

## Suspended Subject Positions: Cai Guoqiang and the Medium of Gunpowder

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### Abstract

*This paper argues that the contemporary artist Cai Guoqiang (b. 1957), a Chinese expatriate and resident of New York City since 1995, suspends his own position of subjectivity through his use of the volatile medium of gunpowder for his explosion events. Raised in the Fujian province in the southern parts of China, both Daoism and the ideas of Mao Zedong left an early mark. Like a field of potentiality or creative void, Cai describes himself as a "vessel," subject to the things and events that happen to him. During Mao's rule, the idea of the individual as a subject was suppressed in order to emphasize the collective and objective gaze of critique. The individual remained formless. In his artistic projects, Cai not only withholds his own sense of agency, willfully submitting to the nature of his medium, he also withdraws and minimizes his own gaze in favor of an external and objective gaze upon himself. Using the examples of his *Project for Extraterrestrials*, 1990–2000, Cai Guoqiang's *Maximov Project*, 2000–present, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, 1999, and his more recent explosion event *Freja: Explosion Event for Faurshou Foundation*, 2012, this essay demonstrates the ways in which Cai Guoqiang defers his own agency. The larger implication is that, as a globetrotting artist often hired by major institutions to be present for artistic interventions, because of his biography, he in fact suspends his own presence and subjectivity in his gunpowder explosions and becomes the "vessel" of others instead.*

**Keywords:** Cai Guoqiang; gunpowder; fireworks; explosion event; subject positions; identity; Mao; Cultural Revolution; Daoism; China.

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What does it mean for an artist to choose gunpowder as an artistic medium? What are the connotations of gunpowder as a medium of artistic expression when the artist grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and includes in his influences both Mao Zedong's ideas alongside Daoism? Cai Guoqiang (b. 1957), a Chinese expatriate and resident of New York City since 1995, has been using gunpowder in his art since the late 1980s. Today, he provides explosion events for major cultural institutions across the globe, such as the Romerillo Organic Museum in Cuba or the Fundación Proa museum in Buenos Aires, Argentina.<sup>1</sup> This essay examines a handful of works by Cai, from the early 1990s to the present, in order to demonstrate the enduring and overarching theme of his suspended

subjectivity primarily achieved through his use of gunpowder. Cai thinks of himself as a "vessel." A vessel is not only a boat that serves to transport someone temporarily, but also an empty receptacle that receives and holds things. In order to think of the ways in which Cai becomes a vessel of either kind, I first turn to his early *Project for Extraterrestrials*, 1990–2000, when he began using the medium of gunpowder consistently. *Project for Extraterrestrials* shows how the uncontrollability, indeed agency, of this medium is key for Cai's message. He must obey the medium and not vice versa. His explosion events were often arranged for an "unknown" audience in outer space, and Cai's role as the object under observation becomes a dominant theme in his 1992 *Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9*. Why does Cai choose gunpowder, refer to himself as a vessel, favor limited artistic agency, and place himself as a passive object for others' eyes? In his work *Cai Guoqiang's Maximov Project*, 2000–present, and *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, from 1999, I demonstrate how Chinese Communism and the Cultural Revolution influenced his concept of identity as a suspended subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Liberation of 7th Avenue: Explosion for Cuba*, 7th Avenue between 116 and 118th Street, Cuba, 2015. Collection of the artist, Commissioned by Romerillo Organic Museum. *Life is a Milonga: Tango Fireworks for Argentina*, held at Vuelta de Rocha, Buenos Aires, in front of the museum Fundación PROA and commissioned by the Patronage Cultural Arts District, Grupo Clarín, and American Express. See the artist's homepage, <http://www.caiguoqiang.com/projects>.

The paper concludes with his 2011 explosion event *Freya*, created for a Copenhagen art gallery. It is in many ways the framework of much of his contemporary work. Typically these explosion events inaugurate an exhibition of his in a museum or gallery, and the explosion or fireworks or gunpowder thematize the cultural specificity of the location through references in the title. The larger implication of Cai Guoqiang's oeuvre is that, as a globetrotting artist often hired by big institutions for artistic interventions precisely because of his artistic biography or position of subjectivity, he in fact denies this very position through his art, especially with his use of gunpowder.

### Gunpowder's Field of Potentiality

While an artistic medium tends to be a tool or material skillfully manipulated by an artist, the powerful and highly volatile medium of gunpowder is tricky and difficult to control. Gunpowder mediates both beauty and violence, producing both firework celebrations and destructive artillery fire. The invention of gunpowder was happenstance. A group of alchemists, in 850 AD Tang Dynasty China, mixed together a concoction that exploded before their eyes. In Chinese culture, the sound of gunpowder firecrackers warded off evil spirits, while fireworks ushered in the Chinese New Year. The celebratory nature of gunpowder continued during the Chinese Cultural Revolution marking special birthdays and other festive events.

