

48. *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9: Fetus Movement II* (27 June 1992). 90 kg gunpowder, 1300 m gunpowder fuse, seismograph and sensors, electroencephalograph, electrocardiograph. Performance at Bundeswehr-Wasserübungsplatz Military Base, Hann. Münden, Germany



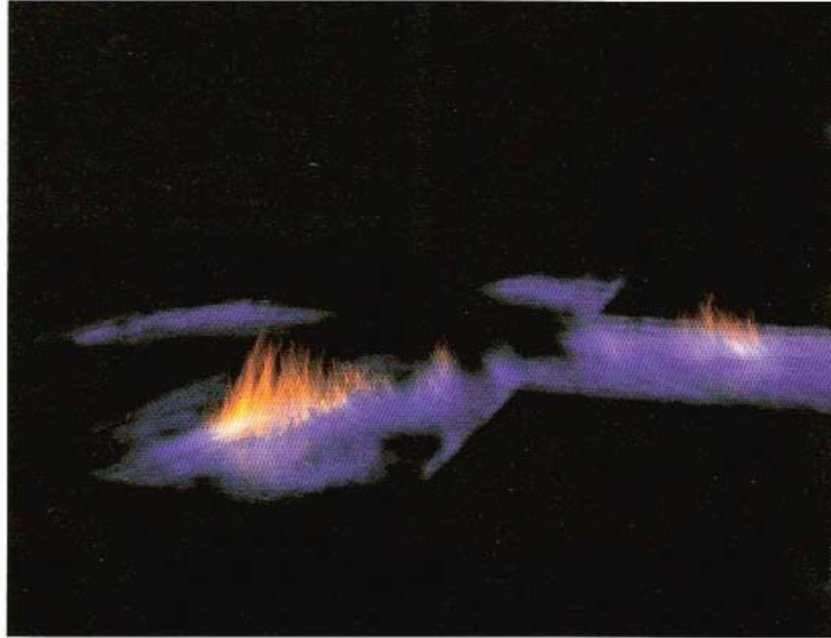
The aim of Cai Guo-Qiang's project is both simple and grand: to show the fusion of human endeavours and cosmic forces. Instead of emphasizing divisions, his work is holistic, optimistic, and deliberately curative, seeking to heal the ruptures between mind and body, between different cultures and eras, and between humans and natural forces.

Cai's works remind us that our actions are part of a larger whole. His "Projects for Extraterrestrials" are enormous environmental light drawings proposed as intergalactic beacons signalling to other beings who share our universe. The forms of these drawings return to the most primal means of knowing and relating to the

49. *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10: Project to Add 10,000 Meters to the Great Wall of China* (27 February 1993). 600 kg gunpowder, 20,000 m gunpowder fuse. Performance at extreme western end of Great Wall of China, near Jiayuquan



50. *Blue Cross - Prescription for Art Museum* (1994). Wooden structure, aluminum foil, 200 litres medical alcohol. Performance at Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands



environment. For example, *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10: Project to Add 10,000 Meters to the Great Wall of China* (1993) was a ten-kilometre-long gunpowder-fuse extension to one of the only human constructions visible from space. When this virtual extension was ignited, it snaked from the western end of the Wall across the open desert, symbolically projecting an image of human enterprise across the earth and beyond. In *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 14: The Horizon from the Pan-Pacific* (1994), the lit fuses traced five kilometres of the curved Pacific Ocean horizon, delineating the limit of the earth and suggesting the transitoriness of divisions between East and West, earth and heavens. The effect of these performances lies in their ephemerality, in the sense that forces have converged at a particular time and place. Their striking physical impact has an essentially conceptual outcome: what is important is the idea of extending ourselves – reaching out to connect with the unknown, we become strangers seeing our environment anew. At the same time, there is a practical social dimension, as the negotiations and communal work required to produce any one of these abstract projects become part of its significance, and in turn part of the human content that is symbolically synthesized with the earth and cosmos.

