

Of Terror and Tigers: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang's *Inopportune*

By Robert Pogue Harrison

Inopportune is an artwork that erupts from out of the core of our bewildered age. Or maybe one should say: it reveals the explosive core of the age from which it erupts – an age in which we carry on our lives as if the framework supporting them were not under a constant threat of fulmination. The nature of this threat is obscure, like the artwork that confronts us here with its luminous enigma. *Inopportune* leaves one perplexed, uneasy, and in a state of wonder. One does not know what to make of it, or how to translate its impact into words or ideas. Indeed, impact is everything here. And yet we look again and see that beneath the deliberate aggression in the narrative of these objects, the work as a whole, in its four-part installation, achieves an aesthetic resolution that opens up a space of reflective calm at the heart of its upheavals. It is as if the artist enlisted the tactics of shock and awe in order to call on us to think. If we choose to respond to that call emanating from the fireworks, we find ourselves thinking not only about *Inopportune* – its complex articulation, its logic, its meaning – but also about the terrorized and terrorizing era to which we, along with the artwork, belong. For this is a work that, by calling on us to think, places us squarely at the center of the times – or at the center, as it were, of Times Square.

These cars, for example. Or rather, this car. For surely it is the same car in an odyssey of successive frozen frames that is on display here. Nonetheless, there are nine real cars in the room, each identical to the others. What kind of *in pluribus unum* is this? The least we can say about a car bomb is that it shatters the principle of identity by annihilating the vehicle of its delivery. Here the car preserves its integrity through the process of igniting. So this is not really an explosion after all. As the artist himself has declared, it is more like a dream image than a representation. But what does it mean to dream a car bomb? Dreams are for the most part harmless, while a car bomb is anything but harmless for those who find themselves in the vicinity of its detonation. In “*Inopportune: Stage One*,” the catastrophe is at once silent, beautiful and innocuous, for the self-same car remains in tact after its tumultuous ride through the air. This is disturbing. It unsettles. We know that the explosion

took place – that it is taking place – yet its effects, cancelled out at the end of the trajectory, are consigned to the oblivion of dreams or the order of illusion.

Illusion? The second installation of *Inopportune* features a 90-second video entitled exactly that: “Illusion.” A car superimposed on the scene enters Times Square from the left side of the screen, explodes in the middle of the square, and then returns again, repeating its action in a continuous loop. Here too the explosion is clearly harmless, for it has no effect on the bustle and rush of traffic in the square. It would seem, then, that the car bomb goes off somewhere in the phantasmagoria of the viewer’s mind, that it is precisely as the title says: an illusion. But what do car bombs, and the terrorism with which they are associated, have to do with illusion? There is nothing illusory about terrorist acts, to be sure, yet the terror they unleash after their impact feeds off the natural extravagance of the human imagination, which exceeds reality on all sides. A single act of terrorism can turn all places, all beings, all people, into potential targets, thanks to what Jean Baudrillard calls the “spirit of terrorism,” with its vast imaginary and symbolic reach.¹² Andrew Mitchell puts it well when he writes: “Terror brings about an alteration in the very mode of being of reality; the real is now the terrorized. The change has already taken place, and this regardless of whether an attack comes or not.... The effectiveness of terror lies in the threat, not the attack.” One could say that “Illusion” puts in motion a visual allegory of the imaginary threat that hangs over reality. What we see in the video is not the imaginary destruction of Times Square but the square as transformed into the site of a potential holocaust. The car that enters the scene and explodes is the visible correlate of the invisible threat in and through which terrorism alters reality even as it leaves it intact. In this respect, the illusion in question is not that a car bomb has exploded in the square, it is that nothing has really taken place after all. “Illusion” reveals that Times Square in a post-September 11 era is no longer the Times Square of old. Its identity, or self-sameness in time, has been exploded – not by a car bomb as such, but by its specter.

The specter of terrorism has a way of moving through closed doors, insinuating itself into our secret fears, our vulnerabilities, our unavowed guilt, our existential dread. The statistical risks of becoming a casualty of a terrorist attack on American soil are on the whole extremely minimal, if not infinitesimal, yet look at how we quake with anxiety! Listen to our cries for more security measures, for more “homeland security”! How ready we are to trade in our cherished liberties for the sake – or for the illusion – of safety. This is far from harmless. The question that we must ask, that we are called on by *Inopportune* to ask, is one that puts us at a certain risk. What is it about the times

that renders us so easily terrified? What is the deeper source of our perturbation, figured here in dream-like images?

