Fluidity and Transformation: Positioning the Art of Cai Guo-Qiang

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Master of Arts

Meredith L. Skaggs

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Fluidity and Transformation: Positioning the Art of Cai Guo-Qiang

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Cai Guo-Qiang works within many contradictions, one of which is the making of art while challenging commoditization of objects. As a Chinese person abroad since 1986, Cai navigates his own cultural heritage while taking into account the global spaces where he exhibits. Such precarious positioning allows him to comment on and challenge the art-system of object production. Cai’s artworks subvert their own materiality whether by being evocative of process, seeking non-productivity, allowing re-contextualization, being submissive to place and time, and/or through expressing intangible phenomena. These tendencies prevail with consideration of Plato’s notion of the real and Jacques Derrida’s concept of trait. It is evident that Cai’s mediums (gunpowder drawings, explosion projects, installations) and methodology reflect the elusiveness of his art and ambiguous categorization as a contemporary artist, imbuing process with more significance than any commoditized object.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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Additionally, I thank The Cleveland Museum of Art for the opportunity to get up-close-and-personal with Cai Guo-Qiang’s Pine Forest and Wolf during a private viewing of the piece in August 2010. I extend my appreciation to Paola Morsiani for accompanying my visit and Moyna Stanton for her comments on paper conservation.

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INTRODUCTION: CAI GUO-QIANG’S CONTEMPORARY QUEST

“My work looks for temporal and spatial chaos, to attain the boundlessness of life, and cast out the temptation of material gain. It is like becoming a monk, in a nihilist limitless universe. No matter how extraordinary an event is, it is also nothing extraordinary. No matter how transitory life is, it is also infinite. No matter how lacking in energy, there is still energy. Impossibility is still possibility.”

-Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang’s (b. 1957) work is often discussed in relation to the paradox of creation by destruction and in relation to land art, but rarely as a vehicle to critique consumption. Miwon Kwon discusses this issue in a reading of Cai’s use of gunpowder, specifically in his explosion events, as an act of lavish and wasteful expenditure. I observe that Cai consistently challenges the art-system of object production throughout his oeuvre. Cai’s explosion events, in which the artist sets up explosives to be ignited for typically a short duration, are perhaps the most logically and easily identifiable as lavish expenditure. While Cai’s gunpowder drawings—the laying of gunpowder upon a fabric or paper surface and marking it through its explosion—and installations forgo such extreme expenditure and non-productivity, it is still about the non-commodity. The subtlety that is expressed through shifts in function, structural re-use, authorial and

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2 See Miwon Kwon, “The Art of Expenditure,” in Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to believe, Thomas Krens et al. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 67-68. From Georges Bataille’s The Accursed Share, Kwon uses the notion that modernity poses one with the problem of what to do with surplus energy. If excess cannot assist the growth of a system (the contemporary art system for Kwon), then it is necessary to be lost without profit (i.e. Cai using hundreds of thousands of dollars in gunpowder within seconds). Even though Cai attempts to create a “non-productive” work, the art system appropriates his wasting as gain and the cycle continues despite Cai’s efforts to the contrary.
viewer de-centering, and themes of changing and fluid concepts all fortify interest in re-routing surplus energy. Cai’s continual efforts to subvert object solidification, and therefore commoditization, lies in his variety of mediums and in his methodology.

The transformative is a key theme in Cai’s works, whether it is the transformation of gunpowder into fire or the transformation of structures into other forms. This tendency springs from spiritual belief, particularly Daoism and its principle that the universe is in a state of constant transformation. Another significant component stemming from spiritual belief is that of balance. The concept of qi refers to energy that makes up living things and it is in constant flux. The balance of qi requires the ability to respond to its flow which manifests in Cai’s re-situation and re-contextualization of pieces. The notions of transformation and energy express an acceptance of the fluidity of everything, freeing the object from the confines of its materiality and being influenced by its space and time.

The implication of Daoism is connected particularly with China as a spiritual belief, yet its influence on Cai’s art makes statements pertinent to global spaces. Part of the problem of the contemporary is working through the role of the artist. How can one retain personal identity in a largely globalized community? For Cai, as a Chinese person living predominately abroad since 1986, it is about balance between his cultural heritage and the history of the place in which he exhibits. The ties that are evident between stories and forms, no matter from which culture they originate, are the vehicles to express the transformative in his art. Cai is able to operate in addressing multiple “presents” that
exist within the contemporary. His work oscillates between site-specific and universal, not quite preferring one to the other.

It is crucial not to strip identity away from Cai by positioning him with relativity to the place where he makes and exhibits his art, which threatens to align him in “western” history. Because of this, I will present ways in which Cai is sensitive to his roots in China, born in Quanzhou City in the southern province of Fujian, and retains crucial identity as a Chinese artist. However, following Kwon’s lead as well as Alexandra Munroe’s discussion, I would like to situate Cai as transcendent of singular categorization. Cai is particularly difficult to label as he is always placing himself on the margins artistically and culturally (a crucial factor for what Wu Hung calls “experimental art”). Artistically, he creates explosion events, gunpowder drawings, and installations while culturally he has lived in China, Japan, and now, the United States. Although Cai’s work often employs Chinese signifiers, beyond the self-evident gunpowder, it operates as global commentary, addressing issues that pertain to contemporary art as objects are subjected to place and time.

Chapter one will explore Cai’s engagement with time as movement. The implication of time is connected to the process of making and the ability of his pieces to be markings of activity. Part of Cai’s working method is his use of gunpowder drawings that pre-date explosion events. There is an interdependency between these preparatory gunpowder drawings and their subsequent explosion projects that causes the drawing to shift in function, which favors process above any static object. This chapter will also address gunpowder as a marking material; one that expresses its volatile nature and
shows its marks as it relates to process. Process is implicated as the surface contains accessibility to how the gunpowder drawing is produced. Because of this exposure, viewing the drawing activates the markings, something that I will draw a connection to Chinese scholar handscroll paintings as theorized by Richard Vinograd.

Not only does his art connect to traditional painting like handscrolls, Cai also exhibits similar interests in methodology as his contemporary artists of the Xiamen Dada group working within China. As manifested through process, Cai embraces the chance ever-present when working with gunpowder, a key interest to the Xiamen Dada. What is also relevant is the group’s effort toward non-productivity as a way to critique the museum as an institution, a concept which with Cai grapples though ironically because of the materiality of some his choice mediums. It is mainly Cai’s acceptance of slips between conception of projects and their realization that evidence his non-committal position towards permanent and fixed objects.

Chapter two focuses on the ability of space and time to shape an object. With inspiration from Cai’s background in stage design, the artist manipulates his installations, like settings on a stage-like space, to work in a strain of revealing and concealing. In his installations, Cai uses Chinese stories and symbols that de-center traditional notions towards them in order to make relevant these signifiers to the place and time in which they stand. Much like his gunpowder drawings, his installations evoke an unfolding scene, thereby calling attention to movement rather than a static snapshot. The space of exhibition as a stage also creates an on-going experience. By this conception, structures allow permutations in design to be re-molded and re-used according to its space. Cai’s
casual attitude towards his pieces through their re-contextualization challenge object finality.

In the second chapter, I will also discuss Cai’s interest in the fluid through forms that incite confusion between real and produced. Especially through the use of clouds and shadows, Cai possesses the ability to dispute artwork and the idea of “reality.” In the staging of some installations, Cai debunks the myth of a singular reality by pointing out discrepancies between technologies at any given date due to place. Cai moves further to question “realness” of the object with his work using shadow.

Chapter three will offer a reading of Cai’s 2009-2010 exhibition *Fallen Blossoms*, a collaborative effort between the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in conjunction with the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). This exhibition operates in an intricate exploration of memory and time. Cai sets up dialogue in the relation between pieces of *Fallen Blossoms*. Memory and how it fades, alters, and re-solidifies is a key thread as discussed by the artworks’ function in highlighting process. In *Time Scroll*, Cai marries gunpowder drawing and installation as he creates a gunpowder drawing on-site at FWM. Upon its completion, the drawing is submerged in a constructed river filled with water. While markings fade in *Time Scroll* there is another piece that reinforces altered memory through weavings, entitled *Time Flies Like a Weaving Shuttle*.

Complicating juxtaposition of deterioration and creation is the sense that memory can never be a pure recollection; never static. Memory is as subject to time as the artworks Cai presents. The third chapter also explores significance present in the layering of memory through a trace rather than anything of overt physicality. The
consideration of the whole exhibition of *Fallen Blossoms* is about how Cai’s pieces work on an intangible level through memory. As these pieces evidence, there are slips in meaning that occur artistically and linguistically. Through my own on-going study of Mandarin Chinese and experience living abroad in Beijing, language greatly informs my research on art. The tonal nature of the Chinese language lends itself more readily to confusion of meaning, and therefore, more room for alteration of meaning between original intent and translated word or sentence (especially from a native English speaker’s point of view). This linguistic precariousness reflects the way Cai uses art. I will discuss the significance brought to bear when there are slippages in language and apply it to *Fallen Blossoms*. Within the disparity of image, as in language, a trace remains wherein meaning is brought to escalate. This trace, as will be discussed, is closely related to memory as it points towards an origin which is no longer present, yet absence is assurance that there was something before.

In Cai’s art, it is process, transformation, intangibility and the non-object that operate as more important than object commoditization. This thesis explores Cai’s work from his early explorations into gunpowder drawings, explosion events, and installations in the early and mid 1990s up until his work in 2011. The primary exhibition sites of these pieces also vary widely from Iwaki to Berlin to Philadelphia to Doha. While there is a loose progression in date of the discussion of figures, there is no particular allegiance to creating a timeline of works. I freely discuss pieces that jump in date within each chapter. The perhaps frustrating lack of a neat and tidy narrative as pertaining to Cai’s personal history and art history as a whole dovetails with the incoherence of
contemporary art to which Jaleh Mansoor alludes as the strength of the present. The position of the artist allows for this exploration, balancing place with his own personal observations. Embracing the confusion, contradictions are part of the method that Cai makes evident as a way to artistically operate.

A popular contradiction that appears in writings on Cai stem from the violent implications of gunpowder as a medium. Through gunpowder, authors link Cai to his hometown where the artist often experienced military drills and tension between Taiwan and China. The use of explosions also draws ties to war and attacks, both of history and of the present day. Explorations into this violent aspect of Cai’s art often leads to the discussion of creation by destruction. This contradiction of art making is only one among many that spring forth from Cai’s art. I will concentrate on other notions that are seemingly incongruous. Working through the many contradictions, fluidity is the way in which to challenge the object while creating something. In lieu of a heavily biographical look into dates, what is important is drawing out reoccurring tendencies in Cai’s oeuvre. These tendencies all relate to a subversive view of object-solidification and commoditization while also offering an exploration of time and space.

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3 See Jaleh Mansoor, “Questionnaire: Mansoor,” in *October 130*, Fall 2009, 104-106. This issue of *October Magazine* is devoted to responses to a devised questionnaire on the Contemporary. Mansoor posits the incoherence of the contemporary as a response to a forced and imagined linear history of the past.
CHAPTER ONE: FUNCTION, ACTIVATION, AND CHANCE

In this chapter, I will explore process and transcendence as it relates to materiality and borders, specifically the ability of tactile materials to transcend their encasing and point to process. Cai’s methodologies, including the use of preparatory drawings and the use of Chinese signifiers and spiritual beliefs, are contingent on time and space. By indicating time instead of a finalized object, Cai works through objects to avoid a finalized commodity. Materiality is sutured to other things wherein it is process that accumulates and emits worth. By looking at his Project for Extraterrestrials series, I can investigate gunpowder drawings as they link to subsequent explosion projects. Functioning as a preparatory drawing at first glance, these pieces also shift in function over time in various stages of the explosion project’s realization. This fluidity flits away from cementing a final object by being always subject to process and time.

Gunpowder drawings, regardless if they are related to later explosion projects, are intrinsically a description of time. The process that the drawing undergoes is displayed on the surface to be activated through looking, also a time-based action. Indexical marks that map the explosion by which gunpowder drawings are made lead the viewer back to process. It is in this way that Cai’s art relates to Chinese literati handscroll painting. Similar to gunpowder drawings in particular, these ink paintings do not offer a view into a scene that envelops the onlooker, but rather entices movement. By indicating process, Cai reveals how things are constructed, offering a complication of mystification with demystification.

Preparatory Gunpowder Drawings: Project for Extraterrestrials
The way gunpowder drawings are employed as preparatory to other pieces always connects it to process as it is process. *Project for Extraterrestrials* is a series of realized and unrealized concepts that make use of explosions as a code to speak to alien realities. This series marks Cai’s first production of explosion events, the inaugural realized project occurring in 1989, entitled *Human Abode: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 1*. Cai begins the series after moving to Japan and expanding his personal borders as an artist. It seems fitting that he would be interested in transcending physical borders at this time in his artistic development. The idea that these pieces reach out to the universe breaks borders similar to the way Cai transcends his own borders (but somehow remains inextricably linked to “Chineseness”) and how objects break away from materiality. In a sense, you cannot transcend borders unless they are there just as you cannot have process without something being done.

In *Project for Extraterrestrials*, Cai uses a variety of mediums and formats to plan out future explosion projects—primarily gunpowder drawings, to which Wu Hung refers as “think pieces” because of their use to articulate ideas. Cai employs gunpowder drawings as the method to diagram these explosion events, sometimes working on paper

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5 To borrow a term used by Melissa Chiu. See Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2006). Chiu uses this term as a unique characteristic of contemporary Chinese artists that live and work outside of China.

