

Extraterrestrial Fires

East and West

Within the limits dictated by the differences in mentality, one matter exists that can help us better understand Far Eastern cultures. Karl Gustav Jung in his introduction to the *I-Ching*, the famous Chinese book of oracles published by Wilhelm, provides us with an accomplished synthesis. He states that the basis of oriental thought is not the relationship between cause and effect but rather the interconnections between all elements. Therefore not a sequential or rational point of view but rather a more organic, gestaltic and all-absorbing one. Coins or leaf sticks are tossed to build a hexagram and the reading that derives, seen in a universal perspective, advises us on an adequate behaviour to take in relation with life in general.

It is a different world – McLuhan will explain – separated from ours from a fracture that dates back to the dawning of our respective history. One of the clearest differences is of course the alphabet. The West developed the phonetic alphabet, which drove to the creation of more analytical and sequential notions. The Far East, on the contrary, invented an ideographical form of writing, which managed to preserve a more global vision that joined concepts, images and words together. Our society – adds McLuhan – is slowly recovering that organic perception that once belonged to the dawning of humanity thanks to electric-electronic technologies.

The East has probably drawn many aspects from the West. If for example we take into the consideration Japan, it is plain to see that after the period of the Middle Ages, which, alas, lasted until the 19th century, the country launched into a technological and capitalistic development capable of competing with the West. Things have moved on since then and now we are facing the next step of this transformation, globalisation.

Cai Guo-Qiang's roots were buried in a traditional Chinese farming environment and his desire to break away and face the world soon led him to leave the wide yet psychologically restricted areas of his homeland to meet the Western by first moving to Japan (1986) and nine years later to the United States (1995).

When he comes face to face with the West he decides not to passively conform to it. The rationalist, analytical and economic culture, which belongs to our society, is fondly loved yet strongly criticized by Cai Guo-Qiang. It is no surprise then that his first work in New York was *The Century with Mushroom Clouds* series, i.e. the simulations of atomic bomb explosions in front of the Twin Towers, which unfortunately are now more sadly remembered.

For the past seven years he has lived in America and travelled far and wide. Yet he continues to use Chinese as his main language, a sort of defence strategy perhaps against the danger of logical-literacy. What Cai Guo-Qiang advances is the attempt to find a meeting point between two different cultures, one that is superior to both but which does not privilege any but allows him to use them in turn.



Chado Pavilion – Homage to Tenshin Okakura

2002

preparazione del tè secondo la tradizione giapponese, interventi luminosi, proiezione di spezzoni del film *Rikyu* di Hiroshi Teshigahara / tea ceremony according to Japanese tradition stage-lights, parts of the film *Rikyu* by Hiroshi Teshigahara projected into the room Ph. Murakami Shinji

Cai Guo-Qiang. *Chado Pavilion*, The Hakone Open-Air Museum, Kunagawa, Japan



Uprooted from China and not fully integrated in the West he raises himself above both with a look that cannot but be that of an "extraterrestrial".

Cai Guo-Qiang often attempts to analyse Western concepts and rationally explain his work, but he does this in an oriental way lacking the confidence of whom is at one with this manner. His approach may at times seem slightly naive and didactic, but it also represents the fragrance of things that are new. His work therefore results apparently simple and immediate but it always leaves an unsolved element, something ambiguous that even us, with all our knowledge, are still unable to decipher.

A Megalomaniac Thaumaturge

Cai Guo-Qiang's work is marked by a strong ambition to conquer. As an artist he does not only stop at the mere representation of the world but rather desires to modify it by aspiring towards the expansion, broadening and involvement of physical space and human minds. This approach, however, also belongs to other contemporary artists. Maurizio Cattelan, for example, uses marketing promotional strategies that could make the toughest multinational envious and disappears behind his logo. Other artists, instead, attempt to spread and multiply their message with the aid of new technologies, for example the Catalan artist Antoni Abad whose computer projects penetrate network systems and spread and amplify like viruses.

