Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe
By Alexandra Munroe

Artists have a way of filling their work spaces with images and artifacts that have talismanic power, and Cai Guo-Qiang is no exception. A Chinese stone lion guards the entrance way to his large, garden studio in Manhattan’s East Village. A full-page newspaper advertisement reproducing a majestic El Greco painting is taped to a door, and a multipanel gunpowder drawing of an eagle with wings fully spread—Cai’s Man, Eagle, and Eye in the Sky: The Age of the Eagle (2004, fig. 80)—occupies a place of honor, watching over and blessing the studio’s activities. The most unexpected and arresting icon, however, is a poster depicting a UFO hovering in the sky above a bucolic landscape printed over with the words “I Want To Believe.”

Cai’s largest series of artworks to date is called Projects for Extraterrestrials. For the artist, imagining the existence of alien intelligence compels a contemplation of alternative, coexisting, or multiple realities that is akin to the function of art. The perception of art is an experience of believing in something that does not actually exist, or rather, exists as another reality. Along with the supernatural and UFOs, Cai’s work freely cites historical legends and folk myths, apocalyptic imagery and healing powers, the big bang and terrorist acts—all utilized in different ways to suspend, provoke, and challenge our habits of mind. The slogan “I Want to Believe”—which unbeknownst to the artist was popularized by the television series The X-Files, captures the brilliant ambiguities at the core of Cai’s protean artistic practice.

Cai is best known for his use of gunpowder. Invented by the Chinese and called fire-medicine (huoyao), gunpowder is arguably China’s single technological advance of the last millennium that has had truly global consequences. Cai mines this material’s charged associations and has used it to create a radical new form and methodology of art. Explosives are central to his signature gunpowder drawings, which are made by laying gunpowder and fuses on fibrous paper and igniting them in a blast that creates charred residue of the original matter. Gunpowder is also the essential material for Cai’s spectacular explosion events, which are site-specific pyrotechnic displays, often on a monumental scale. Although his practice can be related to Conceptual art, performance, and Land art, Cai extends each art form toward a new matrix by operating outside conventional parameters. Where artists like John Cage, Chen Zhen, and Yves Klein have used fire, smoke, or burned matter to make objects of art, Cai uses explosives to directly manifest the pure force of energy, induce art but as an art form itself. While the intention of modernism and the avant-garde was the destruction of boundaries between art and life, his strategy to embody destruction itself shifts the conceptual framework to the blurring of boundaries between art and war. “I make explosions,” Cai has remarked, “so I pay attention to explosions.”

Inherent throughout Cai’s art are unstable structures of process and transition, doubt and ambivalence. For him, matter and energy are equally materialized and dematerialized. The
transformations from one state to another are both the method and the meaning of his art. All states of a work’s creation, including its destruction, coexist in the work itself. This complete freedom from fixed form shapes a body of work that has evolved from studio paintings to interactive installations to visual extravaganzas for vast audiences. Cai’s subject matter ranges from Buddhist metaphysics to cosmological science, from ancient healing systems to contemporary car bombings, and what underpins his diverse practice is the core ideal that art link—if you want to believe—the seen and unseen worlds.

The ideal of belief also generates the political dimension of Cai’s art. A socialist utopianism pervades his artistic strategies, and has led to using the term “social projects” to describe a range of work for which the allure of socialist memory and the idea of absolute faith in communitarian forces of historical progress—another kind of unseen world—are key to the artist’s process, imagination, and narrative. An ongoing aspect of this approach is Cai’s working method for producing explosion events and installations that requires dozens, even hundreds, of collaborators, including professional project teams, art-world volunteers, and local residents. More specifically, his social projects comprise the Everything Is Museum series for which he has produced MoCAs (museums of contemporary art; see cat. nos. 50–52) in remote sites, appropriating nonart structures such as military bunkers and old kilns. He assumes the role of curator and invites the participation of artists and the local public alike to install work and participate in his “museum” events. Cai’s infiltration of nonart spaces and local communities involves extraordinary logistical negotiations, relies on his considerable charisma and mobilization skills, including fund-raising, and is infused with an idealistic socialism that aspires to claim the public realm as a site for art of democratic empowerment. Critic and curator Hou Hanru has commented on similar ideals that have shaped artists who were born and raised in the early decades of Mao Zedong’s China:

My generation of Chinese has been fighting for more fundamental issues of humanity. For us, the first necessity of art is never to return to the enclosure of the self. The second thing is modernity rewrites the process of social transformation in different conditions, and then how it is visualized.

Cai’s exploration of the relationship between the individual and the collective society is best understood in the context of China’s cultural and political memory, including its modern revolutionary history—a context that sets his collaborative practice apart from his contemporaries in the West. Cai’s 2006 participation in the Long March: A Visual Walking Display exemplifies how he has become increasingly interested in interrogating and reimagining the history and social idealism of early Chinese communism. Initiated by Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie in 2002, this Long March project was a curatorial experiment that utilized selected sites along the Red Army’s mythologized 1934–35 Long March route. Cai’s contribution took place in Yan’an, the terminus of the historic Long March, where Mao established his base and, in 1943, delivered his “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art.” Cai prepared and discussed a curriculum of art education that critically engaged with Mao’s radical Yan’an call to “make art for the people.” The artist described his pedagogical method: “The program aims to endow students with the power of self-discovery, the ability to understand the past, present, and future of contemporary art more fully…. This will allow them to create based on problems and
questions, and to carry out self-examination and self-criticism.” Cai’s belief system, which is “earnest without being pious,” reflects the aftermath of modern Chinese revolutionary thought.

Ironically, it is precisely Cai’s social optimism recalled from revolutionary history that is now in the service of China’s postrevolutionary state. The opening and closing ceremonies he is collaborating on for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games will be spectacles of unprecedented mass outreach, with an estimated audience of four billion television viewers. His faith in the global language of art to provoke critical wonder among the broadest populations adds another level of idealistic meaning to the words on the poster, “I Want To Believe.” Critic Philip Tinari has commented, “In a way, his elevation to such a public role was only possible because his kind of belief is somehow palatable to this group of leaders and the way they want their national project to be seen.”

Taped to another wall of Cai’s studio is a front-page article from the arts section of the New York Times in which critic Holland Cotter discusses Light Cycle: Explosion Project for Central Park (2003, cat. no. 32):

This is the stuff of a visionary, but unmythical art; complex in ideas, but tailored to a universal citizenry. In a world where politics, culture and nature are all unstable compounds, and everyone lives tensed in expectation of the next Big Bang, such art, like a throw of the I Ching, comes across as a judicious but exhilarating act of the faith in the benignity of the unknown.

**Critical Histories**

The question of whether Cai is a global artist first and a Chinese artist second, or vice versa, has generated considerable confusion among art critics. He has consistently challenged this binary. By complicating, dodging, and deftly deflating the facile categorization of his work, Cai has contributed to this question’s waning critical relevance in contemporary global art discourse. He was born in China in 1957 but has lived and worked outside the country since 1986. Until recently, he was associated with the phenomenon of overseas Chinese artists and was relatively unconnected to Mainland China. Cai was peripheral to the 1980s avant-garde movements, such as the Stars group, ’85 New Wave, or Xiamen Dada, and did not participate in the historic China/Avant-Garde exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1989. Indeed, most critics agree that he first made history within China only in 1999, when his installation at the Venice Biennale, Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard (cat no. 42)—a recreation of an iconic socialist advanced realist sculptural ensemble from 1965 (fig. 5)—became a national controversy.