6 Wu Hung, “Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang’s Gunpowder Painting (2005)” in *Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists*, (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2009) 10. While Wu discusses gunpowder drawings (or gunpowder paintings) as “think pieces,” he does not visually engage the markings on the surface in a way that might support their function as a diagram of vision in addition to future projects.
as a folding album or as a folding screen. Even though we have images on paper, it is
Cai’s emphasis on and statement through process that prevails in three ways; referencing
how it was made itself, the fluidity of its function, and pointing outside itself towards a
time-based explosion to which it is always linked. Process is made more complex
because we have objects (preparatory drawings) that actually refer to time-based
procedures (explosions, making, viewing) rather than itself.

_Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9_ (Figures 1, 2, and 3)
engages with the idea of production and viewing in its visual form as well as its function.
There are three physical ways in which this piece manifests itself, with possibility for re-
presentations _ad infinitum_. In its first conception in 1990, _Fetus Movement II_ takes the
form of a traditional Chinese sketchbook as a 24-page folding album (Figure 1), a
straightforward way of punctuating its function as a repository for an idea or diagram.
This album contains many similar elements to its next realization in 1991 as an eight-part
folding screen (Figure 2). The preparatory function of the screen is brought to attention
by the first and eighth panels flanking the gunpowder image, which are primarily marked
by red ink. Here, Cai writes the title of the piece in English and includes a description of
the future explosion project in Chinese. Both pieces consist of ink and gunpowder on
paper that depict one idea of an explosion event, yet they visually differ. The images on
the folding album provide shifting views of what will become the explosion project; the

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7 This sort of interpretation of preparatory gunpowder drawings comes from thinking
about John Cage’s 1952 composition _4’33”_ that contains a score to follow for a
performance, yet each time it is performed it inevitably varies. Cai’s gunpowder
drawings contain instructions on how to set-up and realize explosion projects, but there
cannot exist a perfect execution that is able to be repeated.
left providing the view of onlookers from ground level and the right showing the point of view from above. This idea of what the explosion may look like from above is a concern for Cai, due to the concept of other-worldly beings witnessing the event, pushing beyond preconceived notions of who/what viewers are.

His *Project for Extraterrestrials* series all carry similar considerations of breaking boundaries, which might reflect the role of the artist in his move from China to Japan. Indeed, this shift in viewpoints, as the album suggests, might reflect Wu Hung’s assertion that *Fetus Movement II* displays Cai’s different take on his own Chinese culture.  

This is an important point to visit because the rise of globalization has offered new challenges to the role of the artist as she/he works in international contexts with cross-cultural influences, while maintaining individuality. It is crucial to take a stance on the borders of place and identity in order to break confinement and offer new commentary while also being embedded in history.

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8 Wu Hung, “Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang’s Gunpowder Painting (2005),” 14. Wu cites *Fetus Movement II* in his chapter to mark Cai’s new conceptualism of his medium by his move to Japan in 1986. For Wu, Cai begins to “revisit his own cultural traditions from a different angle.” This is shown through creations of Chinese style sketchbooks (accordion style albums) that were used by traditional painters which then transform into other various manifestations, such as a larger screen and explosion project.

9 In this sense, Cai fits the definition of experimental Chinese contemporary artists that Wu Hung brings forth and explores in the introduction to his book accompanying the exhibit he curated, entitled *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art and the End of the Twentieth Century*. For Wu, borders are political, geographic, or ideological spaces that characterize identity and these artists must operate on the margins of them in order to make comments on contemporary issues. This definition is primarily aimed at artists within China where highly controlled art practices, such as official art and academic art is prevalent throughout history, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Post-Cultural Revolution artists set themselves opposite of these confinements by being on the borders, not within them. See Wu Hung, “Introduction: Pushing the Limits: Chinese
should consider multiple standpoints and it is this “vision” so to speak, that Cai
punctuates in *Fetus Movement II*.

*Fetus Movement II* as a folding screen addresses ideas of vision through its
gunpowder markings and the act of viewing. Attention is drawn to the center of the
screen where a figure’s silhouette (intended to be the artist\(^\text{10}\)) is the core of four circles
expanding outward around him. The gunpowder is heavily concentrated at the middle,
becoming more of an outlining agent toward the outer circles rims. Visually, this area of
burnt paper at the center appears as a pupil containing the silhouetted man with an iris
and sclera articulated by the expansions outward. The image’s resemblance to an eye
invites consideration of Cai’s art as a mapping of vision. The notion of vision evokes the
question of temporality. The temporality of looking and how looking connects to one’s
memory compounds with the temporal event of an explosion.

Explosions work in a dual manner for *Fetus Movement II*. An explosion is
necessary for the production of Cai’s gunpowder drawings. This momentary act’s
presentation of its creation on the surface of any material promotes dialogue between
solidity and fluidity, blurring the conception of object with moment/event. The markings
on the surface of the screen are undoubtedly the result of ignited gunpowder. This clarity
is evident by the literal holes burned through the paper, which is then mounted on wood,
giving structure to the screen. The scattering of marks caused by the force of lit

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\(^{10}\) Delineated on the first panel (from the left) is detail of the figure inside of the
exploding circles. It explains that the figure, who is Cai himself, is hooked to a device
that will measure his heart rate and brainwaves when the explosion ignites around him.
gunpowder cannot be perfectly controlled by Cai, although he displays mastery of the unpredictable medium. In this way, the means of production is not hidden. Vision is privileged—visible is the way in which the drawing is made.

Relevance of Chinese Art

A method in which Cai’s art operates through materiality to ultimately highlight process and time rather than the object is in relation to evidence displayed on the surface that evokes time (evidence being similar to the trait, or trace, as theorized by Jacques Derrida\textsuperscript{11}). In the production of gunpowder drawings, there is a dynamic and explosive process that repeats itself in the markings on the surface. This sentiment is similar to Cai’s cultural tradition in ink painting. Alexandra Munroe writes that Cai’s pieces, because of his choice medium of gunpowder, are free from linear associations in art historical traditions.\textsuperscript{12} Although his medium is unconventional in terms of traditional Chinese art history, Munroe later observes that, “More recently, Cai has begun to develop gunpowder drawings that are unrelated to specific explosion events. These experiments reflect Cai’s interest in connecting gunpowder drawing methodology with Chinese literati landscape painting traditions.”\textsuperscript{13} I believe Munroe is correct in asserting that Cai’s

\textsuperscript{11} Donald Preziosi, “Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation,” in \textit{The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology}, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 272. Preziosi describes Derrida’s notion of the trait as “referring to anything that is drawn (including writing).” “In effect, what Derrida sought to show was that the ‘inside’ of any work is already inhabited by that which might have been bracketed out as its ‘outside’—signatures, verbal discourse, frames, institutional stagecraft, and so forth.” Cai’s art fits well with the idea that the piece moves to the outside rather than holding all within the isolated object.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 93.
method is connected to Chinese literati landscape painting, but she does not elaborate that
this is present in his very medium and the way it marks the surface. Because of this, I
find that his preparatory gunpowder drawings preceding explosion events exemplify this
association.

Enacting Time with Evidence of Production

Preparatory gunpowder drawings are especially linked with Chinese literati
painting in form and function. As discussed in Fetus Movement II, Cai works in a folded
album layout, a format that is utilized throughout the Project for Extraterrestrials series.
Traditional ink painters used these albums as sketchbooks, which is fitting for Cai’s
employment of the format to layout future explosion events. In this sense, Cai embeds
his work within Chinese art history. Not only does Cai use traditional methods of
sketching, his pieces also reflect the visual workings of literati painting as Richard
Vinograd describes. Vinograd explores the way in which literati painting can be
conceived as active or as a continuation. In order to illuminate his theory, Vinograd
offers juxtaposition between Chinese literati painting with European painting.14 In
European painting, traces of production are hidden. What is presented to the viewer is a
mirror or window to the world which is “an aid to memory as a captured moment or

14 Vinograd specifically engages with Chinese scholar-amateur (literati) paintings from
mid-thirteenth century through the nineteenth with contemporaneous works in Western
history. I will be using the ideas that Vinograd posits about Chinese literati painting to
relate to Cai’s artworks. See Richard Vinograd, “Private Art and Public Knowledge in
Later Chinese Painting,” in Images of Memory: On Remembering and Representation, ed.
Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991)
176-202.
event, but seldom does it evoke the extended temporality of the event of painting itself.”15 Vinograd presents Chinese handscrolls as events with importance to its actual production as well as viewing, both actions of which occur over time. In doing so, there is an interweaving of temporality, duration, and memory.

In what Vinograd terms as “visible graphic formulas,” temporality shows through traces of production and the viewer’s effortful role to observe them.16 The observation of depicted images acts as an extension of the “events of production,”17 meaning how things are painted. It is through the traces on the surface that permits this re-experiencing rather than a witnessing of a scene.18 Vinograd also addresses textual content on literati painting, poetry by the artist or sentiments added by those who view the piece after the artist completes the scroll. This tendency is a very real way that locates the work both within the past and present and “becomes part of the very fabric of an extended occasion.”19

It is in connection to this way of producing (located in the past) and viewing (in the present) as an extended temporality that Cai’s work moves beyond the object itself. The significance of art’s production is exemplified through Cai’s variety of mediums, but particularly in his gunpowder drawings, both preparatory and solitary. Every gunpowder drawing, regardless of its relation to other possible works, contains traces of production

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15 Vinograd, “Private Art and Public Knowledge in Later Chinese Painting,” 181. I would like to note that I will not be broaching the realm of East versus West within this thesis. Although this underlying theme helps illuminate Vinograd’s observations, it would set up an opposing view of Cai as I see him globally engaged.
16 Ibid., 181
17 Ibid., 182
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 183.
as each scorched mark evidences. Through gunpowder drawings, Cai maps the conversion of matter, which is the gunpowder, into energy during the explosion, to matter in another state, being the burnt drawing. The mark becomes an imprint of a moment transforming the object into memory itself.

Gunpowder drawings resulting from explosions carry significance beyond physical worth. This occurs in preparatory drawings as they in themselves are process, a part preceding some other manifestation. Preparations for *Fetus Movement II*, both as folding album and folding screen, carry transformative marks referencing moments past and future. It always refers to memory of bygone process and always holds potential for events in the future. Much like Chinese scholar paintings, these gunpowder drawings contain images and text. In addition to the marking nature of gunpowder that re-performs its production, words upon the surface describe details of the conceived explosion project. While this description of image and text brings to life the event even if one does not view the explosion project, limitation of words to explicate an idea permit alterations in either imagining or realizing the explosion.

**Fluid Translation: Breaking from Page into Space**

An intrinsic facet of Cai’s process is the discrepancy there must be between preparation and realization. While there is hardly a perfect translation of preparatory drawing to event or installation, the ability to express a similar intent despite of change in visual representation displays how the shift in between enhances meaning. This augmentation of conceptual richness (rather than monetary worth) is attached to process.

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Among the components that add interest to the project is the site where an explosion project takes place, which may change how Cai realizes an explosion from preparatory gunpowder drawings.

Even though an explosion project has a diagram of its conceptualization, it is not necessarily set in stone. Certainly there is a relationship between the two, “Like a lace, each ‘thing,’ each mode of being of the thing, passes inside then outside the other…it remains the ‘same’ right through, between right and left, shows itself and disappears…. Hard and flexible at one and the same time.”21 The fluidity between the gunpowder drawing and its move from the page into space illuminates the potential held and cultivated through its various realizations. *Fetus Movement II* as a folding album predates the explosion event, indicating its function as mapping out the event, an idea only existing in Cai’s imagination. However, for the duration of the explosion event, the gunpowder drawing indicates a reality, shifting to a method of documentation once the event finishes. In this, Cai exhibits the ability to produce pieces that resist permanence, and instead move and transform function. These albums hold all the functions within them at once while they are tied up with explosions—of their production and of their future.

The realization of *Fetus Movement II* as an explosion project came in 1992 at the Bundeswehr-Wasserübungsplatz Military Base in Hannover-Münden (Figure 3). In breaking from the page of its previous gunpowder drawings, the explosion project

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permutes slightly to respond to its site. This project evidences Cai’s consideration of site while subtly referencing his cultural heritage through Daoist spiritual beliefs. Three concentric circles were dug into the ground into which water was diverted from a nearby stream. For Cai, the additional element of water incorporates the notion of feng shui (literally translated as “wind water”), to restore balance to Fetus Movement II’s militaristic site. While this alteration is not specifically accounted for in the preparatory gunpowder drawings, it reflects Cai’s interest in allowing outer, unexpected elements to shape and transform his work.

Allowing explosion events to divert from preparatory drawings frame Cai’s simultaneous control and submission to the work. The artist seems to acknowledge this precarious relationship between himself and the work through situating himself in the middle of the explosion for Fetus Movement II. While there is a description of Cai’s intention to sit amongst the explosion present in its preparatory drawing, the result of the electrocardiograph and electroencephalograph that measure Cai’s heart rate and brainwaves, respectively, cannot be known. After Fetus Movement II’s realization, like the fluid and moving function of the preparatory gunpowder drawings, the resulting documentation of Cai’s heart rate and brainwaves allows a reenactment of the explosion. This is seen through his reaction from anticipation (relatively calm, thin, flat lines), experiencing (spike in activity), and ending of the event (restoring equilibrium). These results are tied up with process rather than being about physical, paper records. While

this could be seen as an object resulting from *Fetus Movement II*’s explosion project, it
really is one with process and intended to be taken as such.