However, Cai Guo-Qiang does not base his drive on a "label" or a precise system. He, on the contrary, aims to move in different directions, to penetrate always-different fields through handcrafted works which are in direct line with the modest technological levels of Chinese production, yet great elements of diffusion.

Lengthening the great Chinese wall by 10,000 meters was like competing with the megalomania of the emperor Shi Huang Di who unified China and who commissioned the army of terracotta statues, destroyed all the books published before his time, searched for the elixir of life and thus ordered for the Great Wall of China to be erected. Cai Guo-Qiang's ambition was to create something visible from space and compete with the only real structure that holds this record today.

The desire to raise himself above the ground leads Cai Guo-Qiang to plan other quite unfeasible projects, for example *Inverted Pyramid on the Moon: Project for Humankind No. 3*. The project aims to place a pyramid on the Moon in direct line with its duplicate on Earth. The point of the Moon pyramid is to face downwards and Cai has fun in boasting about the fact that NASA has taken this project into consideration for a possible future expedition.

Another example is *A Certain Lunar Eclipse: Project for Humankind No. 2* where a luminous line is

Crossing

1999

bamboo, corda, congegno che simula la pioggia, sensore laser (l'immagine di destra mostra l'attività didattica relativa al lavoro) / bamboo, rope, rainmaking device, laser sensor (the picture on the right shows the didactical area about the work)

Ph. Cai Guo-Qiang

Beyond the Future. The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

to appear on the dark side of the Moon during an eclipse. This project is so blatantly visionary that the artist has cautiously handed it over to future generations as he awaits for new technologies to be developed.

But Cai loves working on the thin line that separates the possible from the impossible: seven projects that make up *Primeval Fireball. The Project for Projects* (1991) represented by seven screens. The two we mentioned earlier are blatantly unfeasible, others are so for contingent reasons and one *Fetus Movement II* will find its final realisation soon after 1991.

Apart from these, his *grandeur* can be met in other works based on the multiplication of a basic unit which constitutes the structure of the work of art: the artist used 400 car engines fused together to create the *Wailing Wall* (1992), 114 helium filled balloons for *The Earth Has its Black*



**Internal and External
Universe: Water Wood
Metal Fire Earth**

1994

distributore automatico
contenente droghe
asiatiche di 5 sapori
(dolce, amaro, salato,
piccante e acido)
provenienti dai 5 elementi
naturali, che sono in
grado di curare ognuna
uno specifico organo del
corpo / slot-machine with
Asian drugs in five tastes
(sweet, hot, sour, bitter,
salty), coming up from the
five natural elements,
each one able to cure a
single human organ
Ph. Cai Guo-Qiang

Heart of Darkness,
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo, Nederland

Hole Too (1994), 2000 meters of slow match to tie them together, and 3000 arrows which spear a hovering boat in *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrow* (1998). These quantities are fit for the Chinese; it's a bit like finding oneself in front of an army platoon, that of Shi Huang Di's terracotta soldiers. In other occasions his desire to conquer manifests itself through more involving events as he asks people to partake in his work. Inviting a group of artists to paint the same subject, like in *Still Life Performance* (2000), means imposing his own personal view of the world on others, fulfilling one of his secret ambitions to see every painter of a city in front of a model on a horse. In other occasions, locals get involved in the creative process of the work: many volunteers collaborated for the unravelling of the slow fuse for *Extend the Great Wall of China of 10,000 Meters* or the retrieval of the craft in *Returning Light* (1994). Other events are closer to life and many works foresee the participation of the public who, for example, are invited to play cards under the lantern covered cupola in *Dome* (1997), or play golf in *Red Golf* (1997), or fly kites in *Spring Breeze* (1999). But this is not all. The artist also created cobble stone paths to stimulate the soles of the visitors' feet (*A Cure When Ill, a Supplement When Healthy*, 1997) or distributed healing medicines through an automatic vending machine (*Internal and External Universe: Water Wood Metal Fire Earth*, 1994).