With these volatile works there is a sense of reconnecting or reconciling with the environment. One light drawing, *Blue Cross – Prescription for Art Museum* (1994), made this explicit in the form of a large cross-shaped pool containing the blue flames of burning medicinal alcohol.



52. *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* (1995).  
Fishing boat from Quanzhou, herbal tonics  
in vending machine. Museo Navale di Venezia, Venice



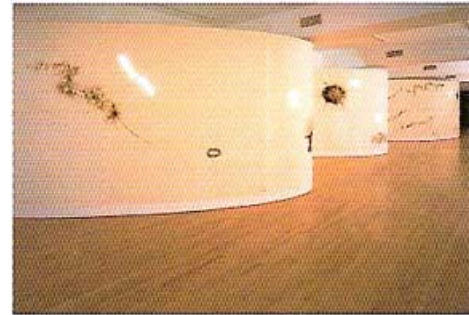
*Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9: Fetus Movement II* (1992) featured concentric circles of buried fuses whose effects on the earth were recorded by a seismometer, and on human beings by an encephalograph and a cardiograph attached to the artist, who sat at the epicentre of the explosions. In a more private set of performances, *The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Projects for the 20th Century* (1996), the artist lit small amounts of gunpowder at a nuclear test site and elsewhere, like small healing rituals for the massive violence witnessed in this century.

By titling many of his works "Projects for the 20th Century," Cai reminds us that our era is one amongst many, that our history and concerns are part of a much larger continuum. Works that refer to specific cultural events or periods do so within a global or even universal context. In *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan* (1996), a traditional raft made of inflated sheepskins is driven skyward by Toyota car engines, theatrically and sardonically uniting the ancient Mongols' and today's technologies of invasion into an imposing dragon, the mightiest character in the cosmic pantheon. In this updated iconography, the creature might incarnate contemporary Western anxiety about Asian economic powers. Again emphasizing cross-cultural exchange and synthesis in *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* (1995), Cai launched onto the canals of Venice a traditional ship from his hometown of Quanzhou (in China's Fujian province), the port from which

the Venetian Marco Polo began his return voyage from Asia 700 years earlier. Loaded with Chinese medicines, the boat was a souvenir of the many Chinese cultural traditions seamlessly adopted by the West, and a metaphoric incursion of others previously rejected by European culture.

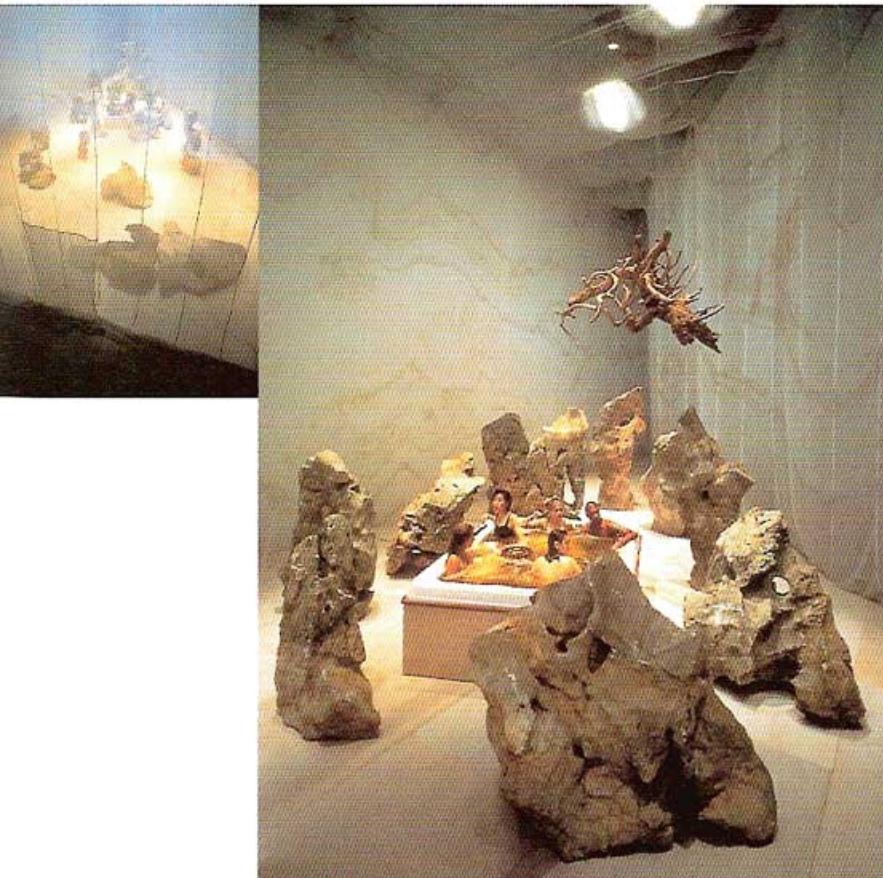
Cai's exhibitions often bring objects from the local social environment together with elements of traditional Chinese culture. His *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* (1997) was a sort of interior garden featuring large fantastic water-sculpted limestone boulders and a standard Western synthetic vacuum-formed communal hot tub whose waters were steeped with restorative herbs. In a space draped with white gauze, these elements were arranged according to the principles of *feng shui*