### Materiality, Process, and Loss

Preparatory gunpowder drawings to explosion projects in realized *Series for Extraterrestrials* pieces “end” with an explosion, a non-productive event that essentially consumes hundreds of thousands of dollars. Materiality and extravagance has been a lesser focus in Cai’s art and discourse surrounding it, but important to address in congruence with Miwon Kwon’s essay on Cai and expenditure. While Kwon states that “pure consumption” characterizes Cai’s “U.S. period,” I approach this tendency as a thread which is present throughout Cai’s *oeuvre*, perhaps cultivating in his most current projects, but by no means absent from his earlier works. Kwon discusses Cai’s 2005 explosion project, *Black Rainbow: Explosion Project for Valencia*, in which Cai claims $200,000 were spent on the project. In regards to this explosion project, Cai seems to relish the idea that there is “a triumph of spiritual reality over material reality.” Her analysis of Cai’s use of explosion events in a non-productive manner and his attitude towards them speculates an association with anti-commoditization. Cai’s interest in non-

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23 Miwon Kwon, “The Art of Expenditure,” 63. Kwon acknowledges Cai’s own words from an interview with Fei Dawei in 2000, in which Cai names three periods of his career: his “Chinese period,” “Japanese period,” and “U.S. period.” He says that his first period was about avoiding Literati painting through gunpowder in opposition to his “spatio-temporal environment,” while his second period was about aesthetics and the cosmos. He declined to categorize his third, U.S. period, only calling it “something new.”
24 Ibid., 65. Kwon later references Georges Bataille’s economic theory in which excess money (money that is not needed for survival) must be used unproductively devoid of profit.
productive consumption manifests less overtly in earlier works due to their comment on seemingly fixed things as being impermanent.

Through *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (Figures 4 and 5), there is questioning of permanence versus vulnerability. This opposition is set up because of the work’s iconography along with the material implications of gunpowder. *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1990) allows us to think about the possible function of gunpowder on paper. In this project, Cai renders a few iterations of the same subject, but of most interest to me is a 24-page folding album (Figure 4). The album serves to map out a future explosion project, using both black ink and exploded gunpowder to render the Great Wall. Moving from right to left, the wall that represents the actual structure is shown in ink and Cai’s explosive extension of it is depicted with the gunpowder markings. Visually, the ink of this album appears more ephemeral, while the gunpowder seems more substantial. The juxtaposition of actual with fictional allows for exploration into the concept of the object and a purpose of gunpowder on paper.\(^{25}\)

The depiction of the Great Wall and its extension as represented in ink and gunpowder, respectively, allows a dialogue between artistic medium and spatial tactility. Ink, a technically more fluid medium, creates the Wall’s structure. The opposition of structure with representational medium is offset with the explosion’s representation by gunpowder. This choice seems logical given the nature with which the Wall will be

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\(^{25}\) I want to avoid using the terms “real” and “reality.” This desire is due to disputed meanings and implications of the terms, especially as I discuss in chapter two of this document.
extended using gunpowder and fuses, but visually, it appears more structured than the Wall itself. Here, and in many of Cai’s preparatory gunpowder pieces, gunpowder depicts a fiction and a non-fiction. In the *Project for Extraterrestrials* series, gunpowder markings, especially in preparatory drawings, represent something that is the future, present, and disappeared.

In his folding album’s subsequent explosion event, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters* (Figure 5), Cai lengthens the Wall from its Western most point into the Gobi desert. The theme of the Great Wall of China reflects the idea that nothing is completely permanent or resistant to deterioration. In many places, the Great Wall is deteriorating, a testament to time and material subjectivity to its eroding force. Despite its material decline, the Great Wall remains an important and loaded symbol in China. Under the First Qin Emperor, the Great Wall (or “The Long Wall” more accurately translated from *changcheng*, its name in Chinese) created an imaginary fortification that became nationalistic identity through connecting parts of the Wall previously built by feudal lords to defend against neighbors. Even as the Great Wall became impractical as a protective force, it remained a monument that Sun Yat-Sen, considered the founder of modern China, touted as a great achievement of the people.

26 Yun, “Catalogue,” 142.
27 See Wu Hung, “Demystification: Counter-Monument,” in *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 31. Wu discusses the cultural myth of the Long Wall in its contradiction that while it created a national symbol identifying a unified Chinese empire, it did not benefit real Chinese people nor did it offer protection to the people. Rather, the Wall was constructed by the common people, many of whom perished from their labor. The symbol of the Wall, therefore, is layered with tragedy and suffering.
Later, the Wall became key Communist propaganda and served as “reconstructed Chinese nationalism” under Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform. The changing role of the Great Wall offsets the Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters folding album’s functions, while Cai’s extension of the Wall through an explosion seems at once to echo solidity and forcefulness along with impermanence and vulnerability.

The fleeting explosion matches well with the grandeur and spectacle of the Great Wall itself, while also addressing temporality of material gains, no matter how substantial or extravagant in form. Even though the Great Wall as a physical structure is subjected to time and erosion, Cai’s gunpowder lasts an infinitesimally small fraction of time in comparison to the duration of the Great Wall before dissipating—exaggerating the non-permanence of objects through this juxtaposition. The use of money towards an explosion project like Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters is extravagant due to its short period of existence. This piece is an early example highlighting Cai’s interest in subverting material commodity through “pure consumption,” and it also comments on the level of material impermanence.

Apart from, yet linked to the “pure consumption” of explosion projects are gunpowder drawings that utilize the same medium but leave traces of the event more readily. Again, the preoccupation with developing ideas through gunpowder drawings extends beyond explosion projects to exhibitions as a whole, encompassing “finalized” gunpowder drawings and installations. Working in this manner, Cai has to address the

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28 Ibid., 32.
contradiction of trying to be subversive through yielding some products. Because of this predicament, preparatory drawings must insist upon something more than just iconography and forms to work out ideas. In this insistence, pieces self-reference while also reaching outward to evoke threads between drawing and explosion, installation, or other gunpowder drawings.

The Vague Border between Gunpowder Drawings, Explosions, and Installations

Four gunpowder drawings from the *Project for Extraterrestrials* series, including *Fetus Movement II*, as folding screens are placed significantly as part of another project, an installation called *Primeval Fireball: The Project for Projects* (Figure 6) in 1991. The piece blurs strict distinction of gunpowder drawings from explosions from installations. At the level of its display, this installation refers to an invisible point that either moves away from itself or draws itself back in, depending on the movement of the viewer. It is unclear what the intention is at first, but given Cai’s use of explosion (rather than implosion) one can reasonably conclude that it emanates outwards. The consistent use and arrangement of things as moving outwards from itself is a reflection of materiality pointing towards other things, like preparatory gunpowder drawings to their explosion project counterparts.

Six of the folding screens for *Primeval Fireball: The Project for Projects* act as preparatory drawings for explosion projects. There is one outlier which was created solely for this installation with no future project in mind, being *The Vague Border at the Edge of Time/Space Project* (Figure 7). Unlike the other screens in the installation, *The Vague Border at the Edge of Time/Space Project* does not depict an event that moves
across the panels that make up the folding screen, but rather devotes its seven parts to its own image. Each panel consists of Cai’s body as projected onto the surface as a shadow cast from daylight. The placement of the body and the angle of projected sunlight affect the forms as well as the interpretation of the form through gunpowder drawing. This method acknowledges the impossibility to see an object or thing identically while the medium reflects the difficult nature to reduplicate exact images.

As the title suggests, borders, time, and space is a central focus for Cai, rather than the objects’ materiality. While this does not depict a future explosion project, it is still very much concerned with the object as subordinate to time and process. As part of *Primeval Fireball: The Project for Projects, The Vague Border at the Edge of Time/Space Project* acts as a strand which stitches all the folding screens together. *The Vague Border at the Edge of Time/Space Project* is a statement of the issues at stake in the other projects—the fluidity of spatial borders, the impermanence of what is thought of as fixed, showing that there is no true self-containment through the projection of the body onto the surface as well as the enforcement time has on materials and the manifestation of images on it. Gunpowder drawings and their images within are reliant on time and the process of the medium and move towards other manifestations. Each folding screen in *Primeval Fireball: The Project for Projects* as well as other preparatory gunpowder drawings in the *Series for Extraterrestrials* is an object mediated by process and time.

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30 This brings to mind the experiments of French Impressionists, working at different times of day to depict the same image, such as Claude Monet’s *Haystacks*. In addition, the projection of a shadow and its implications will be explored in further depth during chapter two.
Cai develops ideas through gunpowder drawings for other projects besides explosion events in which the realization permutes from first conception. *Pine Forest and Wolf: Experimental Drawing for the Deutsche Guggenheim* (Figure 8) is one such example. The gunpowder drawing, produced in 2005 might be explored as a precursor to his exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim in 2006. In *Pine Forest and Wolf*, four panels present a scene of wolves running through a forest. Even though pine trees flank the centralized wolf, the highly contoured nature of the trees dominates over the subtle, dusted forms of the wolves (if one looks closely, there are fainter forms of wolves besides the most clear wolf in the middle of the composition). Areas depicting tufts of pine needles in turn express the explosive medium of gunpowder itself as the form evokes an every-which-way movement. Because of an all-over use of gunpowder, the composition is evocative of crowdedness, bursting with movement in which the animal is engulfed.

The exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim appears to spring forth from the agitated connotations of *Pine Forest and Wolf*, in particular, the 2006 installation *Head On* (Figure 9) and the 2006 gunpowder drawing *Vortex* (Figure 10). *Head On* features 99 life-sized wolves, suspended and arranged in various stages of leaping in an arc that ends with collision into a glass wall. In response to the geo-political space of the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, the glass wall is the height and thickness of the Berlin Wall. The wolves as a pack represent collectivity as they gain momentum yet unexpectedly run towards an invisible barrier—collectivity does not mean security, but rather, causes

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31 Cai completed many experimental gunpowder drawings for the Deutsche Guggenheim, six in all. Each experiment shares the commonality of the wolf as the main iconographic interest.
individual blindness. As the wolves collide into the wall, they tumble and crash to the ground. The pack of wolves, instead of offering safety, exudes chaos through their uncomfortable close proximity to one another and is overwhelmed by the structured wall. There is a visual connection between *Pine Forest and Wolf* and *Head On* with both including wolf protagonists and their helplessness, yet permutes in how to present the theme within the move from page to installation.

Cai’s ability to capture claustrophobia and agitation from gunpowder drawing to installation (even though some iconography shifts) can, in an updated way, bring the principles of Chinese handscrolls into three-dimensional space. Moving from page into space, one is given traces of previous manifestations. Instead of offering an exact reproduction, Cai allows intangibles to be connecting threads. The sense of vulnerability is evident in *Pine Forest and Wolf* on page as the two wolves appear secondarily to the overwhelming forest. In *Head On*, unfolding before the viewer is the unexpected susceptibility of the wolves as they begin their confident and strong leap forward, only to meet a solid wall. By privileging sense and not a stringent replication, Cai accepts the changes that occur between his ideas and the physical manifestations of them. Cai does not need the realization of events or perfectly executed drawings or events because it is not true to his attitude about art and materiality. In his attitude towards the possibility of imperfection, Cai seems to uphold the idea that material manifestation is fluid and it is
the momentary that contains importance. This sentiment is reflected in a statement by Cai, “Art is not about what you say, it’s about these other things that you don’t say.”

To Cai, allowing for the existence of uncertainties is a primary way to express issues relevant to the world. There are many places for the uncertain to manifest; from conception to execution and experiment to reinterpretation. Process is the area where the slips occur. A degree of chance is present when using gunpowder as a medium as there is expected alterations when interpreting the same idea through different mediums. In this way, Cai is removing value associated with objects in finalized states.

Cai, Chance, and the Xiamen Dada

Chance that occurs within process is welcome to Cai. In this way, there appears to be a strong link between Cai and artists of the Xiamen Dada group, especially Huang Yong Ping. By making this connection, I can relate Cai with his country’s artistic lineage, but I would like to avoid pigeon-holing Cai’s art as simply a symptom of Chinese art development. I find that Cai’s art moves beyond Chinese-centric matters, which were of concern by the Xiamen Dada group, by parsing out issues that contemporary art faces, transcendent of borders. Of course there are layers of significance related to his native China, the place in which he exhibits, and a larger realm of the universe. Even with influence under various socio-political contexts, something that follows Cai is the same avoidance of heralding a finalized commodity. The methods he uses to work against

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33 What is also of interest is the significance of projects that have not been realized. Cai has discussed the unique importance that is held within events that are not enacted or events that are not executed as the original conception.
The commoditization of art works in line with the techniques employed by artists of the Xiamen Dada group with Huang as a central, leading, figure.

The Xiamen Dada group was founded in the mid-1980s and subsequently named because the artists who comprised the group were from the town of Xiamen (also Huang Yong Ping’s hometown). The group is considered a subversive collective effort; its inaugural group event consisted of burning all the works they exhibited one month before on November 23, 1986. This event highlights the principle characteristics of Huang and the Xiamen Dada’s artwork, which centers around “dematerialization, emphasis on process, critique of the museum as institution, and attacks on conventional ideas through collective action.”

The interest of Huang and the Xiamen Dada also includes “emptiness, nothingness, and chance.” Huang worked with chance through the use of the roulette wheel, conceding personal choice to the instructions at random. The group’s interest in chance is part and parcel to its highlighting of process while striving for nonproductive-ness. Cai similarly focuses on process as a way to de-emphasize commodity. Cai’s reflection on object’s worth in a museum is subtly approached through exploration into process and chance.