Cai’s rise to international prominence following his move to Japan in 1986 and later to New York in 1995 is unparalleled in contemporary Chinese art. His high-profile participation in biennales and other international coterie of art events, his many solo museum exhibitions, and his Olympics collaboration—which is without doubt the most visible and important project within the Chinese art establishment today—lend Cai a unique status. As historian Geremie R. Barmé remarked, “Cai’s international, fame, which parallels and reflects the rise of China as a world power, stimulated the surge of interest in contemporary Chinese Art in the west. He will always
be remembered as the first Chinese artist to become a house-hold name.” While it seems ironic that an unofficial artist will represent the Chinese state at the largest public ceremony in modern Chinese history, the fact that Cai’s rise to fame has coincided with China’s epic economic transformation during the years of reform has earned him his place in that history.

Cai’s position within the Mainland but he has long been a central figure among the émigré Chinese artists. Many artists of his generation were the first to leave their homeland after travel restrictions were lifted following the post-Mao reforms of 1979; others left after the military suppression of the Tian’anmen Square protests in 1989. The perpetuation of the Chinese government’s antagonistic stance toward experimental art (shiyian yishu), which often led to terminations of art exhibitions and banning of artworks, the reluctance of state-run art galleries and schools to support installation art, video art, and performance, and the perceived insularity of the Chinese art world were among the factors that caused a significant exodus of artists through the early 1990s. This wave of immigration to the United States, Europe, Japan, and Australia included several artists who became China’s most prominent in the international arena, including Chen Zheo, Gu Wenda, Huang Yong Ping, and Xu Bing. The international awareness of contemporary Chinese art that advanced so dramatically during the late 1980s and the 1990s was largely due to the activities of these so-called “overseas artists” with transnational identities, including Cai, rather than those residing within China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. Related to this phenomenon was the simultaneous emigration of a coterie of critics and curators who would play an important role in introducing Chinese experimental art to the West, including Fei Dawei, Gao Minglu, Hou Hanru, and Wu Hung. In short order, their exhibitions and publications created the canon of contemporary art from China. Cai has been featured in most of the large surveys of Chinese art that these influential critic-curators have produced in the West, beginning with Chine demain pour hier, Fei’s landmark 1990 exhibition in Pourrières, Aix-en-Provence, where the artist’s 45.5 Meteorite Craters Made by Humans on Their 45.5 Hundred Million Year Old Planet: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 3 (cat. no. 19) introduced his explosion events to an international audience.

Cai’s importance within this parallel history of Chinese contemporary art is critical, for he was among the first to contribute through the originality of his artistic strategies to discussions of Chinese art, however geographically dispersed, as a viable intellectual narrative with its own historical context and theoretical framework. Gao Minglu, curator of such important exhibitions as Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile (1993), Inside Out: New Chinese Art (1998), and The Wall (2006), has proposed three requisites for this new art-historical inquiry: an artist must search for the principles of art making within specific Chinese cultural mechanisms; must learn from specific traditional philosophical concepts, aesthetic values, and techniques; and must develop experimental approaches to making art. Cai not only satisfies these conditions; he helped to create them. What theorist Wang Hui wrote of modern Chinese thought applies equally well to Chinese art, and locates Cai’s creative innovation:

The teleology of modernization that has dominated Chinese thinking for the past century must now be challenged. We must reconsider our old familiar patterns of thought. Even though there is no one theory that can explain the complex and often mutually contradictory problems we now face, it nevertheless behooves Chinese intellectuals to break their dependence on time-honored binary paradigms, such as China/West and
tradition/modernity, and to reconsider China’s search for modernity and its historical conditions by placing these questions in the context of globalization. This is an urgent theoretical problem…. [It] may prove for Chinese intellectuals to be a historical opportunity for theoretical and institutional innovation.

However valid it may otherwise be, this “Chinese art” framework poses limitations for an interpretation of Cai’s work because of this association with Japan, where he lived from 1986 to 1995. It was in Japan that his work first achieved art-critical recognition and he was championed within the emerging critical discourse of contemporary Asian art. For this discourse as it evolved in Japan, national identity was less significant than cultural identity—that is, East Asia—as defined by a spectrum of “Asian” aesthetics and philosophical sources. The artist-critic Lee Ufan, who first came to prominence in the late 1960s, was among those who drew on post-structuralism to posit the legitimacy of non-Western modernisms and argue for alternative referents for contemporary Asian artistic expression, including Taoism and Zen. The political, cultural, and philosophical foundations of modern Asia came to challenge, if not displace, the authority of the Eurocentric philosophy of modern art. This direction and the construction of “Asia” were informed by a sophisticated discourse about Japan, China, and modernity that dates back to Okakura Kakuzō, whose classic *Ideals of the East* (1903) advocated the recovery of traditional aesthetics to create an authentic, modern Pan-Asian culture that was not simply a crude imitation of Western models. This debate from the pre–World War II period culminated in a symposium on “overcoming the modern” (*kindai no chōkoku*) organized by the Literary Society (Bungakkai) in Kyoto in 1942. Although coopted in part by the state’s Pan-Asian expansionist agenda, the purpose was to rethink Japan’s course of modernization in terms of refuting westernization and articulating an autonomous, nativist, and spiritual vision of the future. Among its participants was the critic Kobayashi Hideo, who believed that Japan was already modern but dangerously close to becoming a mere replica of the West. Rejecting the rational, progressive view of history, Kobayashi proposed that the timeless “essence” of tradition, as found in art and objects of beauty, could save Japan by offering a source of “renewal, creative inspiration, and identity in a world insisting on the sameness of the modern.” After the war, the debates about modernity and Asia led by such influential intellectuals as Takeuchi Yoshimi further argued for Japan’s urgent need to resist the West’s objectification of itself and to willfully pursue global equality before being subsumed by Western homogeneity. In Takeuchi’s essay “Asia as Method” from 1961, he posed the question, “Shouldn’t Japan rather stop pursuing the West and ground itself on Asian principles?” Japan’s gradual reconciliation from the late 1970s with its former colonies and occupied territories stimulated new iterations and elaborations of its Asian imaginary.

In Japan, Cai’s explosion events, gunpowder drawings, and installations came to emblematize the successful recuperation of Asian culture within the contemporary language of international art. A leading institution for the research, collection, and exhibition of contemporary Asian art is the Fukuoka Art Museum, located at the historical crossroads of East Asia in southern Japan. In 1979 this museum began a series of Asian art exhibitions, making it the first forum in Japan to regularly show contemporary art from across Asia. Its continuing program has aimed to aesthetics independent of the framework of create new criteria for Asian art’s distinctive fine art derived from the West. Curator Kuroda Raiji reflected that “it is not an over-statement that the notion of ‘Asian contemporary art’ was born in me when I witnessed the successful realization of
Cai Guo-Qiang’s explosion event [I Am an Extraterrestrial, Project for Meeting with Tenjin (Heavenly Gods): Project for Extraterrestrials No. 4 (1990, fig. 47)].” Kuroda also remarked:

Cai’s projects constitute communication with the whole of humankind, the whole of history, no, the whole universe, through the use of the medium of gunpowder, a Chinese invention. His art is completely new; it starts from zero and transcends such stale issues as East versus West, tradition versus modernity, and high culture versus popular culture…. [He] presented work that effortlessly satisfied the Euro-American critical standard of “originality” … and completely changed my idea of Asian art.

