



Over the centuries, a single flash of light, whether emanating from celestial or manmade origins, has come to signify a quick and terrible end to one thing and the beginning, often much more humble, of something else. One imagines the blinding glare that engulfed Hiroshima and Nagasaki moments before the mushroom clouds rose into the sky, taking away with them the innocent conviction that atomic weapons would never be used to bring a wartime enemy to its knees. Biblical references portend "the fire next time" as the form that God's final judgment on humankind will take, while in science fiction the aliens of *War of the Worlds* use a ray of light to visit death on their victims, its sweeping glare instantly vaporizing anyone who stumbles into its path. Even on the less cosmic level of journalism, barely a single scandal managed to unfold in the public eye over the twentieth century without the accompanying flash of an army of flashbulbs heralding their unwitting subject's inevitable fall from the heights.

For Cai Guo-Qiang, who since the late 1980s has primarily used gunpowder and explosions to produce all of his artworks, few if any of the myriad cultural and historical interpretations of his chosen medium have escaped his attention. Of all these associations, the long chain of links between Chinese history and the development of gunpowder might appear to have been foremost in his considerations, since one of the greatest ongoing burdens for Cai artistically has been to provide a working basis for a substantive artistic dialogue between the century-old narrative of modernism in the West, and the emerging globally integrated aesthetic. If this formulation sounds puzzling to those who think of his work as Chinese first and foremost, they may be giving too little weight to the implications of Cai's decision to move to Tokyo in 1986, then to New York in 1995. In both instances, not only did he feel the need to breathe fresh cultural air, but he also sensed a growing purpose: to inform the West of what was going to follow in his wake.

In 2006, a year during which Western auction houses suddenly snapped out of their collective stupor regarding the Chinese market, Cai's mission has been made considerably more difficult by the fact that, overall, China tends not to perceive modernism's Eurocentric myth as the type of grand historical tragedy that completely absorbs the world's attention, and whose slow death scene can then be milked for a century or two of artistic aftershock, but rather as a single, fascinating thread within a much larger and more complex fabric. As the twentieth century ground to a close, entire suppressed histories of modern and post-modern experimentation began coming to light, including—to take a handful of examples—the 1920s in Russia, the 1930s in India, the 1940s in Brazil, the 1950s in Mali, the 1960s in Japan, the 1970s in Poland, and the 1980s in Cuba. Each of these unearthed histories has had the effect of slightly shifting modernism's emphasis away from the capitals of Paris and New York, so much so that their accumulated impact has been a growing decentralization of art—not just in its current iteration, but also our understanding of the art of the past few generations.

Against this shifting cultural background, Cai Guo-Qiang's departure from China more than two decades ago might be understood as a means of starting over—a movement towards the contemporary, but not necessarily as it was then understood by any of its most celebrated practitioners. One did not speak then of contemporary art in the Soviet Union, Africa, South Korea or South America, because such things were barely known to exist. Japan, however, was an important stronghold of avant-garde artistic

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

DAN CAMERON

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practice, and many of the most prominent Japanese artists—the Gutai group, Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama, On Kawara—had been successful at maintaining a separate philosophical viewpoint from American or French existentialism, even when they opted to make their careers in New York or Paris.

The basic chemistry of gunpowder consists of sulfur, charcoal, and usually potassium nitrate, the last of which was traditionally extracted from manure, like compost. While gunpowder produces an explosion when it is ignited, this is known as a 'low explosive,' meaning that its subsonic waves are enough to propel a cannonball or bullet, but not so much as to blow up the cannon or rifle from which it is expelled. Throughout the long history of warfare using gunpowder, the great difficulty has always been in getting the exact proportion of the three basic components right, so that the firearm discharges, but doesn't explode. This slight margin of unpredictability is partly what attracted Cai to gunpowder as a medium, even before he began producing visual art, since it symbolized a type of spontaneity that he saw missing in the society around him.