There is a certain degree of indifference in Cai’s attitude towards his art throughout his processes. The root of this thought might be tied to his acceptance of

chance. Huang poses an interesting question regarding significance of intention and realization: “…is the ‘original’ intention more valuable, or is the reality that has constantly been changed but is finally realized more valuable? We must see them as being one and the same. I naturally hope that my intention can be realized, but I do not insist on it—this hope even diminishes, rather than increases, as the project evolves.”

Cai, even though he conceives an event, image, or project, embraces the faults that comes along with working in a volatile medium. He can control well the outcome of his gunpowder drawings (Cai addresses his own mastery of gunpowder when he worked in Japan), but his explosion projects prove trickier to realize. This acceptance of the “never constant, always changing” are the ways in which Cai understands the world.

Fluidity and Transcendence

Cai engages with a number of themes that he interprets as fluid. The constant exploration into what is impermanent, as rooted in Daoism and the concept of qi, fortifies non-productivity even when there is material ramification. Cai incorporates this spiritual thought into the very medium of his art; principally gunpowder as a way to use nature’s energy. Preparatory gunpowder drawings, whether for explosion projects, exhibitions, or installations, shift in function due to their connection to these other things. For explosion projects, preparatory gunpowder drawings are always subject to a time-based

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38 Art 21: Art in the twenty-first century.
procedure; process is privileged. As preparation, actualization, and disappearance collide, the drawing points outside of itself.

It is not what the object holds within itself that is of worth because static materiality is in question. Cai allows us to see his preparations and re-experience them through gunpowder markings that echo the drawing’s explosion. In this way, Cai’s methodology relates to literati handscroll painting, giving preference to activity over immobility. These tendencies exceed materiality through openness and their inextricable tie to process. Because of the incorporation of chance that is linked with process, Cai exhibits a casual attitude that allows slips between various realizations of conceptions. It is always through materials that we are guided towards process, off-centering our own notions of an object as entrapped by itself, transcending singularity and allowing a fluid working between many mediums.
CHAPTER TWO: STAGING

A certain degree of theatricality enters Cai’s art from production to installation and viewing. A good deal of his art hinges on visceral responses, whether it is the object’s response to its space or participant’s reaction to her/his surroundings. How things are arranged in space contributes to these responses. Cai concerns himself with the experience rather than object centrism (which poses a degree of irony as the object solicits feedback). As ideas of space as a stage and on-going production creep up in his art-making, it seems to be no surprise that Cai has been trained in theatre set design. With a background in stage design, graduating from the Shanghai Drama Institute, Cai has the skills to realistically render objects and presumably knows how to trick the audience’s eye. Stemming from this type of artistic training, Cai can choose when to reveal how things are produced and can decide when to portray something as faithfully as possible (although it seems to Cai process is more faithful to life than trompe l’oeil). By demystifying the object through exposure to process and staging, Cai can strip away the value placed on finalized forms themselves.

It is not only in revealing processes, but also in Cai’s willingness to re-use and re-contextualize his own artworks that he expresses his disregard for absoluteness, recycling former materials and structures for new works. The sustenance and building upon these pieces highlights Cai’s commitment to challenging finality. Like an on-going theatre experience, produced on different stages in various locations, Cai’s artwork exhibits pliability for adaptations. Cai stages the object to challenge preconceived ideas towards
it. Although Cai’s pieces tend to be rather grandiose in scale, they shy away from absolute finality, allowing themselves to be inscribed by space and time.

Cai’s installations are especially relevant when discussing staging and re-contextualization. In these pieces, Cai often uses Chinese stories and/or signifiers to reveal truths behind constructed objects and ideologies. Instead of sticking to cliché reasons for including Chinese symbols, he uses them in a universal sense. As Alexandra Munroe states:

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.40

The inclusion and use of traditional Chinese stories, forms, and beliefs is not and cannot be exactly as they were used in the past. Iconography may suggest an interest in these former uses, but it is expressed in a new way, through new mediums and new environments.41 In this sense, it is important not to ignore the relation between Cai and

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40 Ibid., 34.
41 See Erwin Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art,” in The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 220-235. Panofsky discusses three levels of interpretation; pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation. These levels concern themselves with pure forms, allegories and stories, and symbols, respectively. Panofsky uses the example of Medieval versus Renaissance reintegration of pagan stories (of ancient Greek and Roman time) into art to illustrate that disparity in periods must be understood in order to update the program of past themes. For Panofsky, Renaissance artists exceed Medieval artists in this reintegration due to interest in humanism during the time period. Therefore, it is the surrounding climate that changes the reintegration and in this aspect, there cannot be a renewal of the past. “They
his Chinese heritage. Cai looks to entice new perspective on traditional stories and symbols. It is necessary to view this thread in terms of how these connections support his quest to move beyond object-centric thinking. For Cai, materiality and forms as presented in the artwork are the catalyst to reveal process, allowing the object to transcend commoditization and debunking disillusioned thinking towards a thing’s value.

Unveiling the Stage

At once dramatically frozen and evocative of activity, *Inopportune: Stage Two* (Figure 11) suspends reality and allows for exploration into Cai’s use of traditional stories and iconography. This piece features nine life-sized tigers that are suspended at various heights, twisting as arrows pierce their bodies. The tigers express pain in their movement and facial expression; mouth wide and teeth bared as if wailing in agony. There is no sound, however, and the silence of what would be an unpleasant aural experience is solace that they are fabricated. The interplay of viewer emotion with sympathy for the installation’s iconographic program questions the use of “staging” the object and how it manipulates viewer perceptions.

The story behind *Inopportune: Stage Two* is based on a twelfth-century Chinese folktale about a hero named Wu Song who saves his village from a man-eating tiger.\(^42\) As Cai retells this traditional story, he permutes the original implications of the tale. What would usually extol Wu Song becomes a tragic event at the expense of the tiger. This reflects the nature of traditions passed down orally and illustrates how re-telling

\[^42\] Yun, “Catalogue,” 222.
creates disparity in versions depending on the choice of words and point-of-view. A prominent distinction between the tale and Cai’s telling of it is the use of multiple tiger forms for the story’s singular man-eating beast. Just as the scenes unfold in traditional Chinese handscrolls, Cai is using nine tigers to illicit the movement of one tiger in its various stages of anguish.

“Stage” appears to be an important motif in Inopportune: Stage Two (as well as in other pieces that do not include the term in its title). In addition to its implication as a numerical progression, the title addresses the space of a stage. This latter definition suggests a self-awareness that a stage is a place where a setting is used with specific intentions to impart onto the viewer. The absence of human representation as the perpetrator of the violent act implicates the viewer as the possible instigator. Cai challenges the viewer to be moved by the pain of the tiger rather than simply rejoice in its defeat, which would be the original response to Wu Song’s heroism. Even if unfamiliar to the folktale, the tiger may be considered a fearsome creature to most and would be uncomfortable in a confrontational situation with it. However, the reaction to be moved in sympathy with the tiger is a natural emotional inclination when confronted by its suffering.

Rather than relying on a viewer’s intrinsic knowledge of Inopportune: Stage Two’s back-story, Cai connects to human nature to highlight this point: we might rejoice or feel relief in defeating an enemy, but if shown the cost of our relief, we become uncomfortable again. It is about the re-positioning of an object (not object worth) to gain something more valuable in understanding regardless of cultural discrepancies. Cai’s
choice to use a Chinese folktale to illustrate his meaning comes from thoughtful considerations of a couple points. When deciding on what stories or symbols to include in his works, stemming from Eastern or Western culture, Cai himself states, “first is whether these things are able to give rise to a productive tension within contemporary culture; second is whether they can be converted into contemporary language.”

For Cai, there must be pertinent truths that can be updated within his choice stories and symbols. His up-to-date appropriation of the folktale between Wu Song and the man-eating tiger deals with post-9/11 society. Cai looks to de-center how one approaches violence as a mechanism of defense.

Media Staging

The use of tigers and other predatory animals become more prominent after the events on 9/11 as vehicles to allude to human nature. In Inopportune: Stage Two, his foregrounding the installation as a “stage” compounds with the solicited emotional response in what may be a critique of media and its manipulative powers. The way in which stories are presented to the public influence how the viewer perceives that particular subject. Cai’s piece reveals and critiques the one-dimensionality that media

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44 There have been essays written on Cai’s gunpowder medium as creation by destruction and as a way to express violence artistically. Cai never seems to take a stance on this subject, allowing many contradictions to spring forth from his oeuvre.
45 Yun, “Catalogue,” 222.
could present through ambiguity as to feel relief or agony in the tiger’s suffering. It is about looking upon events from a different angle. Cai achieves this de-centering as a result of his repositioning the story.

Revealing and Concealing

Cai tackles a major Chinese symbol in an installation that exposes the manipulations that are possible through staging a story or artwork. In opposition to a piece such as *Inopportune: Stage Two* in which forms (the tigers) are carefully crafted to resemble the animal in nature, *Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard* (Figure 12) hinges on unpolished depiction. In this piece, Cai does not hide his medium. He is not tricking the viewer into believing a scene is mirrored in front of them, but rather he is honest about its production and how the work is constructed in time. *Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard* for the 1999 Venice Biennale offers a look into the practice of making sculpture, which further asserts the non-static nature of things. This piece is not solely a way to expose process in terms of art-making, but it also functions to demystify deeply engrained thinking.

Cai bases the forms in *Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard* on a 1965 social-realist sculpture used to propagate ideals of Mao Zedong entitled *Rent Collection*

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46 See David Joselit, “Global Readymade: Image Explosion,” in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*, ed. Thomas Krens et al. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006) 50-60. Joselit also claims that Cai’s work mirrors that of the media, where the circulation of images can operate in a contradictory manner. In reference to media coverage of 9/11, Joselit cites Jacques Derrida’s term “autoimmunitary” as a way to explain how coverage of the same image-event can both terrorize and garner support for retaliation. “In other words, the aggressors and the victims in this attack made use of the same image-events: the former in order to terrify its opponents and rally its sympathizers, and the latter to claim moral high ground and consolidate support among its citizens and allies” (58).
Courtyard. The scenes that make up this piece depict peasants struggling against the ruling landlords prior to the revolution. In its 1965 realization, Rent Collection Courtyard appealed to the working class on the levels of theme—hardships at the hands of the elite—and medium—clay plaster. Multiple renditions of this piece were exhibited throughout China. Cai begins his installation of Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard from wooden and wire structures and over the course of its exhibition, sculptors re-create the known scenes. The sculptures are never fired or hardened. Instead, Cai intends Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard to be instruction on producing sculpture. Nothing is hidden or made glossy; it is raw and open and its construction allows the viewer to experience transformation that occurs when staging. Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard has been re-exhibited multiple times since its first enactment. While the premises are the same, no two exhibitions are the same. Sculptors always begin with wire forms, but spaces vary from place to place. This supports the idea that the formal qualities are not the most important aspect to this piece. It is the occurrence and what is revealed over time that takes precedence.

The Precarious Nature of the Object

In Inopportune: Stage Two, a tiger is the creature that suffers rather than dominates, arrived at from the positioning of the objects. In Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard, popularized communist propaganda is exposed in its re-exhibition as an

47 Much controversy resulted from Cai’s Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard. Although Cai won a prize from the Venice Biennale, the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (where the original Rent Collection Courtyard was produced) threatened a lawsuit against Cai.

48 My take on Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard is politically slanted. I observe that Cai, in revealing the way sculpture is made makes a statement on how Communist ideals are similarly constructed and presented to the audience in pointed ways.
instruction on the process of making sculpture. The use of installation space is important to acknowledge when considering how space can dictate an object’s meaning and the arbitrariness of assigning roles or behavioral labels to certain forms. Another piece in which challenges, as Cai puts it, “the fine line that defines the nature of an object,” is *Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki* (Figure 13). Rather than de-centering preconceived ideas towards a thing through a folktale or propaganda, Cai addresses the object as a material thing that is challenged depending on its form and context.

*Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki* features two objects that are plucked from their originally intended place and put into a space designated for art. There is interplay of stripping and adding through this act of staging. By taking something from its area of function and rendering it impractical nulls its use-function to enhance conceptual meaning. *Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki* is an imposing structure of rotted wood covered with broken white porcelain that recalls the water that engulfed the ship before its excavation. The imposing shipwreck has been quieted by time and decay. The porcelain spilling from the ship are defective statues of the Bodhisattva of mercy, Guanyin (a Buddhist deity). There is a small discrepancy that separates a deity from a mere statue—its space of display being one component of definition. The porcelain’s

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49 *Art 21: Art in the twenty-first century.*

50 See Joselit “Image Explosion: Global Readymade,” 50-60. Joselit discusses the term “cultural readymade” as an image that one would link to the artist’s heritage. When Marcel Duchamp inaugurated the readymade in *Fountain* (1917), he challenged the notion of what constitutes art as an everyday object is put into the gallery. Joselit believes that Cai’s use of the cultural readymade questions what it means to be Chinese in addition to implicating the speed of image dissemination through different temporalities. Figurines of Guanyin may be identified as a cultural readymade as it is a mass produced, commonplace object one might find in Chinese Buddhist households.