What was classified as "participational aesthetics" during the 90s and which was considered one of the most influential trend in art of the decade, however, does not belong to Cai. He, on the contrary, motivates his work by addressing the traditional Chinese culture through the creation of situations that relax of the body and soul. After all he aspires to become a great thaumaturge.

Destruction and Rebirth: Fire as "Eternal Flow"

Cai has often admitted when interviewed that he has always been fascinated by the concept of a flowing art. He probably developed this idea when he attended the stage design school in Shanghai, which offered him the possibility of learning about music, martial arts and philosophy.

Cai's first works on fire date back to 1984, where gunpowder was made to explode on canvas. This research is in perfect line with his previous oil work and represents a perfect continuation from a stylistic point of view. Previously, in fact, he worked on oil paintings where matter contorted into a seething magma or human figures were transformed into dark shadows, like silhouettes of bodies struck by the Hiroshima bomb.

If initially fire was used to naturally and promptly reach a result, the artist soon became more interested in the preparation phase, in the fast explosions on canvas or Japanese paper, which left natural traces of their passing but which could also be recorded on video and photographs.

Metaphorically speaking, and in reality, fire comprises both destruction and rebirth. It is the origin of human progress, from nomad societies which "cut and burnt" to the age of metal. It is not a case that at the dawning age of Western culture a philosopher like Heraclitus saw in fire the genesis of what was "eternal flow", evolution as the harmony of opposites. Approximately in the same era, when the wounds made by the fractures between East and West had not yet healed, Lao Tse on the other side of the world stated the same.

Cai Guo-Qiang's first open-air pyrotechnic project, his first exploding performance was *Human Abode* in Fussa, on the river Tama near Tokyo in 1989. A square tent, typical of tibetan nomad tribes, was made to explode and the remains were collocated in the close-by Kumagawa sanctuary. This work comprises all the artist's poetics: the need to find ancestral prehistoric forms, to capture the strong signs of the human soul, that soul which he considers an all-time extraterrestrial force in the universe.

Gunpowder Picture

1988

esplosione di polvere
da sparo su tela /
gunpowder explosion
on canvas

Ph. Ono Kazuo

Cai Guo-Qiang Painting

Exhibition. The Energy

Field of Explosion

Paintings (personale /

solo), Gallery Iwaki, Japan

Gunpowder Picture

1988

in preparazione /

in progress

Ph. Takami Akihiko



So here you have it, the power of fire; in its flames, its explosions all the primordial energy can be found along with the possibility of erasing every evolved forms and returning to primordial origins. Fire destroys but it is also the origin of life; it's the spring that set off the *Big Bang*, the source of what eternal change.

Bearing this in mind, what prevailed in Cai's first works in China was the feeling of destruction, the chance of breaking away from the mental and not physical oppression that he felt in his country. As time went by the fulcrum of his work was replaced by spectacularity, the dispersion of energy that in only a few moments dissipates the stage of preparation.

In *45.5 Meteorite Craters Made by Humans on Their 45.5 Hundred Million Years Old Planet: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 3* (a performance held in occasion of the *China Demain Pour Hier* exhibition near Aix-en-Provence and which in 1990 introduced Cai's work to the West) Cai Guo-Qiang wanted to offer a didactic and somewhat moralistic explanation to his work; he wanted to demonstrate how the Earth, which has existed for more than 45.5 hundred million years now, could be destroyed by 45.5 man-made meteorite craters. This was an invitation to better consider and safeguard of our planet.

It is clear that all these projects also contain the evocative power of *Crop Circles*, those which mysteriously appeared on cornfields in England during the 60s and are said to mark the landing of space ships. This clearly emerged in *I Am an Extraterrestrial: Project for Meeting with Tenjin* (1990) and in two following projects, *Fetus Movement* (1990 and 1992). But the concept of extraterrestrials for Cai Guo-Qiang does not base itself on the idea of life on other planets but rather on the need to overcome limits, cross earthly borders and become one with the universe. In the rapid explosion of *Fetus Movement II* the artist places himself in the centre of a concentric structure mapped out by digging water canals. The project was equipped with seismographs to verify earth vibrations and also with devices to measure his heart beat and brain movements. "The moment we connect with the universe", the artist says, "we become extraterrestrials".