Contemporary art, as Cai wished to study it, was not taught in the Chinese art academies at the end of the 1970s, so, following an initial period of exploration, he elected to study stage design for four years at Shanghai Drama Institute. To an artist whose later challenge to the art establishment would consist, at least in part, of his insistence that viewers devote their full attention to an event that was finished in a matter of seconds, the discipline developed through the study of theater is focused on a staged event that nonetheless appears spontaneous to those in the audience. The impresario whose gestural flourish lifts the theatrical curtain is the same as the sculptor of explosions, who lights the fuse and steps away, or the magician who produces a flock of doves from within a pocket handkerchief. In each case, an interlocutor is required first to set the stage, and then to step back and let the human imagination fill in the rest.

Unsurprisingly, Cai's background in the science of stagecraft has proven immeasurably valuable as a working basis for merging visual art practice with ideas and principles that seek to completely reinvent the way that art can be understood by society at large. An example of how this transformation works is Cai's 1999 installation, *Rent Collection Courtyard* at the Venice Biennale, which in many respects became the art world's first large-scale exposure to his work. Up until that point, Cai may have been known to many as the Chinese artist who made explosions, but the breathtaking intricacy with which he wove a multi-level narrative involving economic exploitation, political myth-making, painting as part of Chinese history, the unique work of art in the age of populist propaganda, and the central place of performance in contemporary art practice came as nothing less than a shock for those who had not developed a sense of the immense breadth of his practice. Perhaps the most compelling encounter with the piece took place during the festive opening days of the exhibition, when academically trained artists from China were still hard at work producing the life-size figures 'borrowed' from the ur-revolutionary woodcut of the work's title, and visitors to Cai's installation suddenly found themselves rubbing elbows with the 'artists' and their 'creations,' whose respective body language seemed no less ritualistic and formal than the art world jet-setters who had flown in to gawk at them.

01 Cai Guo-Qiang, *Self Portrait: A Subjugated Soul*, 1989

02_03 Cai Guo-Qiang, *Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9*
Hann. Münden, Germany 1992

04 Cai Guo-Qiang, *Rent Collection Courtyard*
Venice Biennale, 1999



Once the role of avant-garde impresario became established as the basic framework for a working methodology, Cai then set about to annihilate the self as author—a gesture consummated by his first and only self-portraits, which are in effect silhouettes created from the residue of a series of small explosions in which only the outline of the body remains intact. Having thereby liberated himself from the ego's mortal limits, Cai was free to turn his attention to producing an art intended to translate across differences that are not simply cultural, but interplanetary as well. In effect, his *Projects for Extraterrestrials*, a series which began in 1990 and continues in one form or another in quite recent works, takes as its working premise the idea that whatever cultural bridges need to be built between one part of the earth and another, these are insignificant compared to what we might have to say about ourselves collectively as a single species to someone observing us from some distant point elsewhere in the galaxy. Similar ideas are believed to lie behind the enigmatic Nazca lines created in ancient Peru, and they certainly inspired efforts by NASA in the 1970s to include pictographic information about earth's inhabitants as part of the payload of the first unmanned spacecraft sent to the surfaces of other planets. This notion of celestial visibility is also one of formative principles in the building of the Great Wall of China, which is in fact the only manmade structure that can be seen by orbiting spacecraft. Not coincidentally, in one of his earliest large-scale works in 1993, Cai used a series of explosions to visually extend the Great Wall by an extra 10,000 meters into the desert. This *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, like so many of his subsequent explosion works, is best appreciated from a bird's-eye perspective.

The deliberate mingling of earthbound and heavenly viewpoints is also an ongoing theme in traditional Chinese landscape painting—a tradition that Cai frequently references in both his explosions and other public projects, and into which he has literally inserted himself through his two-dimensional artworks. With his background in theater, and having established gunpowder as his primary working material, it seems that incorporating both magic and a belief in the supernatural into his work was never very far off. In fact, one of his most successful early drawings, *Bigfoot's Footprints, or Project for Extraterrestrials No. 6*, uses the visual premise of following the elusive creature's footprints through the snow to incorporate the same mingled perspective. The fact that

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tracking a beast through the snow requires being at ground level with him, while the capacity to see a long line of footprints suggests a fixed point somewhere above the earth, does not pose a visual contradiction. On the contrary, both yeti and UFOs fall into the same loose category—heavily witnessed phenomena for which science has no substantive explanation—, so it is very much in keeping with the drawing's subject that we can see things in it that would not be available to the unaided eye.