51 Yun, “Catalogue,” 214.
structural broken-ness, deformities, and positioning in a place outside of spiritual
connection alter its deification, yet the statue does not lose its substance as the
Bodhisattva of mercy entirely. As scattered on the ship, the wreckage is a thing of beauty
and not devastation, bringing rebirth to its being. Through displacement, Cai renews.
This sentiment highlights that it is not the object which is the valuable commodity, but
the way in which we experience it and the outer influences that impose itself onto the
object. Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki offers an exploration in space and object
subjectivity.

Obsolescence and Necessity

Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki is just one piece that is born from collaboration
between Cai and the residents of Iwaki, Japan. In his exhibition at Iwaki City Art
Museum in 1994, entitled Cai Guo-Qiang: From the Pan-Pacific, he begins what could
be seen as precursors to Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki (a later collaboration with the city).
For his 1994 exhibition, Cai takes his artwork’s reoccurring motif of the boat to highlight
possible discrepancies in its connotations. It de-centers what a person views as necessary
or obsolete, which is contingent on space and/or place. Part of the discrepancies that Cai
highlights deals with juxtaposition between contemporary times in Japan and China,
which aligns Cai with a thread of artists dealing with China’s economic development.

Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone) (Figure 14) was created
for Cai’s 1994 Iwaki exhibition. This piece showcases the form of the boat almost like a
pre-historic artifact, where its wooden skeleton echoes reassembled dinosaur bones.
Furthering ties with paleontology is photo documentation of the excavation site and those
working on it. The underlying theme of preservation and protection is about development; the disparity in what is considered to be a modern technology as opposed to an antiquated method. Such categorization depends on one’s point of view.

In *Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone)*, Cai draws on the discrepancy he finds between respective societal and economical transformations of Japan and China. Cai approaches the wooden boat as a symbol of distinction in how each country reacts to their rapid development; Japan in a smooth fashion and China in a jagged way. To come to this understanding, Cai observed a connection through the differences of the port cities of Iwaki, Japan and Quanzhou City, China. In Iwaki, the wooden boat was obsolete whereas his hometown’s (Quanzhou City) economy still relied on this type of vessel. This may underscore why Cai would choose to display these materials in a manner akin to museum artifacts. Simultaneously, the object is necessary and obsolete. The conflicting connotations of the wooden boat express a disparity in time. There is not a singular present whereby everything has the same meaning. There is disconnect between object, place, and time. Efforts to preserve the wooden boat stem

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53 Andrew Uroskie discusses at length the idea of a disparate present in relation to Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970). His essay explores the relation of Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* film to his land art of the same name in which creates a “stratigraphic temporality.” Uroskie says, “…we are invited to inhabit multiple ‘presents’ existing outside of any overarching chronology.” For me, the archeological implication in Cai’s *Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone)* connects with Smithson’s same impulse in *Spiral Jetty*. Both works include documentation of process and both works create a layering of past and present that suggests possibility of multiple meanings. See Andrew V. Uroskie, “La Jetée en Spirale: Robert Smithson’s Stratigraphic Cinema,” *Grey Room 19*, Spring 2005, 59-79.
from different desires; to conserve the past and to upkeep the present. While in Iwaki, the wooden boat may be a piece of past to preserve, but in Quanzhou City, preservation of the wooden boat is done to maintain livelihood.

Many Chinese contemporary artists dealing with China’s rapid development focus on the changes taking place on the mainland, but Cai approaches it outside of China. In this unique way of looking at progression, Cai uses juxtaposition as a method to express the complications of this phenomena, one that highlights the growing divide of rich and poor, people and city. Documentation of the changing landscape of China is a way that some artists approach the subject of rapid development. Working within China, photographer Rong Rong captures demolition in Beijing in the 1990s as part of his project, *Untitled* (Figure 15), that juxtaposes ruins with items left behind by previous residents; mainly pinup posters and photos. The vagueness of place and identity calls to question what past really entails and addresses these demolished areas as spaces that are almost invisible in a fast-paced place like Beijing. These photos exploit the absence of the human subject and the growing divide between individuals and city. Cai approaches the subject of the divide between people and city through his works in Iwaki. Along with progression comes divide. In China, people without the means to update their fleet (in keeping with the theme of the wooden boat) eventually fall victim to the increased production new technology entices. As technologies become obsolete, so too do the people who use that technology or specialize in their making. While progress

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55 Notably, these works are around the same time as Rong Rong’s photography.
connotes a move forward, it also leaves behind those tied with former technologies.

Indeed, Cai had to locate people who specialized in maintenance of wooden boats in order to properly excavate and re-construct _Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone)_). Old is displaced by new and the constant renewal of some of Cai’s pieces reflect this intrinsic facet of progression. Cai carries on the cycle of “new” becoming “old” especially through contradictory tendencies to preserve and renew.

**Re-use and Re-contextualization**

As complicated by this supposed preservation of the object, these pieces dealing with wooden boats (_Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki, Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone), and San Jō Tower_) are actually about the connection between past and present and how to rethink this supposed disparity in time. His pieces stemming from Iwaki begin a long lineage of re-contextualization and re-appropriation of materials to morph into later installations. The constant updating and re-contextualization of Cai’s artworks reference pliability as situated in space and time, which allows subtle shifts in meaning and makes ties that increasingly knot up over top of one another. Even something that seems concrete is not and is constantly susceptible to space and time.

While being under the influence of external forces, layers of meaning build up over time while renewing materials and context. Notably, Cai uses the exterior pieces of wood from the boat in _Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone)_ to create another piece at the same Iwaki exhibition, _San Jō Tower_\(^56\) (Figure 16). This piece does

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\(^{56}\) As discussed in _Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe_ by Michelle Yun, _The Orient (San Jō Tower)_ is referred to as two separate pieces with differing titles. She explains that _San Jō Tower_ is configured by placing the installation’s three tiers on the ground, whereas
not preserve the wood as a maritime vessel, but it does allude to a nautical theme as a lighthouse of sorts. The structure consists of three towers that are to be thought of as emitting light to guide ships into port. As the towers are made from wood of a ship that it would supposedly protect, there is a permanent link between the structures and alludes to what can be seen and what is unseen through the function of the port tower. That San Jō Tower’s wood came from a buried structure and a forgotten technology linked with something that continues to serve ports as a steering light seems to offer a another instance of layering time, tying past and present together.

Cai deliberately reuses the structure of San Jō Tower in another configuration entitled The Orient (San Jō Tower) (Figure 17). This latter variation was originally exhibited in Tokyo’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 1995. Instead of each wooden tower being placed on the ground, Cai stacks the three to make a singular, tall tower. To physically connect this piece to its space, seismographic meters were attached to each side of the structure to measure Tokyo’s seismic vibrations. Through this gesture of connection, Cai wants to highlight movement. The tower is tied to the ground, but the ground itself is not stationary as the seismographic documentation evidences. The vibrations transfer to the “solid” structure, reiterating that objects, regardless of how imposing, are not as permanent as we perceive them to be. Already the piece San Jō Tower, has morphed into The Orient (San Jō Tower), and the permutations do not end

The Orient (San Jō Tower) has the tiers stacked on top of each other. In the archival images on the official website for Cai Guo-Qiang, the two pieces are under the same name. I will refer to the pieces by Yun’s differing titles to avoid confusion as I discuss both configurations. See Yun, “Catalogue,” 194.
there. Cai will again reuse the formal structure of these two towers towards another piece: *The Dragon Has Arrived!* (Figure 18).

In *The Dragon Has Arrived!*, Cai makes use of the tower structure and hangs it from the ceiling to transform into a rocket. Emitting out the bottom of the rocket are flags of the People’s Republic of China (PROC) as flames enhanced by fans and lights to signal its liftoff. With these additive elements, the structure morphs to yet another space. This configuration was first displayed at the 1997 Venice Biennale. Making a jump from Japan-oriented implications to Chinese symbolism further Cai’s casual attitude towards object solidification in that he resists it.\(^{58}\)

*Random Relativity*

*The Dragon Has Arrived!* reappears a few years later in 2001 as part of *An Arbitrary History: River* (Figure 19). Rather than altering its physical appearance, Cai is broaching another way of re-contextualizing his pieces. In addition to *The Dragon Has Arrived!*, Cai incorporates nine other previously exhibited pieces as part of *An Arbitrary History: River*. He constructs a river that snakes throughout the exhibition space with his selected objects hanging from the ceiling. Just like with much of Cai’s art, especially his gunpowder drawings, there appears to be a controlled randomness to the installation. Visitors are invited to sit in wooden boats to navigate their way along the river, going any

\(^{58}\) It seems fitting that pieces stemming from Iwaki return to reference China’s rapid development. As discussed through *Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone)* in its original exhibition in Iwaki, Cai consistently thinks about China and its economic surge. *The Dragon Has Arrived!*, which takes old, rotting wood from an excavated boat from Japan and is renewed by the Chinese flags, fans, and lights, might foreshadow (over 10 years in advance), China’s economic rise over Japan.
direction they please. There are no set rules, but they are guided by parameters set by the artists.

*An Arbitrary History: River* is a play on a timeline. Cai’s timeline highlights the fluidity of things, such as dates or objects, that are perceived as set. The snaking form of the river formally attests to the “arbitrary” association this installation carries. There is rarely a straight line that can delineate events. Most everything is muddled and relations between things run back and forth. Neither is there a clear-cut relation amongst the artworks Cai has chosen from his *oeuvre*. The pieces that hang above the river are dated from 1992-1999, but they are not positioned according to their produced date. Rather, the pieces showcase reoccurring themes. It seems extremely fitting that *The Dragon Has Arrived!* appears in *An Arbitrary History: River*, the reason being that its history embodies the relatedness of a timeline while also characterizing the randomness of its path.

Over the eight years from 1994-2001, Cai has not abandoned the pieces of wood originating in Japan as a very site-specific work in Iwaki to its configuration as a rocket of Chinese power. It is anything but a static object. What began as wood from an excavated boat conforms and morphs into art that sustains relations that perhaps could not be mapped in any other manner. Cai’s ongoing re-contextualization of these pieces exhibit his peripatetic conception of objectivity and his ability to highlight and forge ties in a number of contexts.

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Exposing Critique of Consumerism

Interestingly, among the pieces in *An Arbitrary History: River is The Age of Not Believing in God* (Figure 20) which features Cai’s critique of contemporary society and consumerism. Wooden figures of Guanyin, Jesus, and other religious symbolism, are pierced with arrows. The resulting forms look like burrs one may find in nature, emphasizing Cai’s tendency to pierce things with arrows (as seen in *Inopportune: Stage Two* among others). Not only does this piece stand in as his example of his reoccurring theme of arrows sticking out of objects, but it also points to a theme that is of interest to Cai. The attack on the figures comments on how things increasingly displace religion, one component being a preoccupation with materialism.\(^{60}\) That *The Age of Not Believing in God* is situated in *An Arbitrary History: River* suggests that the issue of consumerism and consumption is one that Cai considers as relevant to more than just one piece of his oeuvre.

In Cai’s decision to de-center viewpoints and re-contextualize objects, there is an undertone that questions the power of an object as a commodity. He consistently creates contingencies that set up oppositions. Clearly, his art harnesses power to draw attention to relations between unseen things despite of its substantial being. Seen and unseen is another theme which Cai broaches to enforce his interest in the fluidity of just about everything.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.
Questioning the Real

While Cai explores how to make structures into something that is actually fluid through re-contextualization, he also takes interest in forms that reflect malleability and non-objectivity, such as clouds and shadows. Clouds act as an ephemeral substance that contains fanciful and malicious connotations as expressed through his *The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century* (Figure 21). Of course, clouds that form in the aftermath of his explosion projects also contribute to this idea of conflating celebration with devastation. In his gestures, Cai makes a mark that dissipates in time, challenging how one remembers in addition to how something so intangible taps into deeply engrained memories. Shadows, on the other hand, create a dialogue between object and its projected shape. While the shadow itself is not the object, it is an illusory vision of the thing. Through using shadow as part of gunpowder drawings, like in *Ninety-Nine Horses* (Figure 22), Cai asks if the shadow is as real as the gunpowder markings or are the gunpowder markings merely shadows of the un-ignited gunpowder? Clouds and shadows offer a gateway to explore how non-permanent images have lasting effects as a challenge to the enduring object.

Cai challenges the form of the mushroom cloud in *The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century*. In this piece, his first project after his move to the United States in residency at the P.S.1 Studio Program, Cai detonates hand-held tubes of gunpowder that create a mushroom cloud at various locations including a backdrop of Manhattan’s skyline, Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Nevada Test Site, and
Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* (1969-1970). Each site of detonation carries their own interesting connotations, but it is the form and substance of Cai’s mushroom cloud that speaks to his artistic concerns, one being the re-inscription of images to challenge preconceived notions.

The interchangeability of nature with man-made weaponry, or in other words, fanciful beauty with threatening destruction, is especially framed in an image of Cai detonating a mushroom cloud in front of Manhattan’s skyline for *The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century* (1996). At first glance, it is difficult to ascertain which forms are the natural clouds and which form is the cloud Cai produces. Once located, the mushroom cloud is a threatening presence, but also seems an organic part of the sky-scape. Given the ambiguity of meaning, it seems fitting that the form would mutate and dissipate quickly. This brevity challenges remembrance of significant, culturally marking event of dropping the atom bomb that remains a scar on collective memory, especially in light of the project’s enactment at the Nevada Test Site. Again, Cai dances the line of which defines the image, as exposed in *Inopportune: Stage Two, Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki*, and *Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone)*. The form of the mushroom cloud flits between ominous and destructive to natural and common-place—produced through an explosive device, blending into the sky.