Cai’s goal—to challenge, disrupt, and imbalance the center of modern and contemporary art—is perhaps itself an “explosion” aimed at the entrenched status quo, as he himself stated:

Previously, [there were often two reasons that] art coming from Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and other non-Western areas was appreciated in the West: first, it was seen as criticism of the artist’s own culture or national system; second, it was seen as proving that the artist was studying diligently, seeking to catch up with contemporary Western artistic expression. But these modalities, which have become ingrained in the West, are starting to change. After the Cold War, enthusiasm for non-Western cultures and multiculturalism has made it more difficult for the West to enact its whims, leading to a truly non-Western, multi-polar contemporary culture. Perhaps we are still in some ways the spring rolls at the banquet, but if the spring rolls carry bacteria, they can ruin the entire party.

Cai’s association with the Chinese émigré avant-garde and his importance within the Asian modernity discourse has prompted most Western critics and curators to rely on a predictable inventory of Chinese tropes to construct interpretations of his work. Taoism is frequently cited, for example, as Cai’s primary philosophic source for such thematic content as qi (cosmic energy) and yin and yang (interdependent opposites). This tendency is partly the result of Cai’s conspicuous appropriations of national symbols like dragons, feng shui (literally “wind-water”), acupuncture, and gunpowder. Too often, however, the critical perception of such imagery has led to a facile orientalist interpretation. Cai’s deliberate self-exoticizing strategies have also tended to reinforce the familiar East-West binary, which has sometimes separated him from the international art world by identifying him too stridently as a Chinese artist.

A more interesting reading recognizes the political critique and inversion at the heart of Cai’s Asian imagery and rhetoric. His installation Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan (cat. no. 39), first realized at the Guggenheimm Museum SoHo in competition for the Hugo Boss Prize 1996, utilizes seemingly stereotypical imagery: traditional sheepskin rafts are installed to look like the spine of a dragon, and the work’s title cites Asia’s most famous warrior, whose invasions reached as far as Eastern Europe. Cai inserted into this mythologic symbolization three running Toyota car engines, which augment Genghis Khan’s historic military threat with functioning products of East Asia’s current economic threat. Cai’s installation is more than a spectacular reinvigoration of Chinese cultural devices; it critiques the West for its staid imagery of China while inferring the undercurrent of conflict characterizing U.S.-Asia relations in the era of globalization.
Indeed, it is finally as an artist of the global art system that Cai’s work has come to be appreciated. Though the specific Chinese content of his work is apparent and intentional, and while Cai’s socialist methodologies are grounded in the specifics of his childhood during the Cultural Revolution, his art operates in a framework of contemporary-art lineage that links Joseph Beuys and Yves Klein to Arte Povera in Italy and Mono-ha in Japan and to younger artists like Matthew Barney—an artist he exhibited with when both were short listed for the Hugo Boss Prize 1996, which Barney won. As critic Barry Schwabsky argued in a seminal 1997 essay on Cai in *Artforum*:

There is by now a multigenerational international vernacular of installation art that combines showmanship with elusiveness and synthesizes the collective familiarity of the readymade with the suggestively idiosyncratic “atmosphere” of *bricolage*. That Cai partakes of the international lingua franca does not make him an epigone—it simply identifies the idiom within which he works. From an aesthetic viewpoint, Cai must be counted among its most fluent practitioners.

Cai, like many of today’s most-widely exhibited artists, is an art-world nomad, always on the go, for whom fragmented existence is the norm. Rather than critique such peripatetic conditions, he embeds them in his art. History, geography, and culture are mutable, imagined signs that he feels free to mix up and free to assign with his own brand of universalism. Cai’s early notions of chaos (*hundun*) based in Taoist cosmology and popular science have evolved into a belief in chaos as the ultimate postmodern condition of globalization—the collapse of linear time and spatial boundaries. “I am bringing chaos to time, to context, and to culture,” he remarks. “I ignore the boundaries between different cultural heritages and freely navigate between Chinese, Eastern, and Western, or whatever world culture there is. I can take one out of context and put it into another, ignoring all boundaries and socially constructed constraints.”

Cai has been a central figure in the new art that has emerged since the late 1980s, namely, art that links the global and the peripheral, the transnational and the local. His work, largely realized through commissions from museums, international art events, and government agencies around the world, responds to and signifies the expanded parameters of art making and cultural identity in a global era. He recalls:

One time, someone gave me a form to fill out. The questions on this form were, ‘What is a Chinese artist? What is an Asian artist? What is an international artist? What is a contemporary artist? And what is a traditional artist?’ And for all of these answers, I wrote: ‘It’s me. This is what I am.’ Our times have given us the opportunity to be able to say that we belong to every category. We are free to be whatever we want.

Eclectic, ahistorical, and essentially ephemeral, Cai’s work draws on themes, ideas, and materials that pick up and also refute precedent. Arising from the epic geopolitical shifts of the post-Cold War, his work transgresses cultural boundaries as the ultimate creative force of our borderless age.

**Hometown: No Destruction, No Construction**
Cai was born in 1957 in the southeastern province of Fujian in Quanzhou, a coastal city characterized by a cultural openness to the outside world. Until recently, the majority of overseas Chinese who settled across Asia, the Americas, and Europe emigrated from Fujian and neighboring Guangdong Province. Émigrés maintained vital channels of communication and information with Quanzhou that fostered the city’s remarkable cosmopolitanism. Quanzhou also has a long tradition of religious diversity— with Islam, Nestorian Christianity, and Manicheanism practiced alongside Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism—and is famous as the site, then one of the largest ports in the world, from which Marco Polo departed in 1292 for his return journey to Venice. The city’s rich history has been an essential source of inspiration for Cai’s work, prompting him to claim, “More than [all of] China, my hometown has informed my work. I am interested in gaining the microcosm of my culture for symbols that can be universally understood.”

During the decades of Mao’s regime, Quanzhou was politically marginal enough that various customs banned elsewhere survived. According to Cai, Buddhist and Taoist temples continued to hold festivals and a covert local culture of superstition, ghost stories, and myths stimulated his childhood imagination. The concepts and practice of traditional Chinese medicine based on acupuncture, as well as an understanding of the geomantic principles of feng shui, which tap into the energy currents of the land to promote auspicious environments, were natural belief-systems for Cai as he was growing up, and he attributes his fascination with the supernatural world of “unseen forces” to this early exposure. For his debut at an international arts exhibition, at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, the artist created the social project Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot (cat. no. 48). Cai responded to this biennale’s theme of “transculture” with a spectacular act of historical inversion that marked the seven-hundredth anniversary of Marco Polo’s arrival back in Venice by sailing a Quanzhou junk filled with Chinese medicinal herbs along the Grand Canal. Cai’s work brought to the West what the Italian explorer forgot: the spiritual teachings of the East.

