be painted on the outside for disguise. This type of safe, secretive and indestructible environment with a view (of surrounding mountains and beaches) is the perfect location for love hotels. Just exchange the cannons with beds, nothing to it!

Actually, converting bunkers into love hotels may look simple, but its visual impact could be great (painting it pink, softened lights...), provoking suspicious, ambiguous and endless associations. In Chinese we call the lover's favorite activity "shooting cannon," from which

left:
View of Xiamen from
Kinmen



right:
CAI Guo-Qiang, *Love
Hotel*, ink on paper,
1991



other double-entendres ensue, such as unloading the gun, cannon shaft, etc. Hence, what's the big deal with shooting cannons inside a bunker? However, this cannon is not the same cannon, and it can transform the fire of mutual destruction into a fire of mutual intimacy, the symbolism of this reversal is powerful and projected imagery is easy to comprehend.

Since the dissolve of military rule in 1992, and the opening up of tourism the following year, two to three thousand bunkers have been vacated on the island. With their two-meter thick walls, they are not easy to demolish. While they give Kinmen a unique battlefield landscape, it is not advantageous for tourism. If bunkers can really be transformed into hotel suites, these new "cannon shooting" sites would prosper as the island's tourism industry. It's a pity that this plan is still too premature to be realized due to objective circumstances.

II. Museum Franchise

In the 1990s, Cai Guo-Qiang used the power of gunpowder to bombard the international art world. As an art maker, he was already quite accomplished. But it seems that he doesn't want to be merely an artist. This ambitious creator uses his usual "reckless" aesthetic methods, as he watches the Guggenheim Museum's attempt to open branches around the world (albeit largely unsuccessful) like McDonald's franchise strategy, to launch a Cai-Global-Museum-Construction Project, entitled *Everything is Museum*.

How is it possible to build museums everywhere with the financial strength of an artist? Even Guggenheim does not have enough power to do so. But Cai understands how to "borrow the enemy's arrows" and turn others' forces into his own, and he excels at patching dreams within an "arbitrary history." In *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explains the "Dream-Work" in the following patterns:

Condensation: not reproducing dreams loyally but in a fragmented and incomplete fashion.

Displacement: the dream is, as it were, centered elsewhere; its content consists of elements which do not constitute the central point of the dream-thoughts

Representation by Symbols in Dreams: using concrete forms to replace abstract desire.

Secondary Revision: after awake, one modifies the truth and details of a dream through a rational systematic process.

Using the above-mentioned methods of borrowed forces and patched-up dreams, Cai started to build his empire of museum franchise without much difficulty. First, at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in 2000, he transformed an old kiln from Dehua, China

left:
CAI Guo-Qiang, *To Borrow Your Enemy's Arrows*, PS1, USA, 1998



right:
CAI Guo-Qiang
An Arbitrary History: River, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, Lyon, France, 2001



by transporting more than 10,000 bricks to Japan and rebuilding it into DMoCA: Dragon Museum of Contemporary Art. This project used Japanese money and a deconstructed Chinese kiln, to construct a Director-Cai-Art-Museum.

In 2001, the 6th Arte all'Arte exhibition in Tuscany, Cai transformed ten arches underneath a bridge to build UMoCA: Under Museum of Contemporary Art. The opening of the museum also inaugurated Ni Tsai-chin's solo exhibition. At that moment, Cai evolved from artist to director and curator. Strangely, the subject of Cai's director/curator debut was Ni, artist and former director of Taiwan Museum of Art, where his own 1998 debut exhibition was centered on Cai. This is an example of Cai's masterful manipulation of words and situations, no wonder he is the center of media attention. For DMoCA's inaugural exhibition in 2003, Director Cai curated American contemporary artist Kiki Smith's solo exhibition. Housing contemporary art in an ancient kiln is unique and alluring.

Having produced two successful exhibitions with Ni Tsai-chin and Kiki Smith, Cai maintained his calm and stress-free stature, because of the venues' abundant funding, and solo exhibitions are less difficult to handle. But this kind of curatorial task is too convenient for someone like Cai Guo-Qiang, who enjoys picking up the most difficult challenge. With Kinmen, he found that challenge.

III. Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art

Cai Guo-Qiang especially enjoys shooting cannons in all places with *holes*. So after kiln caves and bridge arcs, he chose bunkers – with holes – to expand upon this ideology of building art museums. While BMoCA's *B* stands for bunker,¹ and evolved from the original concept for love hotels, the real trigger of this project was September 11th. Cai was in Italy working on UMoCA when he saw the twin towers collapse on TV; it made him think of Kinmen, of bunkers, and of war and peace. And the BMoCA idea was born.

Art and erotica is often hard to distinguish, such is the case of love hotels and Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art. Despite their utterly distinct concepts, both share an opposition to war. Being naked and making love in a war zone are anti-war acts – a very direct and forceful method of antagonism. Art has the capacity to be more tactful and indirect, the thought process more focused, the content more substantial, the forms more diverse and the effect undoubtedly more lasting. Such is the case with BMoCA, whose power cannot be underestimated.

Ni Tsai-chin is an artist, critic, curator, and the former director of Taiwan Museum of Art. He is currently the chairman of the fine arts department of Tunghai University, Taipei.

¹ The Chinese word for vagina is pronounced "b".

left:
NI Tsai-chin, *Who is the Happiest?* Inaugural Exhibition for UMoCA, Colle di Val d'Elsa, Italy, 2001



right:
Kiki SMITH, *Pause* – DMoCA Inaugural Exhibition with Kiki Smith, Niigata, Japan, 2003