The interest in clouds and what mutates and moves as well as the confusion of natural and produced carries into Cai’s use of shadows in his art. In Cai’s gunpowder drawings, forms created in that manner often bear a shadowy appearance. The use of

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61 Yun, “Catalogue,” 156.
shadow in his *Ninety-Nine Horses* gunpowder drawing installation in 2011 capitalizes on this similarity. Forms of horses are ignited onto the surface of the gunpowder drawing. After its completion, Cai installs the drawing along with small, golden horses that are hung in front of the piece. The lighting causes the golden horses to project their shadow onto the same surface as the gunpowder images. The resemblance in appearance is striking. The cast shadows act as horses further in distance, which is ironic due to the golden horses being physically in front of the drawing.

In reference to the detached nature of the golden horses becoming part of the gunpowder drawing through its projected shadow, Cai evokes Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” in as much as the shadows are illusory and not actual. “Allegory of the Cave” discusses mythology and truth through prisoners that are chained in a cave, forward-facing, with a fire behind them. On the wall in front of them, they see shadows that are projected from what is behind them, yet the prisoners believe that what they see is real, only because they do not know the truth. If one turns towards the light, they will become blinded after being in darkness for so long and it would be a long process to uncovering truth. And if that person were to return to the cave and tell other prisoners what she/he saw, the darkness again would be blinding, therefore undermining the validity of the truth-bearing person as it would be assumed her/his eyes were taken away.  

62 Unique from Plato’s allegory, the viewer (or prisoner, in Platonic terms) can observe both the thing and the non-thing without breaking from their chains and turning to face an

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impossibly bright light. Viewers are given the distinction. Are the shadows on the surface real, are the golden horses real, are the gunpowder markings real, or all three? Or nothing? In light of the “Allegory of the Cave,” everything is thrown into question. This seems to perfectly punctuate the suspicion Cai has for a commoditized object, especially in reference to art.

The motive of Cai to expose the fluidity of stories and objects based on positioning is an attempt at gathering what truth lies in society today. Questioning the object of art derives from the work’s ability to de-center one’s viewpoint on traditional tales as well as taking a structure that might be seen as final and re-using its materials for another purpose. These tendencies stem from Cai’s background in set design and his thinking about what one sees from a stage in addition to the ability of place and time to affect an object. His interest in change is furthered by his use of certain forms that naturally shift. Forms, like mushroom clouds, might cause confusion as to what is produced and what is natural, which is a characteristic of the shadow also. In the shadow, Cai questions the real. This happens through an ambiguous relation between viewer, the thing and its shadow, and a surface. Questioning what is real while working in material mediums is a meandering thread that underlies Cai’s oeuvre.
CHAPTER THREE: MEMORIES AND MUTATIONS

“Life is transient and fragile, yet memories, as simple as they are beautiful, continue to linger.”63
-Cai Guo-Qiang

In this chapter, I will explore the interplay of memory and process as manifest in the trace in Cai’s pieces. The trace is a physical marking that encompasses more meaning than its intrinsic value as an image on a page, or in Cai’s instance, the trace also refers to a projected image and woven image. This conception of the trace reflects memory in that the mind records a moment, but it is not the original inscription that is most valuable. Cai uses the trace through physical markings and images as a stand-in for memory. Artworks for Cai’s 2009-2010 exhibition, Fallen Blossoms, operate with each other in the layering between fading, alteration, and re-solidification of memory. 64 Through these works, there is a trace operating at a tangible level as well as intangibly in its reinforcement of that which is outside of the object. This intertwining of inside and outside presents itself with memory as past and present. In the interdependency and oppositions held between the works of Fallen Blossoms, the trace emerges as an essential component in Cai’s artworks ability to move beyond an object-centered piece in critique of a consumptive finality.

Within Fallen Blossoms, I am able to discuss Cai’s gunpowder drawings, explosion projects, and installations in their commonalities and peculiarities. These

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64 Fallen Blossoms is collaborative between the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) and the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM), exhibiting from December 2009 to March 2010.
differing modes of art all demonstrate memory as they work together as well as in their own right. From here, I will probe further into the trace as an essential component due to memory’s distortion over time. Process, and Cai’s willingness to explicate his process of making, illuminates time as an issue to consider, especially as it works with memory. In placing importance on concepts of the trace, memory, and time, Cai is operating against the notion of completion.

Interplay of Creation and Erasure

Cai’s work in *Fallen Blossoms* addresses the multifaceted nature of recollection, from the process of making memory to the deterioration of memory over time. The inspiration for this exhibition comes from accounts of friendship between Marion Boulton Stroud of the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) and the late Anne d’Harnoncourt of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). Each piece on display at the FWM has particular roots in recounted stories from Stroud about her friendship with d’Harnoncourt. Within *Fallen Blossoms*, Cai uses the specificity of the exhibition to comment in a larger context; the fluidity and consumption of the object.

Cai foregrounds his intention of subverting a final object by working within the paradox of creation and erasure (a different reading from the commonly noted creation by destruction). In doing so, Cai leaves his work in a space that is subject to time, yet somehow subversive of concrete manifestation. *Time Scroll* (Figure 23) is exemplary of

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65 Miwon Kwon adeptly observes that although Cai’s medium of gunpowder connotes an explosion or wartime destruction, nothing is ever destroyed. I would like to avoid confusion of the paradox of creation by destruction by emphasizing erasure—something has been produced which now is exposed to possible negation. Creation by destruction, on the other hand, typically refers to Cai’s use of gunpowder, traditionally a destructive medium, to produce his works of art. See Kwon, “The Art of Expenditure,” 67
this tendency, especially with consideration of one of its *Fallen Blossoms* exhibiting counterparts, *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle* (Figure 24).

*Time Scroll* displays deterioration on a physical level as the markings of its gunpowder drawing is submerged in water. The markings seared onto the surface are situated as a riverbed in the constructed river with the gently coursing water altering the images over time. The gunpowder drawing, already a description of time (as explained in chapter one), becomes traces that attest to time’s passing. These distorted traces of *Time Scroll* are enforced in a manner through linear time; linear time referring to the piece’s starting point from the beginning of its exhibition to the ending date. In this act of creation followed by erasure, Cai is able to navigate a space of seeming negation.

Reinforcing the paradoxical space of *Time Scroll* is *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*. In this piece, traditional weavers from the Tujia clan in China make tapestries based on significant events in Stroud’s and d’Harnoncourt’s lives. The foil to *Time Scroll*’s emphasis on erasure is in this piece’s insistence on creation. The artists in residence weave everyday throughout the exhibition, the act of which is punctuated by the title of *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*. This title refers to a Chinese phrase, “ri yue ru suo,” meaning, “The sun and the moon move like weaving shuttle.”66 This reference highlights the act of making, especially weaving’s repetitive act. In addition, this phrase emphasizes time in its allusion to passing days. The act of creation and time together brings its own complications to memory. Insisting on repetitive creation in this manner ultimately leads to an alteration of memory.

Issues of Recollection

More than a physical exploration into creation and erasure, Cai laces memory in the traces of his work. Memory functions as the intangible intersection of his artistic paradox—the intangible of greater importance. Cai looks to deemphasize an art object and therefore its consumptive value in this practice. In *Time Scroll* and its process, multiple issues with recollection are explicit which also holds true in *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle* and *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project (Video Installation)* (Figure 25). At work is the idea that memory can never be a pure remembrance in the first place as well as its subjectivity to time.

The deterioration of memory is explicit in *Time Scroll’s* process. In addressing memory, the visible washing away of marks echoes the deterioration of one’s ability to recollect. Memory, too, fades over time. In reaching its end, *Time Scroll* illustrates the confusion of memory through time’s passage. Memory (as interpreted from Stroud’s recollection—already imperfect) is seared into the surface as the gunpowder physically burns. What comes after, in *Time Scroll*, is an attempt at erasing what has been marked. By submerging the drawing in water, Cai allows for the removal of the mark and in turn, memory. However, it seems impossible to wash away these marks fully, which may be the key to this piece. The unlikelihood of complete erasure refers to the trace always present regardless of the alteration undergone from the original occurrence.

Discrepancies that arise through linguistic translations as well as artistic translation do not mar the past; instead it imbues more significance to it. Although the object, in the same manner as writing, assumes the absent and therefore is always in the
past, the object can be located in the present. “…The assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning—or of force—to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others.” The trace is a remaining part of the past that is full of potential due to alterations and the ability to be updated, just like memory, to the place it is now operates.

In *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*, Cai enforces already amended remembrance. Within two translations—from the mouth of the originator (Stroud) into the weavers’ native language and finally into the weavings—memory alters. The weavers work solely from oral translations with no visual references. This allows the artists to imagine their own memory, or as Cai articulates, an “alternate memory.” In some of these memories, d’Harnoncourt and Stroud are depicted in China, as the weavers add their own nationalistic imaginary to the account of Stroud’s memories. Through these interpretations, the weaver her/himself increases significance to the original recollection. The trace of memory in what Stroud remembers to what the weavers conceive is one way of depicting how the trace operates allowing for the proliferation of meaning.

Translation of memory does not mean that the new inscription cancels out the occurrence’s former meaning, however. Rather, it operates in a way that encompasses even more significance. The slippage which happens between the event, memory, and

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68 Cai Guo-Qiang, “Plates and Artist Statements,” 141.
translation of each work holds more possibility, “inscribing it and exceeding it without return.” A trace, as in *Time Scroll* and *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle* “is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element.”

This points to the fluidity of the signifier as it is not a static reference to the signified. The intended moment of depiction is not held to be superior to the form that it manifests artistically.

Even beyond linguistic and artistic translations lies the issue that a memory is not the actual occurrence. In *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*, alteration that occurs over time and in interpretation becomes the construction of the depicted memory. The remembrance retains traces of the event, but the trace refers to not only the original occurrence but also its past and future, and even the imaginary.

**Time: The Ultimate Influence**

*Fallen Blossoms* contains two long-term pieces that are exposed to physical change over the period of their exhibition, *Time Scroll* and *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*. These two works rely as much on time as they do on their physicality, evidenced by their respective titles. Because Cai emphasizes time, it affects *Time Scroll* and *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*’s outcome, thereby becoming dominant over the objects. In *Time Scroll*, instead of preserving his gunpowder drawing as originally rendered on-site at the FWM, Cai permits its subjectivity to water, aware of the erosion caused by soaking the burnt paper in water. By choosing to employ artists-in-residence to weave

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70 Ibid., 13.
tapestries over the course of the exhibition for *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*, Cai is explicating the change undergone from individual threads into woven cloth. In these ways, time is the perpetrator of the object.

In many aspects, time is the ultimate influence, which Cai illustrates in *Fallen Blossoms* particularly. Time seems to be a telling theme in the content of Cai’s work, especially in light of the role of the global artist. Humans inhabit time, which means it is the time in which one lives that influences mankind socially, politically, and culturally. The morbid reality is that time triumphs over humans and is the overwhelming force that surges forward (or circulates further), which is something that affects every person despite geographical borders. Though *Fallen Blossoms* can be approached as a celebration of life and an exploration into the intricacies that make up memory, there is also a subtle undertone of death. Because of time’s universality, Cai uses it as a way to delve deeply into conceptions of objects (in which Cai appears to challenge the monetary value assigned to objects). With time, Cai also can push classical discourse of his work further while also addressing the contradictions that his works often embody, namely creation by destruction. The contradiction that lies within time is the notions of linear and cyclical time. Cai challenges the viewer to see beyond the initial contradiction in *Fallen Blossoms* by showing how these two ideas of time work together.

*Cyclical and Linear Time*

Cai’s work references cyclical and linear time in process as seen in *Time Scroll* and *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*. A constant interplay between these two concepts of time occurs in *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project* (Figure 26), the opening event of
his Philadelphia exhibition. In *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project (Video Installation)*, Cai offers a video record of the explosion he set up on the façade of the PMA. Manipulation is prevalent in the video representation of the event. The explosion takes the form of a flower blossom, which replays through film in slow motion. A recording of Stroud’s voice recites memories of d’Harnoncourt as the audio track for the video, which is muddled within the gallery space. Cai’s presentation of the explosion project in this manner generates tension between cyclical and linear time, which creates a space that transcends the quantifiable.

The choice to slow down time presents a false representation of the actual explosion event. The flower form slowly lights up, or blossoms, before the image disappears and falls away. The viewer is offered an opportunity to see each part of an explosion which would end in 60 seconds if it were the original event. Time is part of the medium that Cai utilizes. Here, Cai’s reference to a fallen blossom recalls the Chinese saying, “hua kai hua luo” (“flower blossoms, flower falls”). Not only does this recall fleeting time, but it also refers to the cycle of life. In some ways, the nature of an explosion contradicts the idea of circular time as it creates a momentary mark. What makes the reliving, and living on, possible for an explosion project is the use of video recording. In this sense, Cai’s explosion project works with the “loop” as it “simultaneously exposes (through negation of linearity) and traps (through its repetition)

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71 Cai Guo-Qiang, “Plates and Artist Statements,” 91. Cai refers to this sound distortion caused by the drastic slowing of the explosion’s video. This phenomenon enhanced within the gallery space influences my reading of *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project* as manipulated sound.

72 Cai Guo-Qiang: *Fallen Blossoms*, exhibition brochure.
an unrealised utopian possibility…”73 The elongation of the explosion exploits this impossible view of it as well as the contradiction of repeating a momentary occurrence. Just as the cyclical nature of time appears in Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle, so too does it appear in his explosion project in concept and in its video.