Another anomaly of Cai’s childhood in Mao’s China was his family’s relatively undisturbed social and political status. His father, Cai Ruiqin, is a member of the Chinese Communist Party and worked in a state-run bookstore. He is also an amateur ink-painter and calligrapher (see fig. 24). According to Cai, he grew up in a milieu where the classical ideals of Chinese literati culture were still discussed. The elite scholar-artists (wenren, literally “men of literary culture”) whose thinking shaped the critical tradition of Chinese art positioned themselves as independent from or even adversarial to the ruling imperial court, and held painting, calligraphy, and poetry as lofty pursuits of the individual mind and art appreciation as a direct engagement with the philosophical spirit of great sages of the past. “[My] family was always talking about the grandeur and accomplishment of Chinese art and civilization,” Cai has commented. “But the huge discrepancy between the greatness of the art and the dissatisfaction in Chinese society created a natural rebelliousness in me. I wanted to follow Western tradition in oil painting and sculpture, and be influenced by Western thought. Now, looking back, I see I’ve inherited some of my father’s scholarly thinking; Chinese cultural tradition has already unconsciously become part of me.”

While millions severely suffered in the decades following the establishment of the People’s
Republic of China in 1949, Cai is a product much more than a victim of his time. His precise trajectory, combined with his self-described instinctual wisdom (wuxing) and knack for taking advantage of opportunities, has allowed him to productively draw from Maoist revolutionary ideology, culture, and practice in ways that are inconceivable for artists born a generation earlier. From the age of nine, Cai was directly affected by the tumult of the government’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. Schools were shut down, and he participated as a young performer in various propaganda programs. Typically, parades and celebrations in the streets involved beating drums and singing revolutionary songs while holding aloft portraits of Chairman Mao and banners proclaiming, “We are the critics of the old world; we are the builders of the new world.” Cai’s family was spared the terrors of authoritarian rule by which vast numbers of artists, academics, and intellectuals were denounced, jailed, or sent into exile. For him and his generation, Mao was and has remained the transcendent master of a vast revolutionary enterprise:

To us, Mao Zedong is the most influential person in the latter half of the twentieth century. He is the idol, God-like. His artistic talent, calligraphy, poetry, military strategies, philosophy, essays, and revolution movements deeply influenced my generation, despite the fact that later on we all started to question his ideologies.

The perception of Mao and the era of modern China that he shaped as a source of conceptual identity and creative methodology for artists of Cai’s generation is a topic of recent revisionist discussion in China. The appropriation of Cultural Revolution imagery and narratives by artists like the Luo Brothers, Wang Guangyi, and Yu Youhan exemplify this phenomenon. In Cai’s case, the argument that certain of his artistic strategies—in addition to iconography—are derived from his idealized memory of Maoist revolutionary culture is both persuasive and illuminating. Mao’s slogan “No construction, no destruction” (bu po bu li) is central to Cai’s practice, for example. Revolution, transformation, and idealism are born from radical elimination, and the foundation of new culture must lie in the demolition or reconfiguration of the past. For an artist whose main material is gunpowder, such dialectics are theoretically and scientifically pertinent: Cai must literally destroy in order to create. But beyond the methodology of art making, he takes from his memory of revolutionary praxis a deeper commitment to the critique of cultural constructs. Cai explains the ease with which he appropriates, dismisses, and layers multiple “translations” of Chinese culture in his own work, in order to arrive at a new iteration and provocation of culture itself, in terms of this deconstructive strategy:

The Cultural Revolution began as a political movement that was basically an effort to overthrow traditional Chinese culture and heritage, to examine its failings and consider alternative directions for the future of Chinese culture. It was, fundamentally, a cultural revolution. It allowed people to reexamine the lineage of Chinese culture and education, and so produced a reflection, a way of looking at China. It was a large, societal way of reformating and reforming culture itself. At that revolutionary time, the entire society participated in this movement of searching for the core of culture.

Cai’s most significant engagement with the legacy of the Cultural Revolution is his 1999 installation Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard. It had been the wish of curator Harald Szeemann, director of the 48th Venice Biennale, to exhibit the Rent Collection Courtyard in the
West since he first proposed it for Documenta 5 in 1972. This 1965 sculptural work—depicting the misery of peasants at the hands of an exploitative landlord under the prerevolutionary Guomintang government—epitomized the propagandistic zeal of socialist-realist art during the Cultural Revolution. Comprised of 114 life-size clay sculptures arranged in narrative scenes depicting class struggle, Rent Collection Courtyard was hailed as an artwork of unprecedented mass appeal that “can serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers and socialism.” For a decade, it was reproduced and erected in cities throughout China, where it was the most emotionally charged and ubiquitous political image after Mao’s portrait. At Szeemann’s invitation, Cai organized the re-creation of the ensemble at the Venice Biennale by inviting ten Chinese artisans, including Long Xu Li, who had worked on the original, to reenact the making of the work on site. Cai’s intention in showing a socialist-realist work of such emotional power was to subvert contemporary Western notions of art by revealing its own stylistic constraints and fundamental lack of creative freedom. “Today we regularly hold biennales and the like, but why do we do this?” Cai asks. “Are we constrained by something? Are we really free to create what we want? This is something that we must always ask ourselves. I do not know whether it is the artists of the Cultural Revolution or us who hold the strongest attachment to art, but the people of that time believed in a new society and an ideal for mankind.”

In Venice, he was praised for his post-modernist appropriation of the historic icon and won the Golden Lion award. In China, however, the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, where the original work was created, planned to sue Cai for plagiarism and violation of spiritual property, but its case was dismissed. Martina Köppel-Yang placed these differences in the context of Cai’s interpretation of the revolutionary slogan “Revolt is reasonable” (zaofan youlì):

For the international art world, to award this prize [the Golden Lion] to Cai and his Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard was another move in the process of globalization. For the [Sichuan Fine Arts Institute] and the growing nationalist tendencies in China, the fact that this prize—one of the most prestigious in the Western art world—was given to a non-authorized copy of a masterwork of Chinese socialist art was simply an act of Western colonialism. Rent Collection Courtyard not only proves Cai’s sense of witty strategy but also the disrespectful and subversive attitude of a Red Guard, who is convinced that a critique of, and the revolt against, institutionalized thought and practice are reasonable.

Other aspects of Cai’s artistic strategies can be attributed to what he called the formative influences of Mao that “consciously and unconsciously seeped into my mentality” and relate to the artist’s use of spectacle, such as explosion events, to engage a mass public. Revolutionary culture was agitprop culture, made for the moment and immediately expendable. Cai also credits Maoist ideology for inspiring his residency in the Japanese coastal city of Iwaki from November 1993 to March 1994. He “integrated” himself among the local workers in Iwaki and mobilized their help for the realization in 1994 of two installations, San Jō Tower (cat. no. 38) and Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone), and an explosion event, The Horizon from the Pan-Pacific: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 14 (cat. no. 22). Cai would again work with Iwaki residents a decade later to realize Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki (2004, cat. no. 44); whenever this installation is exhibited, it is accompanied by a video documenting the social process of art making that included volunteers excavating a large fishing vessel. Through this process, Cai
demonstrated how the utopian aspects of the Cultural Revolution with its total aesthetization of politics, society, and everyday life can be interpreted and recuperated as an overall “social sculpture,” in the sense of Joseph Beuys. Cai’s methodology as a cultural producer, whereby art serves an eternal revolutionary present through the agency of society, thus arises from both his memory and interrogation of modern art in China during the era of Mao.