The Philosophy: Cure and Conflict

Imbued by Taoist philosophy, Cai Guo-Qiang views man as an integrated part of the universe and aims to identify the energy points which connect one's self to the world. The universe is made up of opposites, which complete each other, of Yin and Yang. The best strategy is to place oneself according to the evolutionary lines of eternal change, "softness and weakness – says Lao Tse – win over hardness and strength". Using the strength of an enemy to your advantage, like in martial arts, is virtually programmatically intended by Cai: *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows* (1998) is linked to an old legend in which a general, finding himself without arrows to shoot, exposes a number of ships bearing human figures made with hay to gather the enemy's arrows during attack.

In his desire to be in line with natural developments, many of Cai Guo-Qiang's works are aimed to suture existing fractures. At times they become public healing events. *Cultural Melting Bath*, and especially the open air version for the Naoshima museum (1998), presents a Jacuzzi containing a brew of medicinal herbs surrounded by *Taihu* rocks placed in a garden. The museum employees and museum goers are invited to immerse themselves in the Jacuzzi to recover their strength.

In other occasions the artist acts directly on the cityscape by using *feng shui*, the Chinese geomantic science which links the sense of wellbeing to the energy of a place. In *Universal Design: Feng Shui Project for Mito* (1994), he asks a master of *feng shui* to study the urban planimetry of the city together with the technical department of the council in order to place a lion shaped stone sculpture in a crisis point of the city (the railway that cuts the city in half) and to perform a sort of urban acupuncture.

For the Whitney Biennial 2000 he even produced a CD ROM and internet project with which any one of us could find the solution to problems related to our homes according to the principles of *feng shui*. In that occasion a series of previously employed spaces were revised as a consequence of *feng shui* meditations: the very same *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (1999) is explained according to the principle of "fight poison with poison": a negative space, that of the decadent great room of the Arsenale chosen by Cai Guo-Qiang to place his work, is made harmless by the presence of another negative presence, the repetition of a series of iconic sculptures broadly spread throughout China during the Cultural Revolution.

But Cai's actions are only apparently inoffensive. Like Heraclitus he is aware that eternal change develops through war. Weapons and medicines are very similar. After all, the Chinese word for gunpowder, *huoyao*, means "fire medicine". As a matter of fact, the questions related to army strategy, and references to war are very common in Cai's work and words. When he was asked to select writings for his recent monograph published by Phaidon, he chose *Warfare Beyond Rules: Judgement of War in the Era of Globalization* by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiahui. This book describes the changes in warfare strategies, from a war based on weapons available to one based on the creation of weapons according to the type of war to be fought. "In the same way", the artist comments in a recent interview, "once exhibitions were based on existing works of art, now the themes and contents of exhibitions come first and the works are created as a consequence".

Cai Guo-Qiang often subtly attacks the core of the matter, the stiffened and pre-determines rules through his work, and not only with gunpowder. Just like a hacker he insidiously mines apparently calm situations which in truth hide unsolved knots. When he presented *Cultural Melting Bath* in New York, he did not only want to create a pleasurable and energising situation by using a Jacuzzi, Chinese herb brew and fluttering birds. On the contrary, since his real intention was to tackle the problem of multicultural societies and the need to make different cultures and races meet. Here, and not only metaphorically speaking, they are physically forced to swim in the same water. Other issues he tackles through this event are body contact and the danger of infection, the relationship between a single person (who guarantees habitual personal hygiene and privacy) and social environments, slightly attacking the Western attitude which separates the individual from society in general.

In other occasions his work is even more subtly violent, for example when in Brazil he builds cannons with recycled materials for the children of the poorest areas of Salvador to play with (*Salute*, 2000). Here he gives visibility to the violence already present in the social conditions of the area. In South Africa for the Johannesburg Biennial 1995 he presents *Restrained Violence: Rainbow*, where a series of fast lighting matches wrap a building to sensationally represent and make visible the nonofficial yet undercover oppression belonging to the country.

