

## Firing Paper:

Reading Cai Guo-Qiang's *Unmanned Nature*



Cai Guo-Qiang *Unmanned Nature* at the Whitworth, February 2015. Photo by Michael Pollard

The installation on view at Manchester's newly re-opened Whitworth comprises a large water pond whose surface reflects a landscape drawing rendered by capturing the traces left by a gunpowder explosion upon sheets of *washi*, Japanese handmade paper. A visually spare work made of few constituting elements, it grafts itself on long stretches of world history and conjures multiple visions and readings. *Unmanned Nature* is the first exhibition in the Whitworth's new Landscape Gallery and connects to an exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, *The Sensory War 1914-2014*, which explores how artists have interpreted and communicated the impact of war on the human senses, the body, the mind, and the wider environment. Leaving behind nostalgic notions of site and identity, Cai Guo-Qiang memorializes and exorcises the inescapable fear of war and chaos. Making a place of calmness for today, this novel landscape painting inspired by the classic work of the Yuan master Huang Gongwang (1269-1354) offers up many possibilities of communication between visitors and the drawing's scenery. A site of contemporary geomancy, a profound emotional transformation can be wrung from *Unmanned Nature* and its expansive poetical space.

When it was first conceived and realised in 2008, *Unmanned Nature* was the artist's largest gunpowder drawing to date. The four-metre high, 45-metre long work was completed in Hiroshima – one of the two Japanese cities whose civilian population was massacred by the explosion of an atomic bomb on 6 August 1945. The installation is a cornerstone of the body of work produced for the Hiroshima Art Prize in 2008 and commissioned by the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. It included an explosion event entitled *Black Fireworks: Project for Hiroshima* (pictured). The re-enactment Cai Guo-Qiang conceived in Hiroshima – a mushroom-shaped daylight pyrotechnic "explosion event" in the vicinity of the A-Bomb Dome – was at once spectacularly beautiful and obscenely mimetic. It should not be seen as an isolated and

inflammatory event but rather as part of a life-long engagement with cosmology and the transformative potentials of performance and site-specific art.

Cai's work avails itself — in ways and degrees that vary among different works — of traditional Chinese doctrines about the analogy between macrocosm and microcosm. As with most advocacy of antiquarianism, his is nothing but a strategy to express contemporary ideas and concerns. *Unmanned Nature* – *wuren de ziran* 無人的自然 in the Chinese logograms also used by the Japanese – means 'nature without people'. The title references Cai's preoccupation with exploring human agency and human responsibilities vis-à-vis extra-human cosmological forces. The disyllabic compound *ziran* 'nature, the natural world' also points at that which is spontaneous, 'natural, at ease, free from affectation'. It is an old religious term contextual to practices of self-cultivation and meditation. It is that which exists 'in freedom, of itself, automatically, without any attachment'. It is also the appearance of true reality as it is, or a thing, just as it is.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent conversation in his New York home, Cai told me that he didn't want to associate the work too facilely with the atomic bomb. Rather, he said, "I wanted to discuss the role of people and their values; that is, what are people's responsibilities in relation to nature? If there were no people, what would nature be?" Cai first moved to Japan in his late 20s and lived there as a practicing artist until 1995. Fluent in Japanese, he is attuned to Japan's rituals of remembrance and commemoration of the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "The problem of the atomic bomb is not the bomb itself, it's people. Ultimately, *Unmanned Nature* is about the problem of humanity".<sup>2</sup> Referencing both traditional ink-wash painting and Monet's *Water Lilies*, Cai adds a disquieting element to the otherwise peaceful mountain scenery; a yellow sun, 'brighter than a thousand suns'.<sup>3</sup> War is an overwhelming, inescapable deflagration in people's lives. In the twenty-first century, it is everywhere, sudden, brutal and unpredictable. It happens in the midst of a sunny day.



Cai Guo-Qiang's *Black Fireworks: Project for Hiroshima*, realised at Motomachi Riverside Park near the Atomic Bomb Dome, Hiroshima, 25 October 2008

Photo by Seiji Toyonaga, courtesy Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art

Cai's questioning of the idea of nature has far-reaching consequences and deep roots. In earlier Chinese writings and paintings, nature is always treated as humans' greater self. Human beings can be depicted as natural landscapes — in particular, as mountains — in traditions associated with Taoist thought and practice, with peaks, watercourses and other features that correspond to specific internal loci or to flows of *qi* 氣, a cosmic and cosmogonic force. There are, Cai told me, "two types of nature: the one we see and the one that we feel and perceive. The latter refers to spiritual calmness, the soul and the place of our births inside our hearts".<sup>4</sup> He is aware of older Taoist and Buddhist subtexts on the idea of spontaneity – 'to let things happen on their own way and to work things out spontaneously' – and applies them to his carefully planned and yet extemporaneous explosions. "After you put together papers and barrels that give shape to an explosion, you have to let them explode in their own ways when you fire. It is 'nature' that gives energy to the flow of an explosion".<sup>5</sup> The dialectic relationship between control and spontaneity is a fruitful one. As John McRae has argued, the presumed spontaneity informing the practices of Chan (Zen) Buddhism was a lot less improvised than it was once assumed. Spontaneity, writes McRae, was debated, imagined, discussed, rather than lived.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the ideal of spontaneous cataclysmic and explosive events evoked by Cai is also part of a carefully planned liturgy.