**China/Japan: Toward Methodology**

Cai moved to Shanghai in 1981 to attend the Shanghai Drama Institute (also known as Shanghai Theatre Academy), where he majored in the department of stage design for four years. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping’s historic “Open Door” reforms of 1979, younger artists and intellectuals returning from the countryside, where many had been assigned to manual labor, were hopeful for the promise of a new era of openness in the arts. Travel abroad and a flood of information from the West stimulated burgeoning movements of avant-garde art (*qianwei* or *xianfeng*) and experimental art (*shiyan yishu*) and promoted previously suppressed ideas about modernism, individualism, and freedom of expression. Writings and artworks by a range of Westerners such as Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Dadaists, Marcel Duchamp, Michel Foucault, Gabriel García Marquez, Andy Warhol, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others, introduced a new ontology for these post–Cultural Revolution artists, who relished transgression, deconstruction, and speed.

Cai’s choice of studying stage design was a fortunate one for his artistic development. Although he entered the Shanghai Drama Institute as a realist oil painter, the realm of theater production exposed him to greater possibilities for new aesthetic thinking. “At that time there were no schools that trained students in contemporary art,” Cai has stated. “But theatre school is different because your concerns are more conceptual…. Theatre is based on time: how your work is revealed in time, how it develops and proceeds, how the audience is engaged. These ideas laid the foundation of my art practice.” Through studying theater with Zhou Benyi, Cai grasped the notion of artworks as conceptual totalities, multivalent narratives crafted from a variety of approaches, not just single images, that expressed big ideas about humanity.

Among his colleagues in Shanghai was the artist Chen Zhen, who, while only two years older than Cai, taught in the department of stage design. Their ensuing friendship was possibly influential for Cai’s early experimental work. Where most artists were looking eagerly to the West, Chen Zhen was among the first Chinese artist of his generation to delve into the rich inventory of East Asian spiritual and material culture to find an alternative aesthetic and discursive framework for the production of avant-garde art. His rigorous exploration of an independent system of thinking represented a radical resistance to both Chinese socialist and Western liberal ideologies. From around 1983, when he visited Tibet to study prayer as a means for curing himself of a degenerative illness, Chen became seriously interested in Taoist cosmology and Buddhist metaphysics. “The key to an artist’s identity is not his nationality,” Chen believed, “but his profound understanding and his critical ideas about his own culture, and also his openness to the world and to diversity.” His 1985 series of abstract paintings, entitled *Qi Flottant* (1985, fig. 7), aimed to make art the practice for his “silent prayer and mental reflection” and, citing the ancient Taoist sages, a reinvented channel for cosmic primary energy (*yuan qi*).
Like Chen Zhen, Cai became interested early on in reclaiming signs and systems of ancient Chinese culture to critique, and as cures for, the ills of contemporary society. During the summers of 1982 and 1984, Cai visited the Tibetan plateau and the remote regions of Xinjiang, Dunhuang, and the Yellow River Valley “to create myself by placing myself in Mother Nature and ancient cultures.” An early work that resulted from his trips is Chu Ba Wang (1985, fig. 6), a pictograph-like painting of the general who lived 231–202 B.C.E. and is famous for committing suicide when his troops were overwhelmed. Cai’s paintings of this period relate to Chen’s contemporaneous works with highly textured surfaces, through which that artist aimed to express “a primitive vitality.” Although Chen was satisfied to enact the Taoist concept of yuan qi through abstract form and color on canvas, Cai pursued ways to collect and expend energy itself as a work of art.

Cai began experimenting with igniting gunpowder on canvas in such early works as Self-Portrait: A Subjugated Soul (1985/89, cat. no. 2) and Shadow: Pray for Protection (1985–86, cat. no. 3). These acts of what he called “unpredictable splendor” combined his evolving interests in war and Dada, hazard and chance, spectacle and performance. Significantly, Cai couched his artistic breakthrough in an eclectic rhetoric of Taoism and a humanism that differed from that of the West: “Through my work, I explore my inherited culture and induce transformations into it.” Elaborating on the significance of his gunpowder drawings, he stated:

I developed a concept of the universe based on the fundamental and primitive relationships between humans and nature, such as “borrowing the power of nature,” “the unity of man-art-nature,” and “the co-existing and simultaneously opposing principles of yin and yang elements.” In other words, the true nature of gunpowder corresponds to the power and spirit that humans have possessed since the beginnings of evolution. These concepts also correspond to characteristics of the universe itself. By producing work inspired by such spiritual correspondence, the meaning of the use of gunpowder went beyond being simply a means of production.

Cai has also been discussed in the context of Huang Yong Ping, Xu Bing, and Gu Wenda, three Chinese artists often grouped together because of their critical and creative use of the Three Teachings (Sanjiao) of ancient China: Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Like Cai and Chen Zhen, these artists were born in the 1950s and left China in the 1980s. Their dual outsider status as expatriates sharpened their sense of identity as difference, while their stance as avant-gardists encouraged them to question the self and Other as a dynamic process of confrontation, exchange, negotiation, and regeneration. Breaking out of a revolutionary environment and totalitarian regime where Western liberalism did not exist—or rather, where its manifestations were suppressed—these artists were free to critique the orthodoxy and institutionalization of contemporary Western culture because its systems were never a given. For all these artists, site-specific installations and events became an important means of subverting the hegemony of art-historical modernism to arrive at a third space beyond the East-West paradigm. Huang Yong Ping’s The Pharmacy (1995–97, figs. 9 and 10) presents a gourd, the receptacle for traditional Chinese medicine and an iconographic motif of Taoist immortals. An actual apothecary of snake and lizard skins spills from this enlarged “object of magical power,” offering a provocative metaphor for alternative and coexisting systems of truth. Huang’s use of Chinese medicine
parallels Cai’s, which incorporates traditional Chinese remedies that viewers are invited to drink, inhale, or soak in, as in such works as Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the 20th Century (1997, cat. no. 40) where museumgoers are invited to bathe in a tub of water treated with Chinese herbs, and Calendar of Life (1994, fig. 11), an interactive installation whose contents are traditional cures.

For Cai, as for Huang Yong Ping and Chen Zhen, Taoism provided the most productive source for their critical engagement with “Asia as method,” to borrow Takeuchi’s words. Taoist concepts, combined with postmodern deconstructive philosophies current in the 1990s, informed the archaic look and essentially ephemeral, chance-determined and process-oriented installations that Cai, Huang, and Chen (fig. 8) staged to critical acclaim at venues around the world. Tao, often translated as “the Way,” is conceived as the void out of which all reality emerges, the structure of being that underlies the universe. In the Taoist vision of cosmogenesis, primal energy, or yuan qi, emerged from the origin of Tao, which was empty and still, and swirled for eons in a state of chaos known as hundun. The Tao then generated the complementary forces of yin and yang, which organized the primal energy into patterns of movement and transformation. According to Taoism, all things are made up of qi, which is vital energy or breath. Matter and energy are interchangeable, and transformation and change are constant. These ideas are found in the famous treatise Tao-te-ching (Classic of the Way), traditionally attributed to the sage Lao-tzu, who is believed to have lived in the sixth century B.C.E. The concept of qi also lies at the heart of Chinese medicine, which views illness as caused by internal imbalances of yin and yang. Acupuncture and other traditional remedies are designed to restore the proper movement of vital energy, thereby restoring health. The same principles apply to feng shui, which is a geomantic system to promote auspicious environments by activating the proper flow of qi.