53. *Searching for Extraterrestrials* (1997), detail. Installation with gunpowder drawings on Japanese paper, neon elements, kite, fan, dispenser with Chinese mushroom tea, projected videotape. Glory Fine Arts Museum, Hsinchu, Taiwan



(literally "wind and water"), the Chinese practice of directing vital energy. Here Cai explicitly allies the healing process with the hackneyed but still seductive American model of assimilation, the "melting pot."

In uniting natural and consumer objects and local and universal elements, works like *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* divulge not only the conflicts but also the mutual resonances between conventionally opposite terms such as culture and nature, East and West. According to Anneli Fuchs, Cai's work is typically Chinese in its use of the



54. *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* (1997). Installation with Taihusu rocks, hot tub with hydrotherapy jets, Chinese herbal medicine, banyan tree roots, translucent fabric, live birds



## Notes

1. Anneli Fuchs, "Introduction," *Cai Guo Qiang: Flying Dragon in the Heavens* (Humblebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum, 1997), n.p.
2. Cai Guo-Qiang, "On Thought and Action," trans. Robert Reed, notes for a presentation at *The Potential of Asian Thought: Contemporary Art Symposium 1994*, organized by The Japan Foundation, Tokyo, October 1994.
3. *Ibid.*

55. *Returning Light: Dragon Bones (The Keel)* (1994).  
North-Sea fisheries boat, 9 tons of salt, plastic wrap, styrene  
foam, fish. Iwaki City Museum, Japan



*feng shui* dual principles of *yin* and *yang*, opposing forces that are in interplay and harmony.<sup>1</sup> If so, it must also be noted that this extends to his universal outlook, which, though rooted in a specific cultural tradition that values the idea of unity, is also explicitly global, and certainly not without self-conscious irony. As he has stated:

"In the end, art, like life processes, is not something that can exist independently. It exists in relation to a wide range of natural, social, cultural and historical factors. Often these factors

stand in contradiction of each other, and it is the fundamental monistic tenet underlying all Eastern culture to accept these contradictions and seek harmony and coexistence within them.... The presentation of a series of works based on this kind of methodology is not an attempt to return to a narrow Eastern world but an attempt to travel in time."<sup>2</sup>

The desire to operate in a wide transnational context is evident in both his work and his personal history. After studying art in Shanghai and spending several years living in traditional communities along the historic silk road, Cai immigrated to Japan in 1986, moved to New York in 1995, and has worked in many different cities and cultures. His use of Chinese inventions such as gunpowder, *feng shui*, and herbal remedies, which are popular enough to signal "Chineseness" but which are also genuine expressions of that culture, conveys a sincere belief in the mutual communicability of cultural traditions. Implicit in this linking of Chinese and other traditions is the idea that we all could be able "to move freely back and forth between the East and West, from micro to macro realms, and between global and local worlds."<sup>3</sup> G.K.