It is the age itself that terrifies us. It is not because there are terrorists that we live in a terrifying age. It is because we live in a terrifying age that terrorism can wreck havoc with our insecurities. If Times Square seems like the ideal target of a terrorist attack, it is because it is charged with a heavy symbolic load of the global network that has transformed, that is to say devastated, our relation to beings and to the earth to which we once belonged. It is the monstrous complexity, relentless expansion and sinister death-drive of that planetary network that fill us with dread. The spectacle of “what man has made of man,” to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth, is altogether awesome. That we are still able to experience a tremor of terror in the face of the technological forces that have put the earth and the totality of its resources on standing-reserve for human ordering and exploitation is an indication that the human in us has not been entirely extinguished, that we have not yet been fully transhumanized, or at least that our memory of being human has not been completely abolished. Soon we will no longer be able to feel even such a tremor, and that is what is most dreadful of all.

The age of terror is the age of “technicity,” a word that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger coined to name the “essence of technology,” which in itself is nothing technological. While we presume to author, direct and regulate our technologies, human beings do not control the inner will that drives us to amass more and more technical capability and to “enframe” all beings in an ever-expanding order of distribution and consumption. “Technicity in its essence is something that man does not master by his own power.”³ Heidegger adds that its will to unconditional domination operates not only beyond the control of man, but, as it unearths the earth, wrests nature’s secrets from their concealment, and devastates whatever lies in its way, it operates for the most part against us – against what is human in us. The terror is that we are its agents, that we are the agents of its dehumanization. As it strives to abolish all distance and singularity across the planet and to render all things available and disposable, technicity turns human beings into resources along with everything else it places on standing-reserve for future utilization. “‘Man is the 'most important raw material',” writes Heidegger, “because he remains the subject of all consumption. He does this in such a way that he lets his will be unconditionally equated with this process, and thus at the same time become the 'object' of the abandonment of Being.”⁴ In their abandonment by Being, beings remain denatured, groundless, in a word terrorized. A world from which Being has taken flight is no longer a world in any human sense. Indeed,

“the ‘world’ has become an unworld as a consequence of the abandonment of beings by the truth of Being” (ibid). What does *Inopportune* have to do with this unworld, or with the planetary movement that, independently of human governance, is bringing about an absolutely technical state – and soon, an absolutely bio-technical state – on the earth?

The least we can say is that the work arises as a response to it. In his interview in 1969 with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger was asked: “What must be mastered in this case? Everything is functioning. More and more electric power companies are being built. Production is up. In highly technologized parts of the earth, people are well cared for. We are living in a state of prosperity. What really is lacking to us?” To which Heidegger answered: “Everything is functioning. That is precisely what is awesome [or terror-inducing], that everything functions, that the functioning propels everything more and more toward further functioning, and that technicity increasingly dislodges man and uproots him from the earth” (56). “Illusion” offers a flash of insight into the awesome nature of “everything functioning.” What is eerie about Times Square in the video is not so much the spectral car whose explosion is superimposed on the scene. It’s that the explosion is feckless, that business goes on as usual, that the cars and people continue to circulate, in short, that seemingly nothing can resist or obstruct the implacable functioning of the global network, of which Times Square is here a symbolic node.

The paradox of the age is that the ordering and enframing drive of planetary technicity in fact violently disrupts and disworlds the world. The times to which we belong are in that sense radically combustible, and Cai Guo Qiang has understood this as radically as any contemporary artist. The effects of this combustion upon our lived worlds, and upon the earth as a whole, are evoked in the third part of the installation, “Nine Cars Drawing,” with its image of an ellipse made by exploding gunpowder on the paper’s surface. In its form, this ellipse is essentially cosmic, recalling among other things the earth’s orbit around the sun. Yet the title links it to the exploding car of “Inopportune: Stage One,” as if to suggest that what takes place in “Inopportune: Stage One” has planetary repercussions, that the impact of the car’s detonation in “Stage One” goes well beyond the single event under depiction (hence the “stage one” appellation).