Time in its dual and contradictory conception collide to enhance the experience of Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project (Video Installation). This collision works to subvert categorization through refusing to conform into a time. Again, memory appears as an integral facet to Cai’s work in its tendency to be distorted, yet preserving a mark that refers to the occurrence.

What then can be made of the actual event, Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project? This explosion marks the beginning of Cai’s exhibition in Philadelphia. Although short in its duration, the form of the flower on the façade of the PMA was ignited at the center and spread to its outer petals. In addition to referencing the life cycle, this piece may encapsulate Fallen Blossoms exhibition and Cai’s working process.

Very literally, Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project as situated on the façade of the PMA facing a road that serves as a central drive in Philadelphia, opens up to the city. From this starting point, Cai’s pieces open up to the public audience.74 In regards to the...

74 One may not help but imagine how Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project might have appeared to those unknowing of its planned occurrence beforehand. Cai, in reference to this piece states, “In contemporary media we often see explosions portrayed as acts of terrorism because they destroy structures of political or cultural significance. But at the same time, if it were not for this era, artists would also not be able to think of explosions as acts of beauty.” Cai Guo-Qiang, “Plates and Artist Statements,” 67. Explosions carry violent connotations due to media and a sort of collective memory. Instead of presenting an act that may be terrifying, Cai tries to mediate an explosion as a gift. Because
explosion project, one can view this without stepping foot into either the PMA or the FWM, but may be witnessed through a window or walking along a sidewalk. The short duration of this piece is the counterpart to Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project (Video Installation). These separate, yet tied together pieces are perhaps more closely related than other pieces in Fallen Blossoms and speak to the seemingly contradictory notions of time. Cyclical and linear time have cropped up in many places with relation to the pieces of Fallen Blossoms, but none so blaringly as in a temporary explosive moment which translates to a continuous and drawn out display of the same image.

The image of Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project repeats at the FWM site, creating an interesting tie between the collaborative institutions. Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project is Cai’s only piece original to the PMA site, yet it is rather ambiguous if it is its own piece or supposed to be tied together exclusively with the video installation at FWM. It is strongly implied that the two are hinging upon one another through the basis of imagery. However, although the video is a recording of the actual event, it is not the original occurrence, just as memories are not the original event which is recalled. Disparity between the explosion event and video installation is further highlighted with manipulations, such as the excessive slowing down of the explosion and adding the sound of Stroud’s voice. The image of the blossom on the façade of the PMA not only repeats in explosions do carry violent connotations, reactions to Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project may have been one of terror from the unknowing. Wang Hui notes the dropping of the atomic bomb in Japan and the attacks on 9/11 as the two major explosive moments that envelop Cai’s explosion events. See Wang Hui, “The Dialectics of Art and the Event,” in Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe, ed. Thomas Krens et al. (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008) 43.
the video installation, but also within *Time Scroll* as the concluding image. This image in *Time Scroll* is even less clear because of the medium of gunpowder on silk.

It is interesting that this first, public image is more and more privatized through its inclusion in the FWM pieces. The same movement from public to private is intrinsic to the nature of *Fallen Blossoms* as a specific memorial to d’Harnoncourt.

Private/Public, Specific/Global

Cai uses the trace in the works of *Fallen Blossoms* to occupy a space that flits between specificity and universality. With consideration of the inspiration for the pieces discussed thus far—a particular, individual, private interaction amongst friends—Cai uses memory and time to mediate the private to public. The transition from specific to global is shown in Cai’s practice of using previously displayed pieces as part of *Fallen Blossoms*.

An interesting aspect of the collaborative nature of *Fallen Blossoms* is that the pieces within the FWM are original to that site, while the pieces displayed in the PMA had been previously exhibited at other institutions. This choice of an integrated exhibition speaks to arbitrary value of objects as well as their ability to be re-contextualized in a way that adds more to their conceptual value.

For *Light Passage-Cai Guo-Qiang & Shiseido*, a piece of the same name consisting of four gunpowder drawings was made and originally exhibited in 2007 at Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo, Japan. Why might Cai consider this piece as congruent with

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75 I do not mean universality in an ideal sense, but as a term to describe similar tendencies or problems that crop up regardless of geographical space. There are always nuances that differentiate a grander occurrence due to specificities of place.
his pieces at the FWM? The hinge lies within the theme of time, although more eloquently described by the passage of light as pertaining to the four seasons.

*Light Passage* (figure 27) and *99 Boats* (figure 28) enforce the importance of time passing. These two pieces, which are displayed in the same gallery, juxtapose the cyclical aspect of time with linear movement. Each small, golden boat of *99 Boats* is hung in succession from the ceiling in a winding fashion, reminiscent of a stream. The first boat starts outside of the gallery and leads the viewer through the space containing *Light Passage* and out the other end. The movement through the gallery as enforced by the boats works against the motion implied by *Light Passage*.

*Light Passage* is a series of four gunpowder drawings depicting the four seasons. Entering with *99 Boats*, the drawings read from right to left while wrapping around the room. The first season is *Winter*, which leads to *Spring* on the other side of a doorway. These two pieces read together, like a painted hand scroll, as a diagonal line leads the viewer from the top right of *Winter* to the bottom left of *Spring*. Across from *Spring* is *Summer*. These three seasons all are placed on five to six similarly sized and stretched panels. However, when “ending” at *Autumn* (to the left of *Spring*), the scale is much larger and a frame does not stretch its two pieces. *Autumn* almost acts as a punctuation mark for the series. The choice of making this season larger than the other three seasons signals the end of *Light Passage*. To view the series one must navigate the room counterclockwise, but *99 Boats* interrupts this circular movement. Hanging overhead, this piece leads the viewer with the “flow” of the boats drifting out of the gallery.

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76 As exhibited in the PMA during *Cai Guo-Qiang: Fallen Blossoms*.
77 Can there be an end to the seasonal shifts, year after year?
Cai’s gunpowder drawings attest to the concept of memory. In their act of creation, the marks are scorched upon the surface. The artist sets up *Light Passage* so that the forms on the surface are reminiscent of worldly objects. In *Spring*, for instance, fish are visible in the grey dust from the gunpowder. In *Autumn*, Cai uses a burst of mustard color that one might associate with fall or forms evoking a bundle of fallen leaves. The lack of completely discernable shapes can also allude to the haziness of memory as time passes. In the absence of concrete images, *Light Passage* sparks the memory of the viewer who connects the forms to a worldly marker (like a leaf, perhaps, in the case of *Autumn*).

The inclusion of *Light Passage* and *99 Boats* in the *Fallen Blossoms* exhibition raises the issue of site-specificity. Although Cai was commissioned by The Fabric Workshop and Museum along with the Philadelphia Museum of Art, these two works exist autonomously outside of the particular exhibition.

This is not to say that the parameters of a particular place or institution no longer matter, because site-oriented art today still cannot be thought or executed without the contingencies of locational and institutional circumstances. But the primary site addressed by current manifestations of site specificity is not necessarily bound to, or determined by, these contingencies in the long run.\(^78\)

Seemingly, *Fallen Blossoms* looks to hinge on its affiliation with the institutional place. It is explicit that these pieces, although they work together, stand alone and remain works of art. The true site that Cai works within for this exhibition, transcends the physical place of the museum. The site that Cai is working in is located in the viewer’s mind, and more specifically, through his or her memory.

Light Passage and 99 Boats resonate with the pieces in the FWM. Memories of Time Scroll might be evoked from the implication of a river in 99 Boats and vice versa. In this sense, the individual experience becomes collective as each person partakes in remembrance. The memory of Time Scroll or Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle can be reminisced, but not fully or clearly remembered. While watching memories form in one piece, it deteriorates in the following moments. This discrepancy may serve to enforce the alteration performed in one’s mind on a memory. In unifying the two physical sites of Fallen Blossoms, Cai’s artwork may connect the different aspects of memory to the experience of the exhibit. This appeal to memory also renders the personal experience of Stroud’s act of remembering into a collective understanding of its complications.

Fallen Blossoms explores what is at once public and extremely personal. A lost friendship is put on display through Cai’s artistic licensure. Uncertainty runs throughout the exhibition because of translations of personal experience in addition to Cai’s choice mediums. A commonality in Stroud’s personal experience and Fallen Blossoms’ mediums is absence, but an absence that tries to be made completed through memory.

In Fallen Blossoms, there is nothing about the object of art that is certain, concrete, and absolute. Rather, Cai addresses the vulnerability of art, just as memories are precariously treasured. At the level of marks on a surface, Cai’s gunpowder pieces in Light Passage and Time Scroll reflect violence done to a tabula rasa. The explosive marking, whether resulting in the intended forms, irreversibly affects the core of each work. Meaning is inscribed by this volatile and uncertain means of marking.
In the same manner that markings are subject to change from conception to execution, *Time Scroll* and *Light Passage* displays that objects are fluid instead of fixed. *Time Scroll* exhibits this tendency by its submergence in water, while *Light Passage* allows for re-contextualization, which alters placement and therefore viewer reception, from its original site. *Light Passage* enters into dialogue within *Fallen Blossoms*, particularly carrying a great connection with *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project (video installation)*. Both of these pieces refer to cyclical movement and time. *Light Passage* reflects the four seasons as a constant birth, death, and rebirth. The video installation also captures the same cycle through the ignition of the explosive blossom, its depletion, and the loop of its footage. In both of these pieces, death is required and absence is unavoidable.

Necessary absence manifests physically and conceptually in *Fallen Blossoms*. Cai appears to embrace the idea that the art he produces will not last forever. This notion is particularly evident through the use of gunpowder which threatens the paper or silk on which it is placed.\(^7\) In *Time Scroll*, Cai stresses the tenacity of the surface further through its exposure to erosion. The object and exhibition is an experience of loss. His use of this medium and its delicate state after marking reflect life itself, where something is made more important in its impermanence. Value in this sense is indefinite and not monetary. What become most precious are memories.

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\(^7\) My consideration of this idea was sparked during a visit with curator Paola Morsiani in August 2010 to the Cleveland Museum of Art to see Cai’s *Pine Forest and Wolf*. Moyna Stanton, a conservator who works with the museum’s paper collection, was gracious enough to provide information regarding the delicacy with which Cai’s piece must be handled, only able to be exhibited three months at a time.
Memories are intrinsically imperfect, yet they are essential in trying to make complete that which is lost. *Fallen Blossoms* expertly explores this imperfection, not in a way that makes foolish fragmentary memory, but in a manner that brings infinite meaning to the imaginary involved in keeping the absent in the moment. *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project (video installation)* is an example of this attempt at reclaiming the absent. The explosion event itself is fleeting, but documentation and video attempt at saving the loss. However, the attempt at keeping the absent alive ultimately ends up being an imaginary because it offers an impossible view of the explosion with the addition of distorted spoken words and the slowing of the footage. Still, there is the inextricable tie between present memory and the lost time. Memory can only be had at the loss of time; the loss of the moment of occurrence. The urge to make whole prevails through recollection of the original event, yet it is fragmentarily filled through the imaginary. Completeness in this manner is actually incomplete and a recreation, but able to speak in the gaps between event and memory.

At the same time that it is clear there is no perfect recollection; there is also the reminder that there is no complete forgetfulness. Something always remains and will never turn into nothingness. Consider Chinese artist, Qiu Zhijie. Looking at his performance, *Grinding the Stele* (figure 29), can illuminate key issues with which Cai is concerned as well. Qiu’s performance broaches the idea of the deterioration of memory through a repetitious motion of grinding two gravestones together. He uses a gravestone from an American two-year-old girl who died in 1915 and against a stele of a person
from the Qing dynasty.\textsuperscript{80} Throughout the three weeks of this piece, Qiu takes ink rubbings of the inscription on each gravestone until the text is erased. The act of *Grinding the Stele* almost envelops the idea of *Time Scroll* and *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*. A repetitious motion, like weaving, results in an erasure, like washed marks.

Once again, erasure is complicated by the impossibility of ridding of the mark altogether. As death is part of both Cai’s and Qiu’s pieces, there is a similar lack of concern towards the permanence of objects. Even though this lackadaisical tendency is at work, both artists try to save the absent. In an indexical moment of mapping progress, Qiu makes ink rubbings periodically throughout the performance. The markings inevitably become more and more illegible as time passes, but there has always been, and will be, that presence that death cannot make absent. This draws parallels to Cai’s concern for a mark or memory that cannot fully disappear.

While Qiu somewhat engages and combines the ideas present in Cai’s work, Qiu’s performance has a more violent connotation. In encountering *Time Scroll*, the effect is calming as the water drifts over the scroll. Deterioration in this instance is mediated less by the human presence, rendering this soothing quality. This crucial differentiation between Cai and Qiu may be due in part to Cai’s inspiration for the Philadelphia exhibition, involved deeply with Stroud’s personal experience of friendship with d’Harnoncourt.

\textsuperscript{80} Britta Erikson, *On the Edge: Contemporary Artists Encounter the West* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004) 78.
Transformed Significance

Even though memories are very personal and try to recreate the emotions of the past, they are never-the-less mediated by the present. Because of this phenomenon, memories are subject to constant re-situation and re-contextualization. *Light Passage* and *99 Boats’* re-exhibition in Philadelphia supports the value of the present’s ability to offer new breath to past events. Cai’s allowance for such an intricate connection of these past two pieces in a newer, personalized setting not only explicates Cai’s interest as artist-curator⁸¹, but the fluidity of the object.

