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Cai Guo-Qiang
Photo by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

Cai Guo-Qiang
Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard
1999
Realized June 1999 at Deposito Polveri, Arsenale, Venice
Photo by Elio Montanari, courtesy Cai Studio

Cai Guo-Qiang
Inopportune: Stage One
2004
Seattle Art Museum
Photo by David Heald

CAI GUO-KILLER
by Ben Davis

"Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe," Feb. 22- May 28, 2008, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 5th Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10128

To judge by the quantity of press received by his current, massive retrospective at the Guggenheim, Cai Guo-Qiang has gone supernova. Not only are the Chinese artist's artsy fireworks displays and king-sized installations the kind of thing that generate lots of copy, but he is about to attain a popular currency that few contemporary artists can boast, when he orchestrates the fireworks display for the upcoming Summer Olympics in Beijing (if, that is, anyone can see his fireworks through the Chinese capital's toxic smog).

The Economist, not so long ago, ran a story about what it deemed to be a new phenomenon: the rise of multinational corporations based in developing countries like Brazil, China and India. For the art world, you could say the rise of artists like Cai represents a similar development. He's both taken to represent China and to be a new international kind of art showman, trotting across the globe, staging spectacles wherever he goes and writing his own checks.

At first blush, it might seem curious that the People's Republic would trust Cai with the task of the Olympics opening, billed as China's "coming out party" as a world power. This is, after all, an artist who first attained superstar status at the 1999 Venice Biennale with an installation for which he hired artisans to remake a classic Socialist Realist sculptural tableaux depicting the plight of the peasantry (a piece that is being restaged at the Guggenheim). In China, Cai's appropriation caused a scandal, provoking the work's original Chinese authors to claim that he had sullied their "spiritual property." Meant to crumble over the life of the exhibition, the reconstructed *Rent Collection Courtyard* was a heavy wedge of irony thrust into the official propaganda of China, from an artist who had lived in New York since 1995.

How to explain today's team-up, then? On the one hand, obviously, the Chinese Communist bureaucracy has only an opportunistic relation to any ideals that the original installation might have represented, having long ago embraced a program of industrialization-at-any-cost. (A week before Cai's opening at the Guggenheim, Steven Spielberg -- not exactly a radical -- pulled out of his own role organizing the Olympics show to protest the CCP's sponsorship of the Sudanese government in the ongoing carnage in Darfur.)

At the same time, it seems Cai Guo-Qiang himself has only a superficial commitment to any ideology at all. These days, he emphasizes that *Rent Collection Courtyard* is actually a satire on Western preconceptions about Socialist Realism. The wall text that accompanies the work at the Guggenheim suggests that his artistic method is inspired by the glories of Mao Zedong's "Cultural Revolution." That would be the period of time from 1966-1969 when

Cai Guo-Qiang
Illusion II: Explosion Project
2006
Photo by Maria Morais

Cai Guo-Qiang
Illusion II: Explosion Project
Berlin 2006
Photo by Hiro Ihara
Courtesy Cai Studio

Cai Guo-Qiang
Borrowing your Enemy's Arrows
1998
Museum of Modern Art
Installed at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008

Cai Guo-Qiang
Inopportune: Stage Two
2004
Collection of the artist
Installed at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008
Photo by David Heald

Mao, struggling to recover from his marginalization after his ruinous "Great Leap Forward" and locked in a bitter faction fight within the Party, exhorted students to burn books and turn in officials they suspected of conservatism. . . .

So, a match made in heaven, really.

What the museum-filling Guggenheim show does allow you to identify is the fundamental matrix of Cai's practice. Many critics have noted the trace of Cai's original vocation as a set designer in his installations, which have a grandiose but slightly hollow feeling. The show's centerpiece, a series of white Chevys suspended in the Guggenheim atrium as if representing the various stages of a car bomb, is a meditation on terrorism that would be at home in a casino. But Cai's formula is the same no matter what we are looking at: combine spectacular visuals with as much of a "serious" theme as is needed to seem edifying. Thus, for one of his fireworks displays, he burns down a shed in front of a Berlin's ruined Anhalter railroad station, a comment, in his words, on the "destruction, glory and heroism" of the German city's history.