A diasporic Chinese artist now living in New York City, Cai Guo-Qiang is at ease with multiple temporalities and with the dialectics of local history and globalization. When asked about definitions, about being a Chinese or a Japanese artist, about being an Asian or an international artist, about being 'contemporary' or 'traditional' – he answers that our times give us the opportunity to belong to every category.<sup>7</sup>

Cai was born in 1957 in coastal Quanzhou, the largest city of the southern Chinese province of Fujian, which lies just across the Taiwan Strait. His father, a painter, calligrapher and historian, was a Communist party member who grew progressively dissatisfied with Maoist politics and eventually chose to live in a monastic retreat on Nantai mountain and engage with practices of self-cultivation. Growing up, Cai drew inspiration from his father's love of art and his ambiguity towards the realities of contemporary Chinese social life. Quanzhou, one of China's many extended metropolitan areas, was the magnificent Zaiton of Marco Polo's extraordinary travelogue, one of the "two greatest havens in the world" with "such traffic and merchandise ... that it is truly a wonderful sight".<sup>8</sup> Polo had served as an accounting official of Khubilai Khan, the founder of the Yuan dynasty in China, then part of the vast Mongol Empire, the largest land empire in world history. The Venetian sailed back home from Zaiton in 1290-1291 when the city was the chief port for the ocean-going trade between China and the rest of the world, and enjoyed an extensive and lucrative maritime trade with Java, Sumatra, India and the Persian Gulf. A cosmopolitan trading community it flourished during the 13th and 14th centuries; some 200 stone stelae with inscriptions in a dozen languages from the gravesites of the many religious groups that pacifically co-existed in the city are still preserved today. In *Bringing to Venice what Marco Polo Forgot* (pictured), that was presented during the 1995 Venice Biennale, Cai sailed Chinese herbal medicine in an old Quanzhou junk along the Canal Grande to Palazzo Giustinian Lolin. Docked outside the palazzo, the boat functioned as a seating area where visitors could savour the medicinal tonics and potions offered inside. These were based on the principle of the 'five elements' wherein wood, fire, earth, metal and water correlate to five tastes (bitter, sweet, sour, spicy, salty) and five bodily organs (liver, heart, spleen, lung, kidney).



Cai Guo-Qiang's *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*, realised at the 46<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, 1995

Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu, courtesy Cai Studio

Even after its progressive demise as a major centre of world trade and cultural exchange, Quanzhou retained some importance in Chinese religious circles. Among his many other sources of inspiration, Cai cites the painter, calligrapher, and charismatic Buddhist monk Hongyi (1880-1942), who moved to Quanzhou at the end of his life and died peacefully there after having predicted the moment of his own death. An astonishing black and white deathbed photograph is on view in his former monastic quarters in the city; the monk lies on his side, his head resting on his hands in a powerful reenactment of the Nirvana of the Buddha.

Trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy, Cai's work is, in a fundamental way, performative. It crosses multiple mediums, including drawing, installation, video and performance art. The artist's gaze is never didactic, impassive or apocalyptic – rather it is contemplative, self-determining and, on occasion, filled with humour and wit. Besides Japan and China – on the Great Wall, on the Shanghai Bund, and at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 – his outdoor explosion events and fireworks projects have taken place in both natural and manmade sites around the world, including oceans, factories, lakes, riverfronts and deserts. Major projects include *Light Cycle: Explosion Project for Central Park* (2003); *Mystery Circle: Explosion Event for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles* (2012), and *Black Ceremony* at the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha (2011). The artist was awarded the Golden Lion at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale; in 2008, the Guggenheim Museum mounted the exhibition *I Want to Believe*, a large-scale mid-career retrospective of his work. The artist's social projects engage local communities to produce art events in remote sites, including former military bunkers in the Taiwan Strait. In recent years, he established BMoCA (Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art) in the Taiwanese Kinmen (Quemoy) archipelago, which had been primarily a military garrison for five decades. As a youth, Cai experienced the almost daily explosions and shelling between Taiwan and its American allies and the PRC during the Second Taiwan Strait crisis and throughout the Cold War.