The object of art is receptive to time and place, which connects to events. Two types of events will be parsed out, singular events and transformative events. “Singular events occur at only one point in time and space…they enter into a plurality of contexts.”⁸² In regards to *Fallen Blossoms*, there are many singular events converging into this exhibition even though these events have their own, individual nature. We may consider each artwork’s production, each interaction between Stroud and d’Harnoncourt, talks between Cai and Stroud to be events in this sense. As soon as there is the

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⁸¹ Cai’s interest as artist and curator can be seen in his “Everything is Museum” series; DMoCA (Dragon Museum of Contemporary Art), UMoCA (Under Museum of Contemporary Art), BMoCA (Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art). Cai tries to decentralize generic MoMAs and MoCAs, which he finds are “detached from the public.” Reiko Tomii, “Catalogue,” in *Cai Guo Qiang: I Want to Believe*, Thomas Krens et al. (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008) 242. It is interesting that Cai works from within institutions as an artist, but is able to make his own comment by tying his works to the space he is occupying. For *Fallen Blossoms*, he creates the connection through the inclusion of new and used original works that together speak to the exhibition inextricably tied to the PMA and the FWM.

occurrence, the event contains the ability to operate outward from that point of origin. The trace allows for this outward movement to diverge into a variety of contexts.

With potential for infinite plurality, it is not as if Cai haphazardly throws together pieces to forge some unwilling connection of past and present. Instead, Cai thinks about context carefully. Time and place are important aspects that work in an object’s definition. Movement and the traversing of time is something that Cai explores in *Fallen Blossoms*, as seen through each piece of the exhibition. “[The] ever changing, never constant—these are the ideas in which to understand the world.” With this attitude, Cai appears to balk at considering his pieces complete, whole, and instantaneously valuable. As his art is always subject to revivification as a way of speaking truth, so too are they transformed in their openness to new events.

“The event marks the sudden transformation, turning, or new continuation of a predetermined route or accumulation process…An event forms only at a particular time, under particular circumstances, and with particular impulses.” This description by Wang Hui of what an event entails supports the significance of *Fallen Blossoms*: *Explosion Project* as the ultimate catalyst of *Fallen Blossoms* exhibition as a whole. The information Cai gathers, artists and workers Cai employs, previous artworks that Cai chooses are given new direction once the exhibition begins. Everything done to organize *Fallen Blossoms* hinges on the explosion event to stitch together the exhibition. This is especially evident in a lineage that I see with the video installations initial dependency on the inaugural explosion event, and the video’s tight association with *Light Passage*. This

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83 Ibid.
84 Wang, “The Dialectics of Art and the Event,” 42.
is not to undermine the past or history in which embeds everything, but to describe how something can be brought from its history into new light.

The past is prominent in *Fallen Blossoms* simply because of its subject matter, yet the present attempts at covering it up. In form and execution, *Time Scroll* displays that memories undergo mutations, but are never actually erased. In light of *Time Scroll* and *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*, an impossibility of complete erasure works with the unlikelihood of true reconstruction of memory in the first place. It may be helpful to think of Cai’s pieces in terms of a conceptual palimpsest, except that there is no true erasure. “This presentation, this fiction of an erasure, is like the theatrical staging of a death, where it is not the obliteration of that character or thing that is the aim, but rather that it is a means of gaining new knowledge about that character or thing which is (fictionally) killed or erased, and gaining new knowledge about the process of death or erasure itself.”

What one is left with is a deconstructed mark that remains as an imprint on Stroud as well as the viewer. The trace exists within time and is never static.

**Time and Memory: Non-Objects**

It has been an utmost concern to emphasize time interlacing with memory to speak of a trace present in the previously discussed pieces of *Fallen Blossoms*. The prominence of time and memory attests to Cai’s work functioning beyond a physical manifestation. These two concepts serve as the operation of the trace of which is not objective. “I have attempted to indicate a way out of the closure of this framework via

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the ‘trace,’ which is no more an effect than it has a cause, but which in and of itself, outside its text, is not sufficient to operate the necessary transgression.”86 As Derrida states, the trace alone cannot exist outside its text, yet in Cai’s pieces, it may operate with time and memory as freed from value tied with physicality. There is a quality that the trace retains to point towards an origin, yet its importance exceeds pinning a trace to its source.

Without a source that overrides all else, what trade commodity exists? Instead of deferring a produced artwork altogether, Cai works within artistic spaces which collect/consume products. Value in Cai’s art is much more enriching than a burned piece of paper which hangs on display. It is able to operate via the trace outside of its physical manifestation in its interlacing of memory and time. In Fallen Blossoms, Cai uses the discrepancies that arise within recollections and combines it to off-set his process of making art. Cai’s artwork engages with personal history while opening onto a post-structural problem set, which involves the proliferation of possibilities and meaning, never allowing an object’s completion.

86 Derrida, “Différence,” Margins of Philosophy, 12.
CONCLUSION: OBJECT SUBORDINATION AND ANTI-COMMODITY

Cai Guo-Qiang’s artworks subvert their own materiality whether by being evocative of process, seeking non-productivity, allowing re-contextualization, being submissive to place and time, and/or through expressing intangible phenomena. During exploration into how Cai’s pieces operate to question object solidity, he also addresses issues surrounding contemporary art and artists that deal with being globally engaged and nomadic. It is evident that Cai’s mediums and methodology reflect the elusiveness of his art and ambiguous categorization as a contemporary artist, imbuing process with more significance than any commoditized object.

Cai works within his Chinese cultural heritage while taking considerations into the site where he exhibits. I find that Cai does not show preference to being a “Chinese artist” first or an “international artist” first. He is more interested in often larger-than-life concepts that relate to present societal situations. The other-worldliness of the Project for Extraterrestrials series stakes claims into what it means to be an outsider. The consideration of alienation translates to what it means to be Chinese in international contexts and also addresses the variety of his audience. In Project for Extraterrestrials, a vital part of Cai’s working method is his use of preparatory gunpowder drawings. In employing gunpowder drawings as a way to map out and diagram explosion events, a tie is created between the multiple realizations that challenge function singularity.

Preparatory gunpowder drawings serve as precursors to other gunpowder drawings in addition to explosion events. From preparation drawing to exhibited drawing, there exists a trace that manifests through pictorial evocation rather than strict adherence
to the reproduction of forms. This lackadaisical approach to formal obedience hints at Cai’s care towards intangible things over object-centrism, something that is reiterated through *Fallen Blossoms*.

The ability to see how things play out is an inherent quality to many of Cai’s gunpowder drawings and installations. Gunpowder drawings in themselves are a description of process. The explosive and volatile means of production is reflected and reactivated by the markings on the surface. Like literati handscroll painting, this form of art highlights its own making, allowing the viewer to engage the scene as unfolding before her/him. The relation to an unfurling scene manifests as part of Cai’s installations as well. For installations such as *Inopportune: Stage Two* and *Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard*, Cai utilizes space as a stage to arrange forms to de-center preconceived ideas as well as to reveal constructed ideologies. The latter piece demonstrates the process of sculpting, literally transforming over the time of exhibition, and the former installation displays an unfolding story from an unconventional point of view. These works are not about self-sufficiency nor are they about the Chinese signifiers included in the installations. The stories and iconography rooted in Chinese culture are used because they are relevant to contemporary time, shaped by the time and place in which Cai situates them.

Showing deference to object subjectivity to space and time, Cai not only repositions stories, but he also completely re-utilizes structures to transform them into new pieces, under new circumstances. *San Jō Tower, The Orient (San Jō Tower)*, and *The Dragon Has Arrived!* are all fabricated of the same excavated wood that is first displayed
alongside Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone) in an exhibition that indicates the disparity in socio-economic “presents” between China and Japan. The forms of each subsequent piece mutate slightly in response to their site, creating a relationship with their context (sometimes through physical connection, ie. The Orient (San Jō Tower)). The re-use of The Dragon Has Arrived! within An Arbitrary History: River as a loose compilation of reoccurring tendencies in Cai’s oeuvre further support that the re-utilization of objects and by extension, the subordination of objects to time and space, are important when considering Cai’s work and contemporary art in general.

The reason, as it appears to be through Cai’s artwork, for object subordination is because objects are not real. Calling attention to this theory is the setup of natural and produced. In The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century, there is a questioning of what is natural versus what is man-made through cloud forms. The confusion incited because of this comparison complicates “reality.” Moreover, this concept is compounded by Ninety-Nine Horses, which draws on Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” to reveal fabrication. That shadows are projected onto the surface of a gunpowder drawing creates an illusion. The shadow is presented upon the surface as gunpowder marking burnt into the paper. It is evident; however, that the shadow is cast because the golden horses hang in front of the drawing, revoking what was previously read as an actual mark into the physical surface.

Memories further explore what is deemed as real. In Fallen Blossoms, Cai questions our very certainty of what is happening/has happened by parsing out the ways in which recollection naturally fade and deform over time. From interweaving creation
and erasure in *Time Scroll* to constructing alternate memories in *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*, Cai undermines reality. Time’s influence (both linear and cyclical conceptions of it) upon memory meddles with recollection. This is not to say that there is no worth to memory, because even if objects are not real and occurrences are not reality, there is important and precious healing in remembrance. Through all the shifts and changes done to what one recalls, there is a trace that is always tied to the original event. The alteration and proliferation of it can inscribe even more meaning to the fluid nature of memory.

To conclude, if objects are not real, commoditization of them are a futile process. I have attempted to explicate how Cai’s *oeuvre* demonstrates an anti-commodity approach, not by means of lavish expenditure as Miwon Kwon would have it, but in his methodology and attitude towards his artworks. Rather than Cai having his goal be a final product, what is transformative, fluid, and intangible is much richer to explore and truer to life. The thread that runs in and out of each chapter and the chosen artworks therein is their susceptibility to time and space. This vulnerability is what allows pieces to re-route energy, making it about the flow of one thing to another, which perhaps accounts for the role of the contemporary artist in constantly shifting global contexts.
Figure 1: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9*, 1990. Gunpowder and ink on paper, 24-page folding album, 33.5 x 320 cm opened. Private collection. Photo Copyright © André Morin.


Figure 4: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, 1990. Gunpowder and ink on paper, 24-page folding album. 33.5 x 320 cm opened. Private Collection, New York. Photo from Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Photo Copyright © André Morin.
Figure 5: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, 1993. Explosion project, Jiayuguan, China, 15 minutes. Photo by Masanobu Moriyama courtesy of Cai Studio on caiguoqiang.com.

Figure 7: Cai Guo-Qiang, *The Vague Border at the Edge of Time/Space Project*, 1991. Gunpowder on hemp paper, backed on wood as seven-panel folding screen. 200 x 595 cm overall. P3 art and environment, Tokyo, Japan. Photo courtesy of Foundation Cartier pour l’art contemporain on caiguoqiang.com

Figure 8: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Pine Forest and Wolf: Drawing Experiment for Deutsche Guggenheim*, 2005. Gunpowder on paper, mounted on wood as four-panel screen. 230 x 308 cm overall. The Cleveland Museum of Art, photo Copyright © The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Figure 10: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Vortex*, 2006. Gunpowder on paper. 400 x 900 cm. Deutsche Guggenheim. Photo by Hiro Ihara and Mathias Schormann on caiguoqiang.com.


Figure 14: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Kaikō—The Keel (Returning Light—The Dragon Bone)*, 1994. Excavated wooden boat. Boat 500 x 550 x 1,350 cm. City of Iwaki.
Figure 15: Rong Rong, *Untitled*, 1996-97. One of three black and white photographs. 50.8 x 60.9 cm. Collection of the artist.


Figure 18: Cai Guo-Qiang, *The Dragon Has Arrived!*, 1997. Salvaged wood, Chinese flags, electric fan, lights. 6.5 x 6.5 x 25.75 ft. The Dakis Joannou Collection, Athens.

Figure 20: Cai Guo-Qiang, *The Age of Not Believing in God*, 1999. Wooden sculptures and arrows. Sculptures varying from 80 to 130 cm in height, Museum Ludwig Köln.
Figure 21: Cai Guo-Qiang: *The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century*. Explosion event, gunpowder and cardboard tubes, duration 1 sec., 1996. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy of Cai Studio.

Figure 23: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Time Scroll*, 2009-10. Stainless steel panels, water pumps, plastic hose, gunpowder and silk charmeuse fabric, audio of Marion Boulton Stroud’s narration and sound system, and video of gunpowder drawing process. River approximately 132’10” x 4’11”. Collection of the artist. Photo by I-Hua Lee, courtesy of Cai Studio.

Figure 24: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Time Flies Like A Weaving Shuttle*, 2009-10. 20 tapestries weaved on site by artisan weavers in residence: Li Chengfeng, Li Quimei, Liang Aixiu, Ye Jumei, five wooden weaving looms, wool yarn, audio and sound system, and wall text, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Photo by Juan Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of The Fabric Workshop and Museum.
Figure 25: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project (Video Installation)*, 2009. One channel video projection, high speed digital video transferred to DVD. 6 minutes, 36 seconds. Collection of the artist. Photo by I-Hua Lee, courtesy of Cai Studio.

Figure 27: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Light Passage (Autumn)*, 2007. Gunpowder on paper. 400 x 600 cm. Photo courtesy of Shiseido Gallery.

Figure 29: Qiu Zhijie, *Grinding the Stele*, 2001. Performance, resulting in a video and ten ink prints mounted as five hanging scrolls, each scroll 225 x 77.5 cm. Video, collection of the artist; prints, collection of Ethan Cohen.
REFERENCES