Cai has appropriated Taoist concepts and even used feng shui masters to prepare sites for his explosion events and installation works, as part of his idea that art is a method for healing the larger ecosystem of today’s society. With the explosion event Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9 (1992, cat. no. 20), for example, which was staged at a German military base. Cai diverted water from a nearby river in accordance with feng shui principles to expel and transform the accumulation of war’s negative energy. Each time he exhibits his installation An Arbitrary History: River (2001, cat. no. 43), the artist manipulates the given space rather than the objects themselves. Instead of fixity, the works and their viewers are subjected to a potential for vitalization. In this way, Cai’s notions of qi inform the conditions of constant change, interconnectivity, and transformation that characterize his practice.

Cai’s methodology advanced dramatically after his move to Japan in 1986. While living and working with his wife, Hong Hong Wu, in and around Tokyo for nine years, he learned the Japanese language and became established as a professional artist of increasing national and international reputation. Cai arrived at a time when China, newly emergent on the world stage, repeatedly called for Japan’s apology and reparations for atrocities committed during the prolonged period that began with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and continued with the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–45. The long-taboo subject of Japan’s role as a perpetrator of imperialist militarism throughout East Asia was brought to the forefront of public debate, and further inflamed, with the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989. The leftist media and art world in Japan, which, like the rest of the Left, had opposed the nation’s war machine and the emperor
system that enabled it, were quick to embrace the latest generation of Chinese students, artists, and intellectuals as heroes and comrades.

Cai also arrived in Japan at the height of revisionist debates concerning Mono-ha (literally “School of Things”), a movement that had changed the course of Japanese art in the late 1960s by accepting Asia as a center, rather than periphery, of contemporary artistic practice and discourse. Korean-born Lee Ufan, the architect of Mono-ha theory, drew upon the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and the religious philosophy of Nishida Kitarō to challenge modern Western aesthetics and theories of ontology. For Mono-ha, the function of art was to produce a “structure” that elicits an “encounter” with “being.” Unity is realized through one’s intuitive, concrete grasp of the total “site,” an elusive term connoting a ceremonial terrain of place. Writing on the influential Relatum series that he began in 1968 (fig. 12), Lee articulated a philosophy that would have clear resonance with Cai’s. Lee stated:

My work involves the displacement of a double meaning: trying to make things which are visible invisible, and to make the world which is invisible visible. The point of contact between the visible and the invisible is the thing which brings crucial immediacy to a work of art. As we get near to it, it has the appearance of matter. As we go away, it appears as a system of ideas. The mystery of art rests in the dynamics of distance.

Cai, who befriended Lee and studied at Tsukuba University with post-Mono-ha conceptualist sculptor Kawaguchi Tatsuo, recalls, “This is the lesson I learned from Japan and from the Mono-ha artists’ experience: the search for one’s own method and an individual expression.”

During Cai’s early years in Japan, his generation of post-Mono-ha artists were developing interest in the allegoric and iconic—what curator Howard N. Fox termed “a primal spirit.” One of the most active artists of the 1980s was Endō Toshikatsu. He subjected his massive, minimalist forms of pitch-black wood or trenches filled with oil to a process of fire in outdoor sites. Set into the earth, his monuments were set afame until their surfaces were utterly carbonized and charred (figs. 13 and 14). Endō believed that “it is within [the] cosmological relation—where human life becomes linked with fire, earth, water, air, sun, and other physical elements of the universe—that the material imagination can become manifest and bring meaning.” Fire does not destroy; it transforms.

Cai’s gunpowder drawings and explosion events were originally seen in Japan within the context of post-Mono-ha art and discourses. Although this dominant art world was conducive to an enthusiastic critical reception for Cai’s work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Cai considered their theoretical terms to be too organized around East-West oppositions: “They [artists and critics] wanted to achieve an internationalism and modernism. But in the end, they found that this too was a form of Westernization. The Japanese problem became my problem. That is how the series Project for Extraterrestrials came about. I was thinking, ‘Would there be a way to go beyond the very narrow Eastern and Western comparison? Was there an even larger context or a larger approach?’”

Cai’s research to create an independent method and expression culminated with the spectacular Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10
Asi Bim dend of most were powd and stone between the fifth and sixteenth centuries, is the world’s largest single structure and China’s greatest national monument, stretching 6,400 kilometers along the country’s northern border. For centuries, over successive dynasties, it was the actual and symbolic fortification that identified “China” to the outside world, but was left to ruin for much of the twentieth century. In the aftermath of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, the Great Wall became a resurgent symbol of a reconstructed Chinese nationalism with the slogan, “Let’s love our country and restore the Great Wall.” Once again, it became a national signifier of enduring empire, terrestrial magnitude, and cultural pride. Cai reworked these tropes for a complex investigation of the mutable meaning of borders in the post–Cold War world—particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—and borrowed the powers of historical myth, in the same way that he had referred to “borrowing the power of nature,” to radically disrupt the historical present.

Cai conceived of Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters as an interactive performance involving hundreds of volunteers and a local audience of approximately 40,000 people. Before leaving Japan, his assistants drank Chinese herbal remedies to purify and fortify themselves for their labor. Cai chose a location in Gansu Province, at the wall’s western-most point in Jiayuguan, at the edge of the Gobi Desert. At dusk, he “extended” the Great Wall by detonating 10,000 meters of gunpowder fuse, which had been laid in a snaking line along the ridges of the dunes. The explosion of the fuse, which lasted fifteen minutes, was meant to evoke the form of a flying dragon of fire against the sky. The dragon, a Taoist mythological symbol of the yang forces of the universe and an icon of the Chinese emperor, has been a ubiquitous image in Chinese art for millennia. Cai’s allusion to such famous compositions as Chen Rong’s thirteenth-century Nine Dragons (fig. 16) is intentional, as he aspired with this project to both represent and be represented by mainstream Chinese culture. The richness of such conceptual provocations is only part of Cai’s overall strategy for explosion events as an art form. What he most wants to achieve happens in the moment before ignition, just before violence rips matter into energy. At that instant, Cai’s mind goes “blank” at the thought of losing all control over to the nature of chaos. “This momentary flash contains eternity,” he says. “Its impact is both physical and spiritual.”

Cai’s intent is not to preserve the past so much as to revivify it, and the inventory of Chinese cultural heritage—whether Taoism, Buddhism, or signifiers such as the Great Wall and the dragon—is not to be revered so much as redistributed. For him, the past is a constructed imaginary. The importance of Cai’s work lies in his notion of cultural transgression, whereby a present that is psychological as well as the social and political is revealed to be a state of perpetual chance and transformation.

**Being Global: The Politics of Relativism**

When Cai Guo-Qiang moved to New York in 1995, he arrived from Japan on a grant from the Asian Cultural Council for a residency at the P.S.1 Studio Program in Long Island City. He and
his family have been residents of New York ever since. For Cai, this relocation was not simply a move to a new country; rather, it signaled a shift toward the peripatetic lifestyle of global artists at the turn of the twenty-first century. That Cai has never become conversant in English—his studio assistants interpret for him—reinforces his ongoing status as a migrant within the global art system. Since establishing New York as his base of operations, Cai has continued to produce explosion events, gunpowder drawings, installations, and social projects and participate in biennials, group exhibitions, and solo exhibitions in cities around the world. His work as a member of the creative team collaborating on the opening and closing ceremonies being planned for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games led Cai to set up an additional home and studio in Beijing. His embrace of these mobile creative conditions—new localities, new environments, new production teams—comes naturally to him; indeed, they have become part of his methodology. Cai embodies what globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai called “a world of flows,” a borderless and fluid space of floating populations, transnational politics, mobile configurations of technology and expertise, and a globalization of knowledge. According to Cai:

We should explore the possibilities of how to understand the world, how to contemplate the world, and how to express the world. The more we get to know these possibilities, the more we can approach the essence of everything. We should be more open-minded to adjust to the constant change in the world in order to get to the core of what our environment is, and then find a more direct way of depicting our realizations and our response.