The artist's early explorations of gunpowder led to his experimentation with explosives on paper and with large-scale explosion events. Paradoxically, gunpowder, a Chinese invention, was not created by military men attempting to devise more effective weapons to kill others, but by Taoist practitioners on a quest to ingest an elixir of immortality. A compound of sulphur, charcoal and saltpeter, which later the Arabs named 'China snow' and the Persians 'China salt', Taoist medieval alchemists immediately recognized the potential of the 'fire drug', as it was called, and handed down the formula to successive generations of practitioners. For the first time in world history, the Chinese experimented with gunpowder weaponry between the 10th and the 14th century. The first true gun appeared in China around 1280, some 50 years before its European counterpart. The subsequent momentous technological transfer between China and Europe was quite likely made possible by the Mongols and the world empire they had built. The military use of gunpowder too may have its origin in magic and the mantic arts for gunpowder weaponry developed from fireworks to scare off evil spirits. The loud bangs of firecrackers and fireworks spectacles are still common in today's China's calendrical festivals and great events, agricultural, religious, social or political. They are widely used throughout the Quanzhou region, once a major centre of pyrotechnics production.

The making of Cai's gunpowder drawings requires a lengthy process whose explosive last phase is sometimes shown in public. It often entails the help of local volunteers as well as the artist's studio assistants. Sheets of especially made paper are laid flat directly onto a prepared floor surface whereupon the artist proceeds to toss onto them gunpowder, fuses, and loose explosive powders following a pre-existing sketched out plan. On occasion, the artist uses stencils made of cardboard or paper to create silhouetted forms over the surfaces. Cardboard and sheets of glassine paper are kept in place by stones in order to intensify and control the explosions. When the structure is ready, in a moment of singular beauty suffused with danger, the artist ignites a fuse using an incense stick. The gunpowder rips across the surface of the paper in a cloud of smoke and loud bangs immediately after which the embers are carefully smothered.<sup>9</sup> The charred paper bearing traces impressed by such extra-human forces emerges with the potency of a cosmological diagram with talismanic powers. Cai comments: "The paint, gunpowder and other materials... are destroyed, burned or deconstructed... In this confrontation between control and anti-control... I try to vividly present the process of exchange between image (*tuxiang* 圖像) and materials. The original image [is] transformed by the explosion and subsequent process of burning. I ...design a model for this process but to complete these works, I need to rely on the power of nature".<sup>10</sup>



*Self-Portrait A Subjugated Soul*, gunpowder and oil on canvas, 1985/1989  
Photo courtesy Cai Studio

One of Cai's early paintings using gunpowder is *Self-Portrait: A Subjugated Soul* (1985) (pictured), a silhouette of a naked body blackened as by fire and irradiating a hazy aura of dark pyrotechnic sparks. Key gunpowder drawings include *The Earth has its Black Hole Too: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 16* (gunpowder and ink on rice paper, 1994) and *Reviving the Ancient Signal Towers: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 8* (gunpowder and ink on paper, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1990). In *Crocodile and Sun* (gunpowder on rice paper, 2007), an open-mouthed black-and-grey crocodile chases and gulps the brownish rays of a yolky sun. *Extension* (gunpowder on paper, 1994) is mounted on wood as a 12-panel folding screen; unfolding like a scroll, it invites the viewer to walk along its length to fully experience it. Like others, the drawing is inspired by an explosion event, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) (pictured), where the lengthy ignited fuse extended from the end of the Great Wall into the Gobi Desert. "The idea was always to derive energy from nature – says Cai – out of that came the idea of investigating the accidental, that which cannot be controlled. This was a release from the pressure that I felt around me. It was also an attempt to distance myself from traditional Chinese art, which is very much concerned with controlled form".<sup>11</sup>



*Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, realised at the Gobi desert, 27 February 1993, 7:35 p.m. Photo by Masanobu Moriyama, courtesy Cai Studio

Some of Cai's methods are reminiscent of those of other artists of different times and places. I am thinking, *mutatis mutandis*, of Caravaggio's *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* (1600-1601, Basilica di Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome) or the *Entombment of Christ* (1603-1604, Pinacoteca Vaticana) – both artists are aware of the dramatic potential of suddenly blocking a movement, of that absorbing moment when life itself is halted. It is also clear that for Cai, as for Caravaggio, the path to salvation is through fully immersing oneself in the world. Both artists, finally, show their concern with how the viewer sees the work; it is only from the latter's point of view, from her angle, that the works make full compositional sense.<sup>12</sup> In our conversation, Cai told me of his interest in the creative appropriation of the past or, to use his own words, in the use of "traditional culture as a source for contemporary art practices".<sup>13</sup>

