

Fear of Remembering

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There may not be an English word for fear of remembering, but perhaps *reminisaphobic* will serve my purpose. For in our time, we claim to want to remember so many things, but in fact seem to do just about everything we can to obscure or deny memory. It may be a simple and healthy aversion to the pain that often accompanies remembering that brings about denial on such a massive scale. Or it may be that one of the functions of social memory is to soften the remembered blow, and allow for collective healing to take place. The continued conflict over the form and fact of a memorial for the victims of 9/11 may provide a perfect case in point.

Morally speaking, we may not feel altogether comfortable with the notion of collective denial, so we construct celebrations of those memories we *are* willing to embrace, and often create holidays or other rituals to further consecrate them. The 4th of July, Veterans Day, and Memorial Day exemplify the most formally consecrated attempts to remember; analogous memorial holidays and celebrations exist in all nations around the world.

In the U.S., particularly in the post-9/11 era, this confusion and conflict between *reminisamania* and *reminisaphobia* has created a palpable social tension, and a corresponding contentious political climate. Elsewhere around the world, this conflict plays out in relation to recent and historical memory to such an extent that it brings about public insurrection and/or government suppression, and often serves as the breeding ground for both reactionary and revolutionary social forces.

The practice of truth and reconciliation has, in countries like South Africa and Chile, had a demonstrably positive impact on this continuing conflict between those who need to remember and those who need to forget. Sadly, these countries are the exceptions to the norm.

So, as it has for centuries, it falls upon art to serve as the site for this particular conflict of values and ideas. Artists seem particularly able to straddle the divide between celebration and mourning, between witness, victim, and predator, between vanquished and victor, between allies and enemies. Art, in its dual role as social salve and provocateur, continues to allow for the open-ended contemplation of profoundly disturbing memories. But perhaps more importantly, art provides a means to explore the very core of this conflict—the notion of collective memory or collective denial.

Often expressed in terms of public spectacle, collective memory has historically taken the form of great community celebrations, mass demonstrations, or public mourning. This is particularly true when what is to be memorialized is war—the deaths it caused, and the prospect of peace. Collective denial often passes lightly over the death of others (the vanquished) and recalls only the lives lost in the defense of the victorious cause. And after a time, even the sacrifice of the victorious is forgotten. In the U.S., the decoration of the graves of those who died during the Civil War is long forgotten. Memorial Day is essentially a shopping holiday and the beginning of beach season.

Men, women and children are dying daily in the Iraq war, genocide continues to decimate the population of Darfur, repressive regimes around the world continue to wage war on defenseless civilian populations and insurgent forces alike, AIDS continues to kill thousands a day, domestic violence is a global scourge, the lives of women remain at risk around the world, slavery abounds at levels equal to or greater than during the 17th century, global warming is no longer a theory but an environmental fact, and yet we seem well-insulated against remem-

bering, preferring instead to whistle pass the collective graveyard and pretend to see nothing, to remember only what helps us sleep well at night.

The irony of this social neurosis has rarely been expressed more elegantly and powerfully than when we encounter the work of Cai Guo-Qiang. For over a decade, Cai has produced work employing social spectacle and allusion as means to profound artistic ends. Well-known for his use of gunpowder and explosive events (an essentially Chinese vocabulary if such a concept can exist), Cai is actually interested in the aesthetic of explosion itself—the speed of the reaction, the transfer of matter into energy, the temporal and the spatial chaos that is created in the moment of explosion. His employment of faux taxidermy has brought the corporeal world into conflict with the world of machines and human madness.

For The Metropolitan Museum of Art project in the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden, Cai brought together many of these elements (and some others) to create a remarkable provocation: *Transparent Monument*. Centered around a large, freestanding sheet of glass, the rooftop installation also includes a pair of life-sized cast resin crocodiles mounted as if they were hovering in flight over the garden, a bas-relief limestone mural, and a daily performance of an extremely elegant and brief explosive event.

In the artist's own words, he has tried "...to situate the audience between history and contemporary culture, mythology and fact, nature and civilization, through the select configuration of four works that address the uneasiness of our society at present."

Uneasiness is a very polite way of speaking about hypocrisy, and the ways in which we continue to allow ourselves to be blinded. Spectacle,¹ as the French Situationist Guy Debord made clear, creates a machine whose sole purpose is mass distraction and misdirection. Cai has long embraced and embedded this understanding of the inherent power of spectacle and its purpose into his work.

In the installation's title piece, *Transparent Monument*, 2006, a simple glass sheet is mounted so as to stand freely in the middle of the space. Functioning as a framing device (we stand and look at the beauty of Central Park through the glass window as a framing device intended to focus our attention as a simple act of aesthetic willfulness) we are at once aware of our ability to look elsewhere, undirected and freely, and are led to a simple comparison. But then we catch sight of the disturbing image of the hyper-realistic sculptures of birds that have apparently flown into the glass and died from the impact. Cai has created a not-so-subtle metaphor for the danger of what is seemingly transparent (the act of framing and direction), and a signal that all is not well despite the abundance of beauty in which we find ourselves.

Not unlike Daniel Buren's memorable work celebrating the completion of the Centre Pompidou in which he strategically positioned binoculars pointing out at striped canvasses placed in the neighborhoods surrounding the new national museum in order to re-frame the experience of the museum in a specific social time and space,² so Cai's large glass acts as a re-framing device, as well as a cautionary indicator—death abounds in nature, but never more than at the intersection of culture and nature.