The work Cai had made while living in Japan demonstrates a preoccupation with poetic metaphysics, cosmology, and ideas of cultural conflict. His conceptual approach to art making changed dramatically, however, in New York, and the underlying theme of conflict that had long concerned the artist moved front and center in his practice. Images of chaos and violence have come to dominate Cai’s increasingly diverse installations and social projects as well as larger and more complex gunpowder drawings and explosion events. Seemingly informed by nimble wit and an indifference to ideological stance, his recent works are unabashed provocations to consider the global human condition of incessant conflict. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the Madrid train bombings of March 11, 2004, the London subway bombings of July 7, 2005, and the proliferation of suicide bombings in Iraq and elsewhere have directly impacted Cai’s work. He has overcome community reluctance to stage large-scale explosion events in New York and Valencia, Spain, in the wake of recent attacks by persuading authorities of the “healing” effects of his blasts. It was his conviction that these aestheticized productions of violence would alleviate the trauma of recent terrorist attacks and stimulate the mental transformation of society at large. “My work *Transient Rainbow* showed people how to have courage and hope in the face of calamity,” he said of his spectacular 2002 explosion event commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York (cat. no. 30).

Cai’s belief in the power of art to affect social change links his work to Joseph Beuys’s concept of art as a generative “social sculpture.” Beuys began his *7000 Oaks* (fig. 18) in 1982 at *Documenta 7* in Kassel, Germany, as the first stage in a proposal to plant trees paired with basalt markers at sites throughout the world—a project that exemplifies his mission to effect environmental and social change. The Dia Art Foundation, for example, planted five pairings of trees and markers in New York in 1988 as a continuation of the project. In various locales, 7000
Oaks was a method of urban renewal and involved citizen and community council participation.

Similarly, Cai’s first projects in the United States, in 1996—The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century (cat. no. 26) and the related Crab House (cat. no. 49)—continued his implementation of healing and can also be understood as partaking of a Beuyssian mission. The Century with Mushroom Clouds is a series of explosions that Cai initiated at the Nevada Test Site. There, he detonated small mushroom-cloud explosions from a homemade, handheld device: a simple cardboard tube filled with gunpowder. Cai also made explosions for this series at two iconic Land art sites, chosen because of their relative proximity to, and arguable conceptual negation of, the nuclear-testing area: Michael Heizer’s Double Negative (1969), in Nevada, and Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty (1970, fig. 44) on the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Cai extended his series to a sequence of explosions for which select Manhattan landmarks like the Twin Towers and the Statue of Liberty acted as backdrops (fig. 17); for him, it was particularly significant that early research for the atomic bomb was done in Manhattan and that the first headquarters for the Manhattan Project was in the borough as well.

While The Century with Mushroom Clouds can be interpreted as Cai’s direct engagement with Land art, in whose critical lineage he perhaps belongs, it can also be seen as the artist’s reimagining of history’s greatest weapon of mass destruction as art. “The mushroom cloud constitutes a beautiful, monumental image,” in his words. “It is the visual creation that symbolizes the twentieth century, overwhelming all other artistic creations of its time. It will continue to have a powerful effect in the centuries to come.” In an act of conceptual inversion, Cai upends the permanent monumentality of Land art with the ephemeral but infinitely more powerful creation of explosions. For Crab House, he transformed a storefront in Manhattan into a tea house that ostensibly promoted “nuclear tourism” as the ruins of our contemporary age. A variety of nuclear-explosion imagery was displayed, including postcards that could be purchased. Visitors were invited to look through copies of an artist’s book containing photographs of nuclear mushroom clouds while sipping a Chinese medicinal infusion made from the lingzhi mushroom, whose form evokes the mushroom cloud. Within the tea house, 160 live crabs scuttled about the floor—a metaphor for evolutionary survival and radiation-induced cancer.

It appears that Cai has appropriated the mushroom cloud to deftly transmute pejorative nuclear tropes into “art” and “culture.” He is avidly nonideological and follows what he calls “the laws of tolerance,” declaring that an artist’s task is not to say whether something is good or bad, but simply to show reality in a new way. This relativism culminated in Cai’s vision for his largest installation to date, Inopportune: Stage One (2004, cat. no. 45), which presents nine real cars in a cinematic progression that simulates a car bombing. In an interview with Jennifer Wen Ma, he remarked:

My work begins with things I observe and am interested in; this, then, gradually becomes the desire to produce a work. For example, I make explosions, so I pay attention to explosions. I can imagine the methods used and the mental state of the suicide bombers…. Before igniting an artwork, I am sometimes nervous, yet terrorists face death unflinchingly. Along with the sympathy we hold for the victims I also have compassion for the young men and women who commit the act. Artists can sympathize with the other possibility, present issues from someone else’s point of view. The work of art comes into
being because our society has this predicament. Artists do not pronounce it good or bad.

In part, Cai’s use of violent but typical images drawn from our modern world is a form of appropriation of art whereby an atomic explosion or a suicide bombing is a kind of cultural readymade. His reinvention of Rent Collection Courtyard by virtue of its placement in the context of a contemporary international art exhibition became a model for reassigning the spectacle of everyday news from vivid terror to deconstructed subject of art. Through his methodology, Cai couples the Dadaist battle cry to destroy the boundaries of art and everyday life with Mao’s famous dictum to make “revolutionary art that is the result of the human mind reflecting and processing popular life.” His use of what can be called the “readymade explosion” underscores his overall strategy of art as a tool of cultural provocation aimed at subverting and challenging contemporary systems of order. Here, Cai’s interest in the work of artist Maurizio Cattelan offers insight into his own practice. Where Cai uses the readymade atomic or car explosion, Cattelan uses effigies of Adolf Hitler and Pope John Paul II to create scenes that border on the unbearable (fig. 19). His purpose, like Cattelan’s, is to disrupt banality with provocative contemplations, as Cai explains: “When most people approach the subject of suicide bombings, their ideas are very fixated and very stubborn. Everybody has the same, almost uniform reaction. What is ‘inopportune’ about this work is not the event itself, but rather the presentation of another voice.”

At first, the apparent neutrality of Cai’s stance with regard to victims and perpetrators of mass destruction can be perplexing. But upon deeper reflection, the violent transformations with which he is concerned reveal themselves as turning points in human history. The invention of gunpowder, the development of nuclear weaponry, and the current ubiquity of suicide bombings each identify paradigm shifts within the history of civilization. For Cai, the forces of destruction are in a dialectical process of creation, and the only constant is change itself. The wisdom that art can impart to those living in turbulent times may be just this perspective. If you want to believe, Cai’s creations unite us, for a brilliant flash, with the mind of benign and terrifying eternity.