The projects created especially for Trento also seem to pragmatically mine different areas of human life. In *Ethereal Flowers* the artist attacks the Western detachment from death, which calls for the relationship with the dead to be an exclusively private matter. Saluting the dead with pyrotechnic flowers becomes a public event to which the whole city assists, and is silently repeated over and over again on video during the exhibition at the Galleria Civica of Trento.

In *Big White Truth: from Antonioni's Chung Kuo* Cai returns on the subject of a controversial and heated political cultural debate of the 70s. Invited by the Chinese government to film a documentary which represented the progress and modernisation of China, Antonioni, in his documentary *Chung Kuo*, filmed people riding bicycles and the countryside, the poverty and solidarity. Soon he was seen as a traitor, his name was placed in Chinese schoolbooks as an example of treacherous foreigner, and his fame became closely equal to that of Marx and the forefathers of commu-

45.5 Meteorite Craters Made by Humans on Their 45.5 Hundred Million Years Old Planet: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 3
1990

45,5 crateri fittizi di meteoriti fatti esplodere insieme. Il risultato è un'esplosione della durata di 3 secondi, che mostra come la Terra può venire distrutta facilmente / 45.5 craters with the shape of meteorite craters made to explode all together. The explosion, lasted only 3 seconds, shows how easily the Earth could be destroyed
Ph. Cai Guo-Qiang

Chine demain pour hier, Pourrières, Aix-en-Provence, France
1991



nism. This film, seen from an ideological point of view, which had its roots in social realism and where culture was subordinate to a political party, was immediately banned in China. All the existing and following generations of Chinese talked about it, debated on it, condemned it or defended it, without even having seen it. The situation in China now has radically changed, and the censorship on *Chung Kuo* has been uplifted but Cai's decision to re-use the film demonstrates that he does not enjoy painlessly accepting the wounds of the past, but rather he wants to open up old sores to heal clearly this case of cultural misunderstanding

Past and Present

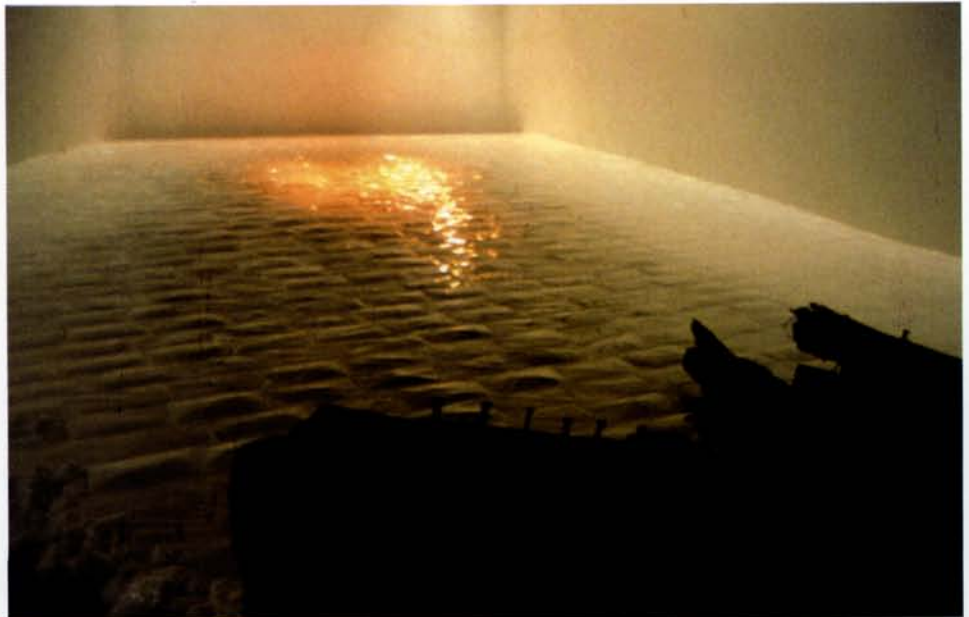
As Cai Guo-Qiang manages to trespass the boundaries of space, he also manages to upturn those of time. A moment can be a mere instance, dissolve in the short span of an explosion or dilated crossing centuries, joining past and present. In *Cry Dragon / Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan* (1996), for example, the artist presents an enormous, rising and menacing dragon made of old sheep skin knapsacks, once used by the Mongolian army to create provisional barges to cross rivers, and by three modern day Toyota engines, which suggest strength and thrust. Boats have always been a recurrent element in Cai's work and symbolise the crossing of time and their floating downstream is a clear synonym of eternal change.