When he substituted canvas with paper, when he chose to burn paper, Cai was contemplating long and persistent traditions. The Chinese invented paper of a quality good enough to be used for writing as early as the second century. Thanks to the technological combination of paper, ink and brush, elite manuscript cultures reached unrivalled levels of bureaucratic efficiency as well as beauty and artistry. Still, paper was not exclusively the medium of the dominant *literati* traditions but also a crucial component of the material culture of everyday life. Objects made of paper are still burned as gifts to the gods, the ghosts and the ancestors who inhabit the world beyond that of the living and the act of burning marks the transition to the netherworld.<sup>14</sup> Such practices rest on the belief that the spirits of the dead continue to dwell in the natural world and have the power to influence the fortune and fate of the living. The goal of ancestor worship is hence to ensure the continued well-being of the departed and their positive disposition towards the living. "Paper represents a more Chinese spirit," says Cai, "so it brings you some danger of blocking yourself into a Chinese setting... if what you create are trees and peonies, what belongs to you as an individual? And what is contemporary? When you get the pressure to a certain degree, you ignite it and turn it into a new form." He adds, "If you hold the fuse in your hand when it ignites, your fingers will fly off. So it is with Chinese symbols of paper, panels, gunpowder, pine trees — you hold these elements in your hand and you ignite these elements".<sup>15</sup>

Francesca Tarocco is a scholar and writer based in Shanghai. Her research interests are in Chinese cultural studies, Buddhist history and contemporary art. Her books include *The Re-enchantment of Modernity: Photography, Buddhism and China* (2016) and *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma* (2011/2008). Her recent essays on Chinese visual culture include: "The Wailing Arhats: Buddhism, Photography and Resistance in Modern China" (Archetype Publications, 2013); "Dreams of the South: Watermelons and Memory in Cao Fei's 'Haze and Fog'" (Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2013) and "Paper Metaphors: On Yan Changjiang's Photographs" (*Fantom Photography Quarterly*, 2011). Her interdisciplinary research has drawn upon art, material culture and religious sources to address problems in modern intellectual history and contemporary visual culture. Francesca is the co-founder and director of the interdisciplinary research platform [www.shanghaistudies.net](http://www.shanghaistudies.net) and a core member of the Global Asia/Pacific Art exchange at the A/P/I, New York University. She teaches Chinese contemporary art and new media and Chinese religions at NYU Shanghai.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Charles Muller, *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, available at <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/> accessed 23 July 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, New York, 1 June, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to Robert Jungk's account of the development of the atomic bomb, *Brighter than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists*, which was published in 1958. The title refers to the verse from the Indian text *Bhagavad Gita* (the "Song of God"), chapter 11, verse 12, that [J. Robert Oppenheimer](#) is said to have recalled at the [Trinity nuclear test](#) on July 16, 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication, New York, 1 June, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, New York, 1 June, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> John McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*, University of California Press, 2003, 132-138.

<sup>7</sup> See "Art: The Critical Point of Creativity and Destruction," a conversation between Asada Akira and Cai Guo-Qiang, *The 7<sup>th</sup> Hiroshima Art Prize, The Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art*, 2008, 40-45.

<sup>8</sup> Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa et al., *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 2 vols, ed. Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, New York: Dover, 1993; e-text available online via The Project Gutenberg: <http://manybooks.net/titles/palom12411241012410-8.html>, vol. 2, pp. 285-299.

<sup>9</sup> See for example the making of *A Clan of Boats*, Copenhagen 2012, available at <http://www.caiguogiang.com/videos>, accessed August 10, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from Kuyi Shen, "Fengshui, Qi, and the Art of Cai Guo-Qiang" in Jeffrey Deitch and Rebecca Morse, *Cai Guo-Qiang: Ladder to the Sky*, DelMonico Books, 2012, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya and Serizawa Takashi. *Cai Guo-Qiang*, London: Phaidon Limited, 2002.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Pamela M. Jones, *Altarpieces and their Viewers in the Churches of Rome from Caravaggio to Guido Reni*, Ashgate, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, New York, 1 June, 2014. See also *The Quiet in the Land*, Cai Guo-Qiang's project proposal in Luang Prabang, Laos, available at [http://www.thequietintheland.org/laos/project\\_cai.html](http://www.thequietintheland.org/laos/project_cai.html), accessed July 28, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Lee Scott, *For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors: The Chinese Tradition of Paper Offerings*, Hong Kong University Press, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Arthus Lubow, "The Pyrotechnic Imagination", *The New York Times Magazine*, February 17, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/magazine/17Fireworks-t.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, accessed 22 July 2014.