If nothing else, *Inopportune* forces us to reflect on the nature of combustion, its effects on both the human and natural world. From a strictly theoretical point of view, one could say that “Stage One” does not depict a car

bomb, but merely offers a fantastical image of the internal combustion that allows cars to function at all. In other words, it is the car in its everyday functioning that is the bomb. And who, looking at things dispassionately, not to say ecologically, could in good conscience deny this? For a century and more we in the west have wedded ourselves to the automobile, have transformed the very fabric of our habitats to meet the demands of the automobile, have dug deep into the earth and seas in order to extract the liquefied fossils that fuel the automobile, have enthralled the rest of the world to the automobile. The car has on the whole terrorized the earth, and its work is far from done. One day – if human history has such a future – we will look back to the era of the automobile as something quite insane, something fundamentally inexplicable. Meanwhile we fight to the death to defend our right to remain enslaved to its demands.

Works of art have the power to reveal the being of things in singular ways. *Inopportune* reveals that internal combustion involves an external combustion that impacts outward, into the world. The most intriguing part of the installation is “Inopportune: Stage Two,” with its nine arrow-riddled tigers in various positions of tension and stress. What are we to make of this work, especially in relation to the other parts of the installation? In her companion piece in this volume, Laura Heon discusses in eloquent fashion the traditional Chinese subtexts in Cai’s use of the tiger and arrow motifs, pointing out the parallel placement of the tigers and cars. About the tigers she writes: “the arrows that pierce them mirror the light rods that jut out of the hanging cars. One receives and the other discharges a force.” If one considers the 14th century Chinese literary work, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, to which these tigers apparently allude – a work in which the bandit hero Wu Song slays a man-eating tiger that had been terrorizing a village – then one is tempted to see in *Inopportune*’s final image the slaying and defeat of the terrorist forces evoked in the preceding parts. Hence the installation would conclude on an uplifting note, to the effect that we (whoever “we” may be) will triumph in some heroic manner over the terror that explodes our cars and disrupts our world. However, in the line of reasoning that I have been pursuing here – call it a free engagement with the work at the level of speculative reflection – the arrows figure as the outward impact of the cars’ light rods on the tigers themselves. If the tiger in *Outlaws of the Marsh* was a force of terror, here the tigers are creatures of pure passion, victims of the violent external combustion of the internal combustion engine. Whatever they may otherwise symbolize, these tigers are embodiments of animal life, and in that respect they appear here as figures for the natural world, which the planetary unleashing of human power

terrorizes. In their passion we see a figure for the suffering of the animal kingdom as a whole in the age of technicity.

Such a hypothesis holds little comfort, to be sure, yet the purpose of art is not to console but to rouse us from the half-slumber in which we get on with our everyday, practical lives. In some cases this means arousing in us a sense of terror and pity. *Inopportune* does precisely that. In “Stage One,” the terror; in “Stage Two,” the pity. Art’s vocation has been linked to terror and pity ever since Aristotle defined the art of tragedy as the “catharsis” or release of these emotions. Art does not domesticate terror in pity; rather, it transfigures terror in the beautiful. Such transfiguration, which preserves the power of what it appropriates, is clearly at work here. *Inopportune* reminds us of the terror of beauty; and in so doing creates the possibility of a pity without condescension, a pity fraught with genuine, self-referential dread. In the first of his *Duino Elegies* Rilke declares: “beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror we can just barely endure, / and we admire it so is because it calmly disdains / to destroy us.”⁵ *Inopportune* calls for this sort of strange admiration. It is explosive and violent, like the age from whose core it erupts, yet it is also pervaded by an underlying, disdainful calm. This is the kind of beautiful calm that only art knows how to secure amid great commotion. In precisely such a calm, which calls thinking forth into the presence of terror, lies the work’s challenge to the convulsive and disfiguring forces of the age – forces that, when left to themselves, put all thoughtfulness to flight, leaving us stunned and bewildered. It takes an art at least as powerful as the forces of the age itself to open a space of thoughtfulness in their midst, for it is only from out of the terror that the powers of rescue can arise.

Robert Pogue Harrison
Stanford University

Endnotes

¹ See Jean Baudrillard's The Spirit of Terrorism, trans. Chris Turner (London & New York: Verso, 2002). All four essays in this excellent collection are pertinent to the theme of my meditation, but see especially "Hypothesis on Terrorism" (pp. 49-84).

² The quote comes from Andrew Mitchell's superb essay, "Heidegger and Terrorism," forthcoming in the Research in Phenomenology, vol. 35 (Fall, 2005).

³ Martin Heidegger, interview with Der Spiegel, "'Only a God Can Save Us': The Spiegel interview (1966)," trans. William J. Richardson, in Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, Inc., 1981), p. 56.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, The End of Philosophy, ed. and trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973) p. 104.

⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1961), p. 3.