Glancing to the left, the viewer encounters *Nontransparent Monument*, something that seems to have been brought up to the Roof Garden from one of the galleries of ancient art in the museum below. It seems, at first, out of place, as it draws our attention to a close reading

of the carved green limestone bas-relief forms. And a close reading is called for, as Cai has depicted a broad assortment of contemporary historical events and personae ranging from images of Kim Jong Il, Osama bin Laden, Fidel Castro; George W. Bush and Junichiro Koizumi visiting the Yasukuni (war) Shrine; horrific images of 9/11 and historic events like the hoisting of the American flag over the World Trade Center ruins by NYC firemen; the funerals of Yasir Arafat and Pope John Paul II; references to pop culture and commerce; and even references to his own work as an artist (see illustrations, pp. 43-51).

What we encounter is another framing device; in this case an historical frame of reference, a guide for our current collective memory. Not unlike a "you are here" indicator in a large complex city map, the form of the work is a cross between contemporary conceptual art-influenced sculpture and something one might encounter in an ancient tomb excavation. It conflates a wide range of events, situations and people creating a temporal marker and a virtual time capsule—though one with a distinct difference.

By inserting his own work into this tableau, Cai is not simply asserting his Warholian right to his 15 minutes of fame, but rather is acknowledging the purely subjective reading of history, and again warning or at least informing the viewer to remain skeptical when it comes to receiving pre-packaged knowledge, and to perhaps ask him or herself, "Whose interest does this particular version of history serve?"

The element of the installation that at first seems out of place, and immediately strikes one as humorous, is the most incongruous and alarming as well. Two large realistic sculptures that look exactly like large crocodiles hover menacingly over beds of green shrubs at the edge of the Roof Garden. As if these unfamiliar yet highly evocative natural forms were not frightening enough, each of them has been pierced and studded with hundreds of sharp objects deemed dangerous by airport security regulations. In fact, these knives, scissors, cutting tools, and other bladed instruments were actually confiscated by airport security, and have thus been recycled (re-purposed) by the artist.

Of course there is nothing at all humorous about *Move Along, Nothing To See Here*, 2006. The title is a reference to the instructions a police officer might bark at rubbernecking pedestrians who happen on the scene of a crime or an accident. And of course, there is always something to see, and we are only made more keenly aware of this when we are admonished to move along and ignore what our eyes tells us is not only not *nothing* but rather is quite *something*.

Again, the reference to menace is to a fabricated menace, one surely serious enough to raise the alert level status to orange if not red, and to justify continuing vigilance—the price of freedom. Again, Cai presents us with a conflation of the real and the faked, the truly dangerous and the apparently dangerous, artifice and life. Again, the artist admonishes us to take in the spectacle, but to remain alert and connected to what a deeper understanding may lead us towards. And as in Cai's recent work employing a group of replica tigers,³ we are also confronted with the fragile ecology that supports these frightful yet beautiful animals, and are led to a consideration of how we have allowed the natural world to be rid of these "threats" by ignoring the warning signs of their imminent extinction.

And finally, if you were present in the Roof Garden precisely at noon, in good weather, you were able to experience *Clear Sky Black Cloud*, 2006, the final work within the installa-

tion. For an artist like Cai Guo-Qiang who first came to the attention of many in the West because of his remarkably sophisticated explosive events involving the use of gunpowder deployed in a variety of ways, this may have been the most confusing. For at noon each clear day, a small charge consisting of a single black smoke shell was set off in the sky above the Metropolitan Museum, resulting in a small black cloud that slowly floated over the park and rather rapidly dispersed and disappeared.

Explosive events, such as firework displays, conjure up for most people the image of great evening celebrations during which we enjoy the remarkable and memorable display of pyrotechnic engineering that has for centuries delighted and fascinated people around the world. As Americans, we tend to think of fireworks as a quintessentially American experience, but actually, people of many nations feel the same way, and relate the experience to their most important patriotic and religious festivals.

Considering Cai's deep understanding of the techniques and aesthetics of gunpowder, one has to wonder about his choice to use such a specifically minimal event as part of *Transparent Monument*. But it seems to me that the work is an inescapable conclusion to an overall work that begs to question our notion of remembering, and challenges the ways in which we construct rituals of remembrance and forgetting.

Clear Sky Black Cloud produces the punctuation that brings the work's text to a close. The work calls daily for a small, mournful black burst—one more directly associated with the martial use of firepower than the colorful and spectacular displays that we normally associate with fireworks. As we watch the little cloud float out over the man-made natural beauty of Olmsted's great 19th-century masterpiece of landscape architecture, we are brought curiously and sadly back to ground. We remember what it was we've been repressing, we think about that which we have lost, that which is endangered, that which has been ruined or spoiled. Each cloud is a little prayer, an offering, an apology, and a reminder of our own evanescence. Each brave little black cloud reminds us of not only our own mortality (it is our daily one-gun salute), but of the fragility of the entire complex system of which we are but a small part.

At the end of the day, I only wish the Metropolitan would add this work to the Museum's permanent collection and continue this practice daily for as long as the Museum exists. It seems the very least we can do.

1. Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. New York: Zone Books, 1995.

2. An artist strongly influenced by the Situationist perspective, Daniel Buren produced a similar work for an exhibition curated by Anne Rohimer for The Chicago Art Institute in which panels were affixed to the doors of trains running on the tracks adjacent to the museum, and visible from a window just outside of the galleries housing the museum's contemporary art collection. A wall label near the window included a schedule of the passing trains. Visitors were led to consider the sources of the museum's wealth, its relationship to the city, and by extension to society at large.

3. *Inopportune: Stage One*. Presented at MASS MoCA, North Adams, 2004.