Walking through the galleries with audio guide in hand, the work's ideological plasticity is what comes through. When applied to a boat suspended in the first-floor annex, we are told that the motif of being perforated with arrows denotes Chinese craftiness in stealing the technology of the West. When applied to a group of stuffed tigers, the same arrow motif becomes a symbol of beauty in a post-9/11 world. When applied to another series of small, wooden icons, we are told, it indicates the death of god. One installation is a stampede of stuffed wolves posed as if smashing into a Plexiglas wall, originally the "exact dimension of the Berlin Wall" to indicate something about the failure of the collective project of Communism. But this formal component can't have been too important to the work, because here the barrier is truncated to fit the space of the galleries. And didn't Cai's recent installation for the roof of the Metropolitan Museum also include a Plexiglas wall, that one studded with fake dead pigeons?

This is an artist who can ruminate on the "beautiful" quality of mushroom clouds, and make a gunpowder drawing cataloging their various shapes, or another work comparing nuclear blasts to mushrooms used in Chinese medicine. This seems less wise commentary on the Yin and Yang than it is simply glib. Explanations of Cai's works have frequent recourse to his beliefs about the spiritual qualities of gunpowder, and its abiding symbolism for ancient culture. . . but then you hit on *Dragons: Explosions on Pleats Please*, a spiral of burnt pleats, the leftovers from a collaboration with designer Issey Miyake for which Cai set off pools of gunpowder on a Miyake garment, the patterns of which were then mass-produced. In the end, the big, serious-sounding ideas here are just readymades, props fitted as necessary into his spectacularist environments with the goal of intriguing whatever audience the artist happens to be addressing at the moment.

This urge to bring people together through the power of spectacle is the big-hearted kernel of Cai's work. It is also his only real theme. And finally, the strengths and the weaknesses of this approach are best summarized by an aspect of the Guggenheim show that is included like a kind of bonus track at the end. Finishing the audio guide amid the spectacle of a wrecked ship buried beneath tons of fragmented porcelain pieces at the apex of the museum, you are told to take the elevator to the basement for a special coda.

There, installed with charming awkwardness in the narrow corridors of the Sackler Center for Arts Education is a mini-show curated by Cai, titled "Everything is Museum." It is, we hear, the continuation of a series of exhibitions he has organized over the years, for which he

Cai Guo-Qiang
Head On
2006
Deutsche Bank Collection
Installed at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008
Photo by David Heald

Cai Guo-Qiang's *Transparent Monument* (2006), installed on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cai Guo-Qiang
Drawing for The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century (detail)
1995-96
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio

Cai Guo-Qiang
Reflection-A Gift from Iwaki
2004
Caspar H. Schübbe Collection
Installation view at Shawinigan Space, National Gallery of Canada, 2006
Photo © National Gallery of Canada

has used his star status to bring ragged shows of artists he admires to quirky venues outside the traditional circuits of arts institutions, such as under a bridge or in an abandoned military bunker.

Among the items Cai has put on view in the cramped space of the Guggenheim basement are a sculpture of a diminutive girl security guard by Kiki Smith, a video projection on a hanging scroll which is some kind of homage to the China-Taiwan conflict by Tan Dun (gotta wonder if that one makes it to Beijing) and a diorama from architect Norman Foster, unveiling the design for a Cai Guo-Qiang museum the artist hopes to build in his hometown of Quanzhou.

But also on view is an "artwork" by controversial Guggenheim director Thomas Krens, a grid of photos of models for museum branches that Krens has tried to open worldwide, these McGuggenheims contextualized here as a work of fantastical concept art. Sucking up to the bureaucracy seems to be the other side of Cai's globe-trotting populism. It is probably a necessary one given his art's costly, extravagant character in general -- but the fact that this work is included in his utopian guerrilla museum also indicates how this material necessity spills over and becomes an esthetic all its own. From an artist whose work has such an undercurrent of the spectacular, it's a fraternal tip of the hat to Krens, the man who, more than anyone else, has labored to turn the museum into a space of corporate spectacle.

Once again, a match made in heaven.

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Photos documenting previous incarnations of Cai Guo-Qiang's "Everything is Museum" project, installed in the Sackler Center for Arts Education at the Guggenheim Museum

Thomas Krens
The Art Museum is an 18th-Century Idea, in a 19th-Century Box, That More or Less Fulfils Its Structural Destiny by the Middle of the 20th Century
2008
Guggenheim Museum