



蔡国强：
农民达芬奇

CAI GUO-QIANG
PEASANT
DA VINCIS

A LITTLE ABOUT ME AND *PEASANT DA VINCIS*

Cai Guo-Qiang Artist

Since the start of the 21st century, I have read reports about peasants' inventions fairly often. At first it was only amusing, but then at the end of 2004 I saw a photo of *Twilight No. 1*, a submarine built by Anhui peasant Li Yuming, and was impressed by the model's charm. So I struck up contact with him and, during the Chinese New Year Holiday in 2005, acquired the submarine, the very first piece by a peasant in my collection. In June of that year, I served as curator of the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where the artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu suggested inviting the peasant Du Wenda to Venice to exhibit his concept of a flying saucer. Their suggestion had my full support, so I must admit that the exhibition *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant da Vincis* does have a certain connection to the China Pavilion at that Venice Biennale. In my years of collecting pieces by peasants, I have been waiting for an opportunity to present them all together and to take advantage of that project to discuss such social issues as the creativity of individual peasants in China, their contributions to modernization, and the reality of their situation today. In 2010, the Rockbund Art Museum, a historic museum that has been newly renovated, invited me to do its inaugural exhibition. Its dates happened to fall during the period of the World Expo in Shanghai, which presented me with

an ideal opportunity. And given the background of the Expo's original thrust—the pursuit of a better life and an exhibition of works of human industry—it also would provide a counterpoint to the Expo's many upscale national pavilions. Anxiety is present in Chinese society over its state of transition between “made in China” and “created in China,” and it is the hundreds of millions of peasants who have paid the price for the construction of modern society and better urban life in the reform era. The slogan of the Shanghai Expo is “Better City, Better Life,” and to this I would add: “Peasants—Making a Better City, Better Life.”

My hometown is the small city of Quanzhou, which retains the appearance of a rural town. My home was within the city walls and moat. Outside the city was farmland, and when I was young I would go up on the wall with the rural children to fight or throw stones, and I would go swimming or fishing with them in the moat. My mother used to wash clothes on this side of the moat, and their mothers washed clothes on the other side. My grandma had carried my parents on her shoulders, one on the front, the other on the back, and move to the city, and we had an endless supply of rural relatives. My activities within the contemporary art circles, from my time at school in

Shanghai, and then on to Tokyo and New York, have been concentrated in major cities and developed countries. I went to Shanghai in 2001 to design the *APEC Cityscape Fireworks*, and later on, I did the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics in Beijing. My activities in China have largely been in an official capacity, and although this occasion is concurrent with the World Expo, I am participating purely in a private capacity. This project has granted me the opportunity to enter into China's vast countryside (for the exhibition, I visited rural areas in eight provinces and municipalities) to further interact with and understand the people who live there.

This exhibition is my second large-scale, peasant-themed project. The first was *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*. The original *Rent Collection Courtyard* of 1965 was a classic work of social realism planned and executed for the government to publicize the tragic existence of the exploited peasant class before the liberation. My creative method was to invite one of the original creators, Long Xu Li, and several young sculptors to transform the artistic situation from “looking at sculpture” into “looking at sculpting,” an act to be remade anew with each performance. In *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant da Vincis*, I am the collector and curator as well as the artist, so pro-

portions had to be handled with care throughout the entire exhibition: too little of myself and it would seem just a fair showing the creations of peasants; too much of myself and it would be as if the creations were nothing more than material for my installation. In the plaza, three large murals with slogans create a propagandistic atmosphere. The line inscribed on the large wall below the flying saucer on the roof, *Never learned how to land*, derives from Du Wenda's sole concern of getting the saucer into the air, and placed here, it suggests anxiety over the rapid development of Chinese society. Beside the aircraft and space shuttle is the line *What's important isn't whether you can fly*, which is a response to the ambivalent dreams and pursuit of material utility among people today. Entering the Museum's first-floor exhibition hall, the first thing you see is the wreckage of Shandong peasant Tan Chengnian's plane, an installation that is both a memorial to the peasant adventurer and a reminder that all of this is real, something that lends it serious weight. On the wall of the second-floor lobby, I have inscribed in ink the name of each peasant inventor, their birthplace, and the name of their creation. Within the exhibition hall, the wind from a fan powers more than fifty kites which sway gently in the air, and projected onto each is the story of a peasant invention. Like white clouds, the kites seem to convey the peasants' abounding romantic ideals. Wu Yulu and his wife, their two sons,

and two daughters-in-law have turned the third floor into a robot production workshop in which they can interact directly with the audience and show off their robots to the public. An atrium makes up the fourth, fifth, and sixth floors. Suspended in the fourth-floor space are five submarines created by Hubei peasant Li Yuming, along with four airplanes and helicopters created by other peasants. Birds chirp as they fly back and forth, grass and blooming flowers are planted on the ground, and visible up through the glass roof, several small flying saucers blend into the sky. The intent here is to create the richly poetic spiritual space of a fairy tale. Outside the grand hall of the National Industrial Bank Building next door, a submarine welded from oil drums by Anhui peasant Tao Xiangli is submerged and frozen as images of its test run are projected onto a white flag inserted into its access hatch. I commissioned Tao Xiangli to fabricate a 20-meter-long aircraft carrier inside the hall. At a time when the first Chinese aircraft carrier is anticipated and feared by many, it seems that the peasants have already begun its construction, namely one that creatively incorporates a submarine. From the Olympics to putting a man in outer space, it seems like the only thing lacking is this aircraft carrier! Screening inside of it is the epic Soviet documentary *Our Century*, which depicts the little-known frustrations and individual sacrifices behind the glorious successes

in space. Romanian director Andrei Ujica's documentary *Out of the Present*, which is projected inside the bank vault, narrates the ten months in 1991 and 1992 that Sergei Krikalev and his companions spent on the Soviet space station Mir while tumultuous changes were taking place on earth and the country that sent them into space ceased to exist. These two documentaries share the Chinese peasants' exploratory spirit, and both express the courage and hardships seen as humanity explores the unknown. Yet there is a great contrast between an act of state directed by the totalitarian power of the former Soviet Union and the energy of an individual Chinese peasant.

China is a millennia-old agrarian society, and in ancient times, peasants were not of low status: classes were divided into scholars, peasants, laborers, and merchants. In most rural areas there were private schools, and through the imperial examinations peasants could even become national leaders, or perhaps return to the countryside again to live out their lives after political disappointment. Mao Zedong pointed out that of China's myriad problems, the greatest was the land issue: peasants who believed that fields held by landlords might be apportioned out to them formed an unstoppable force behind the revolution. Land became collectivized once cooperatives and people's communes were set up after the liberation, and this, combined