The most ambitious of Cai's recent museum installations, *Inopportune: Stage One*, created in 2004 for MASS Moca in North Adams, also reconfigures this combination bird's eye/man's eye perspective in its most lavishly up-to-date iteration. The work is not based on primordial forms of the supernatural, but rather in the current version of that wizardry: the digital special effects that helped transform films like *The Matrix* into cinematic breakthroughs on the level of sheer visual artistry. Since one of the fundamental principles of the magician's craft is that revealing the secret of how a trick is accomplished takes nothing away from its effect on the viewer, Cai conceived of his piece as the sculptural equivalent of a behind-the-scenes documentary on how a certain effect was attained—in this case, a late model car which is zapped by some interstellar ray and immediately catapulted into space through a shower of sparks and bolts of light. Slowing down the action to dissect in a two hundred foot gallery what might transpire over a two-second interval in a film, Cai deployed six identical cars, each frozen in a different moment of their supernatural metamorphosis. We can see all the steps, elaborately laid out for us like a three-dimensional guide, but we are no less amazed at the spectacle itself, because of course knowing how it was done does not help us in understanding what exactly it was that took place, or why.

The continual expansion of spatial possibilities within a landscape format is a frequent theme in Cai's work, both explicitly and less so. For his 2004 work, *Painting Chinese Landscape Painting*, presented by the San Diego Museum of Art as part of an annual air show, he made use of four fighter-planes flying away from each other, each emitting a separate trail of smoke, to conjure an image in the sky of a traditional, calligraphy-rooted landscape form. The fact that this image could be fully identified only at the point of its completion, which was also the moment when it began to dissolve, suggests the exact opposite of the conjurer's illusionistic methods. Instead of watching an object appear or disappear within a puff of smoke, the viewer sees a gesture, or a piece of writing, that achieves visual clarity at exactly the point in time when it disappears forever.

As with his Great Wall project a decade earlier, Cai's *Painting Chinese Landscape Painting* situates the landscape motif within an explicitly military set of parameters, which by their nature also indirectly engage the somewhat delicate subject of present and future Chinese-American relations. Certainly, for a Chinese artist working globally at the beginning of the twenty-first century, such considerations do not merely determine the context on which all cultural and artistic activities depend. Issues related to the ever-changing dynamic between the world's waning hyper-power and its most rapidly emerging rival also happen to figure heavily into the broader question of whether contemporary art has an identity at all, and if so, whether it is part of the artist's job to construct that identity outside the limits of what is typically understood by the words "Asian," "European," and "American." When one stops to consider how extremely

06_07 Cai Guo-Qiang, *No Destruction, No Construction: Bombing the Taiwan Museum of Art*
Taichung, Taiwan 1998



difficult it is for the Western art establishment to even admit that its narrative of recent art history is heavily biased in favor of its own cultural production, it is not surprising that Cai's approach to the topic of national identity has been exquisitely circumspect, even aloof.