In Cai's work, therefore, there is often a reminder of ancient times, of a culture sedimented throughout centuries which at first he rejected and then, after leaving China, he rediscovered and revalued. This is the same approach he adopts when he uses ink, landscape traditions and the composition of *Taihu* stone classical gardens.

But ancient past is not all, there is a more recent past, that of his childhood which corresponds to the later years of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution. Cai toys with his past in order to ambiguously and ironically bring to light an object or a method.

Then there is the present time, tendentially futuristic made up of modern technology, computer programs, web connections and advertisements.

Lastly there is the contracted time of the explosion which erases all values of historical reference and once again tries to find the primordial moment, the *Big Bang* explosion which contains all evolutionary potentials.



Still Life Performance 2000

la pittura si trasforma in performance con pittori, tele, cavalletti, cavallo e modella / painting is turning into performance, with painters, canvases, easels, horse, model
Ph. Cai Guo-Qiang

Biennial of Sydney 2000,
Art Gallery of New South
Wales, Sydney



In and Out of Art

Cai Guo-Qiang's works of art clearly tend to be close to life and often prefer to leave the museum grounds in order to create situations that involve the public as a whole. However, during the past few years and especially since he has progressively gained international recognition he has started to vigorously confront art by looking at it with superior detachment and fervent irony. During this period he starts developing his personal museums, the *DMoCA* (Dragon Museum of Contemporary Art) and *UMoCA* (Under Museum of Contemporary Art), the latter ironically placed under the arches of a bridge.

His critique towards the world of art at times becomes even more cutting. For the S.M.A.K. opening in Gent in 1999 he holds a performance in which a line of firecrackers wrapped in money explode above his head as he holds an umbrella. To the director, Jan Hoet with whom he discussed the performance, he explained: "you wanted to build a museum, and therefore distribute money" and he adds in an interview with Fei Dawei: "in China there is a saying: one distributes money in order to recover it back later". This is indeed a direct and provocative attack towards the world of art.

In other occasions his work perfectly complies with the norms which regulate irony, especially when he tackles art categories.

Still Life Performance (2000) mocks artistic genres by mixing them together: still life, from which the title was taken, academic nudity and the typology of equestrian monuments all in one. The only exemption is that here nature is alive in the form of a beautiful model riding a horse, and subject of a live performance based on painting.

Another important aspect of Cai Guo-Qiang's work is the relationship with Land Art. His work seems to represent the direct evolution of the work of Land Artists, who from the late 60s to the early 70s spread art to great deserts, canyons and American Lakes. Moreover, there is a drive to extend art to enormous environmental proportions and bestow it an ephemeral existence. In addition to this, in Cai's work we can also find the explicit declarations of direct descent as witnessed by the simulations of atomic bomb explosions in front of what remains of the *Spiral Jetty* or the *Double Negative*.

However, Cai tends to shrug this off and affirms that he was not really inspired by Land Art itself but rather by the great portraits of Mao carved on the Great Wall of China. Certainly, when the artist started maturing his poetics, he did not have a great knowledge on Western art. But this correspondence in art is no coincidence. Western art has always pulled close to post-modern oriental visions and welcomed the relativistic point of view related to both time and space. What is immensely big or immensely small can coexist in a dimension where the boundaries which separate the material from the immaterial gets thinner and things can reach great extensions or weightlessly and fadingly exist in the virtual space of computer networks.