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1. *Skybound UFO and Shrine*. Realized at Obihiro Racetrack, Hokkaidō, August 11, 2002, 6:30 pm, approximately 20 seconds. Blimp, gunpowder fuse, and shrine. Commission by P3 art and environment for *Tokachi International Contemporary Art Exhibition: Demeter*
2. *Skybound UFO and Shrine*, realized at Obihiro Racetrack, Hokkaidō, August 11, 2002, 6:30 pm, approximately 20 seconds. Blimp, gunpowder fuse, and shrine. Commission by P3 art and environment for *Tokachi International Contemporary Art Exhibition: Demeter*
7. Chen Zhen, Qi Flottant, 1985. Oil on canvas, 221 x 118 cm. Private collection, Paris
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12. Lee Ufan, Relatum, 1968. Stone, iron, and earth, 30 x 250 x 350 cm, including ground
    around iron plates and stones. Artwork not extant
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    Contemporary Sculpture ’87. Fire, iron, earth, air, and sun, diameter 800 cm
15. Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials
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16. Chen Rong, Nine Dragons, dated to 1244 (detail), Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279).
    Ink and color on paper, 46.3 x 1,096.4 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis
    Gardner Curtis Fund, 17.1697
    Looking toward Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty, April 20, 1996
18. Joseph Beuys, 7000 Eichen (7000 Oaks), 1982–87. Performance view at Documenta 7,
    Kassel, 1982
19. Maurizio Cattelan, La Nona Ora, 1999. Polyester resin, natural hairs, accessories, stone,
    and maquette, dimensions variable. Private collection

Notes

2. Hou Hanru, interview in Carolee Tha, Foci Interviews with Ten International Curators (New York: Apex Art,
   Initiated by curator Lu Jie in 1999, the Long March Project has invited Chinese and international artists to travel to
   selected sites along the historic Long March route to produce artworks that interrogate Chinese visual culture and
   revolutionary memory. The ongoing project uses the historical event as a discursive framework for reexamining and
   reengaging in China’s cultural and artistic past through exhibitions, performances, symposia, and the creation of
   new work in public sites with historical, political, or cultural significance. For more about this curatorial project, see
   Contemporary Chinese Art 5, no. 3 (Sept. 2006), pp. 73–74.
   “This 20th-century Chinese substrain of belief seems to be earnest without being pious, differentiating it from
   Judeo-Christian understandings of faith.” Philip Tinari, e-mail to author, Oct. 30, 2007. I am grateful to Tinari for
   his comments on my discussion of Cai’s relationship to modern Chinese revolutionary belief.
4. Ibid.
   2, p. 33.
   China/Avant-Garde was China’s first national exhibition of avant-garde art. It opened at the National Art Museum
   of China, Beijing, in February 1989 and featured 293 paintings, sculptures, videos, and installations by 186 artists.


Among the artists born in the 1950s and 1960s who settled outside China, Ai Weiwei, Wu Wenda, Lin Tianmao, Wang Gongxin, Xu Bing, and Zhang Huan moved to New York; Chen Zhen, Huang Yongping, Shen Yuan, and Yang Jiechang to Paris; Wu Shanzhuan to Hamburg; and Qin Yufen and Zhu Jinshi to Berlin. For studies of contemporary overseas Chinese artists, see Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile (Columbus: Ohio State University, Wexner Center for the Arts, 1993); and Melissa Chiu, Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China (Milan: Charta, 2006).


Unless otherwise noted, Cai Guo-Qiang quotations are from interviews with the author, New York, May 2007.

“Destruction means criticism and repudiation; it means revolution. It involves reasoning things out, which is construction. Put destruction first, and in the process you have construction.” “Circular of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party,” May 16, 1966. For an excellent educational Web site on the Cultural Revolution, see www.morningsun.org.


This grand exhibition of life-size clay figures takes its setting from the former rent collection courtyard of Liu Wen-tsai, a tyrannical landlord of Tayi County, Szechuan Province in southwestern China. It recreates a profound, vivid and truthful picture of the raging class struggle in old China’s countryside.

Before liberation the people of Tayi suffered untold misery through the brutalities of the local despots and the oppressive taxes levied by the Kuomintang reactionary government.

Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party headed by the great leader Chairman Mao Tse-tung, the Chinese people in 1949 completely threw off the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucracy-capitalism and established the People’s Republic of China. Since then the people of Tayi, like those in other parts of China, have been liberated, they have set out on the socialist road and have marched bravely forward in the socialist revolution and in socialist construction.

The more than a hundred sculptured figures portraying the story of rent collection are the work of a group of revolutionary Chinese art workers who, following a path lit by the invincible thought of Mao Tse-tung, creatively studied and applied Chairman Mao’s works, completely immersed themselves in the lives of the workers, peasants and soldiers, and gave full play to their collective efforts.

... *Rent Collection Courtyard* offers a striking example of how sculpture can serve the workers, peasants and soldiers as well as socialism. It is a brilliant achievement of the great proletarian cultural revolution and a victory for the great thought of Mao Tse-tung. [Chinese transliteration given in original Wade-Giles system.]

Cai has commented, “During the Cultural Revolution, people were very moved by the ‘Rent Collection Courtyard.’ Naturally, I was moved myself. I believe it is wrong to simply comment on the limitations of artists from the past, at the time they were being used politically, but they still pushed to the limit of the restrictions set upon them when carrying out their work.” Quoted in Kumagai Isako, “Chinese Artists in New York,” *Bulletin of Museum of Contemporary Art*, Tokyo (Mar. 2004). In Japanese; unpublished translation by Gavin Frew.


Cai remarked in his interview with the author, “All of Mao’s influences and movements happened during my formative years, my elementary school and adolescent period. So Mao’s concepts do subconsciously and consciously seep into my mentality.” Mao Zedong wrote in “The May 4th Movement” (May 1939), “The intellectuals will accomplish nothing if they fail to integrate themselves with the workers and peasants. In the final analysis, the dividing line between
revolutionary intellectuals and non-revolutionary or counter-revolutionary intellectuals is whether or not they are willing to integrate themselves with the workers and peasants and actually do so.” See www.morningsun.org.

36 Cai, interview with Octavia Zaya, p. 11.

37 Chen Zhen studied stage design at the Shanghai Drama Institute from 1978 to 1982, and taught there from 1982 to 1986, when he moved to Paris. I am grateful to Xu Min, the artist’s widow, for sharing reflections on Chen’s friendship with Cai through an interview with the author, Paris, Mar. 29, 2007. For Chen’s life and work, see David Rosenberg and Xu Min, Chen Zhen: Invocation of Washing Fire (Prato-Siena, Italy: Gli Ori, 2003); and www.chenzenh.org.

38 Chen Zhen, quoted in Rosenberg and Xu, Chen Zhen, p. 19.

39 Ibid.


41 Chen Zhen, quoted in Rosenberg and Xu, Chen Zhen.

42 Cai, Primeval Fireball.

43 Ibid.


45 For an excellent study on Taoism in premodern Chinese culture, see Stephen Little with Shawn Eichman, Taoism and the Arts of China (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000).


47 For a history of the Mono-ha and post-Mono-ha movements, see Munroe, Japanese Art After 1945.


52 I am grateful to Sandhini Poddar for helping me arrive at the concept of news items as “readymades.”