One subject that Cai does not shy away from is war—or more particularly, the battle that ensues when one is fighting not to lose one's own life. Since the use of gunpowder belongs almost entirely to the realms of the military and the theater, part of its fundamental attraction to the artist has been its capacity to convey the ferocity of the clash without incorporating any direct sign of blood, suffering or death. The sheer frequency with which real and fictitious animals known for their ferocity are evoked in his art also ties him closely to the long tradition of military conquest evoked through art. Tigers, lions and dragons—all frequent protagonists of Cai's art—are each invested with legendary quantities of strength, ferocity and an uncanny ability to strike fear in the hearts of their foes. As often as not, such creatures are also experienced as part of more mutable, mythological forms—i.e., as kites, comets, warships—, or else they are riddled with arrows, a sign of mortal injury which also taps generously into the story of St. Sebastian. From the point of view of global politics, it is tempting but probably fruitless to engage in the game of identifying certain symbols as standing for America, and others for China. What is probably more to the point is that we live in an age when warfare and the open struggle among nations for power are as real and palatable as the rising and setting of the sun, and the artist's mission is in part to observe these struggles, and convey some sense of their meaning through artistic form.

But the theatrics of war, as they play out in Cai's art, do not refer solely to the contest between countries to dominate one another, but also to the force of destruction as a tool for wiping the slate clean and starting over. His best early formulation of this principle, as applied to architecture, was in his 1998 event to signal the renovation of the Taiwan Museum of Art. Entitled *No Destruction, No Construction*, the work took place in the city of Taiching, in front of an empty museum, each room of which was rigged with gunpowder, so that a sequence of explosions would symbolize the transformation of the building into a reborn cultural entity. At times, such gestures have also worked to exorcise the demons of history, as with the 2005 *Red Flag* event in Poland, which required less than a second to transform a giant flag bearing the symbolic color of the Soviet regime into ash and smoke. A less politically loaded use of the same idea was his unrealized 2003 proposal, *Building a Chinese Tower* in Paris, which envisioned a temporary red pagoda structure standing the same height as the Eiffel Tower, which would light up the sky for one brief moment as its ignited form crystallized in space, then vanish completely.

The problem of temporality is never far from Cai's thought process as he prepares works that require months or even years of preparation, and whose life span is so brief that it can only be recorded for posterity through the imperfect media of video and photography. At the extreme of applied aesthetics, Cai seems to be maintaining a healthily skeptical position with regard to the fetish of the object as it currently figures into the decadently overheated contemporary art market. And on a pragmatic basis, this is probably a wise course to pursue, especially considering how far the market shrank when its last correction took place at the end of the 1980s. But on a

08 Cai Guo-Qiang, Red Flag
The Zacheta National Gallery of Art
Warsaw 2005

09 Cai Guo-Qiang
Proposal for Building Chinese Tower in Paris
2003



purely metaphysical level, Cai's interest in art that is gone before the eye can fully register its existence is closely tied to the conviction that art is never something that occurs outside of the self, but is a form of interaction between external stimulus and internal intelligence. By ensuring that no one, not even himself, has the full picture of his work when it takes place, Cai even allows for the possibility that his art can be explained to others without even any need for images, and that it loses absolutely nothing in the translation from image to words.

Temporality in art is also about the universal problem facing the all-too-mortal artist in conceiving and executing a mark on the world that will be remembered throughout history. That this temporal perspective can be daunting, especially as it relates to the human life span, is something that every artist is profoundly aware of, so that in terms of the artist's biography, the slipping away of life's essence is nearly always characterized as part of a race to finish one's masterpiece before time has run out. In Cai's case, we can begin with the hypothesis that the length of a single artist's life in relation to the full span of art history stands in roughly the same proportion as the length of one of his explosions with respect to the time usually calculated to take in a verifiable masterpiece. Such brevity, especially when considered alongside the fairly common knowledge that we live in an age in which the incessant bombardment of imagery has dramatically shortened the average person's attention span, seems to indicate that perhaps the artist of the future will need to find ways to concentrate even greater experience into ever more fleeting durations of time. Inevitably, perhaps, the freshness of art's bloom will fade as quickly as the after-image from an old fashioned flash-bulb.

Then, too, we know that all of life can change completely in the course of a single instant, and that even the passage from life to death takes place in less time than a single heartbeat. In this spirit, Cai has created a handful of deeply evocative works that take on the weight of conveying the presence of life's ephemeral nature. One of his least-known projects, the *Ethereal Flowers* created in 2002 in Trento, Italy, captures

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