Cai Guoqiang is from the Fujian province in the southern parts of China, but he began using gunpowder in drawings and installations during his lengthy stay in Japan, 1986–1995.<sup>2</sup> While in Japan, he assimilated cross-cultural frameworks in his art such as Eastern philosophy and Western Expressionism.<sup>3</sup> At first, Cai Guoqiang used a fan to apply pigment onto canvas to promote spontaneity. He soon discovered that gunpowder held a far more enticing danger and unpredictability that permitted him to almost fully relinquish artistic control. Much of the pluralist and experimental art of the post-Cultural Revolution period of the 1980s in China exhibited an interest in metaphysical exploration and transcendence. It also drew eclectically from

Western modernism and postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> Cai's artistic practice draws, among other things, on the philosophy of Daoism and its field of potentiality, ideas that were essential parts of his upbringing.<sup>5</sup>

Cai's explosions invite the accidental and formless, providing the foundation for his lifelong artistic practice. In *Project for Extraterrestrials*, 1990–2000, he continuously experimented with gunpowder for works in both China and Japan. As a result he completed thirty-three variations on the theme.<sup>6</sup> In 1993, as part of this series, he planted gunpowder in extension of the Great Wall, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters*, collaborating with the Fireworks Display Factory of the Beijing Municipality, as well as a group of assistants and local citizens.<sup>7</sup> The explosion created a momentary wall of fire in the Gobi desert, for him representing both the heroic and destructive, the romantic and poisonous.<sup>8</sup> The key to his projects is that he must let gunpowder take him in the direction "it wants to go." He is subsumed by its agency, and he must accept its uncontrollability in order to simply "work with it."<sup>9</sup>

The polar opposite and relational yin and yang emerge as energies in Cai's projects, stressing their passive and active forces. For example, the theme of failure is crucial to his artistic method as a means to emphasize not only his minimal role in the outcome of his explosion events, but also the inherent polarity of success and failure. In 1991, in Sakurajima, Japan, he sought to ignite gunpowder up the side of a volcano, but an unfortunate natural disaster made it

<sup>4</sup> Wu Hung, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the end of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Dao is a source of pure potential from which things emanate. Out of an unidentifiable, unnameable background emerges the potential production of a thing, a creative void that signals incompleteness and unrepresentability. By analogy, Dao might be compared to the spatial breaks of mist that simultaneously obscure and connect spaces in Chinese landscape painting. It is formlessness, invisible but pregnant, in flux, and prior to the nameable object. "Art is about what you don't say," says Cai Guoqiang, "it is the profundity of the unseen. *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3 (2005): Cai Guoqiang. DVD; Arnolds Grava, "Dao: An Age-Old Concept in Its Modern Perspective," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 13, no. 3 (October 1963): 238-244.

<sup>6</sup> *Cai Guoqiang*, edited by Fei Dawei (Paris: Actes Sud and Foundation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Takashi Serizawa, "Going Beyond the Wall: Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters; Project for Extraterrestrial No. 10," in *Cai Guoqiang* (2002), 102-11, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Takashi Serizawa, "Going Beyond the Wall: Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters; Project for Extraterrestrial No. 10," in *Cai Guoqiang* (2002), 102-11, 107; *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3 (2005): "Power": Cai Guoqiang. DVD.

<sup>9</sup> *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3 (2005): "Power": Cai Guoqiang. DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Cai says about his stay: "It's not that I chose Japan, Japan chose me" (Phaidon Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Judicaël Lavrador, "La part du feu: Etincelles modernes," *Beaux Arts Magazine* 225 (February 2003): 74-7.

impossible to carry out his project. Cai speaks of several global projects that failed in a similar fashion because of conditions external to the projects themselves. The success and failure of the 2003 firework projects *Light Cycle* in New York and the non-event *Fire Dragon*, commissioned by the Tate Modern in London, as well as the online bankers Egg in celebration of the Chinese New Year 2003,<sup>10</sup> these all show how he views not only nature but also technology as an exterior force out of his control. Cai reduces his ability to manage the outcome of his events by employing computer programmed fireworks, which completely remove the hand of the artist.<sup>11</sup> As such, he positions his own subjectivity in a passive role against the agency of another force. Removing himself still further as an avatar, he quotes his assistant who explains how "things that work out successfully do so merely by chance, while those that don't reflect the way things really are."<sup>12</sup>

Cai uses destruction, a prevalent theme in Chinese contemporary art after the Cultural Revolution, as a tool to highlight formlessness and spontaneity. The beauty of destruction points to the cosmic and heroic, rendering his aesthetic a beauty through pain.<sup>13</sup> Destruction also serves to defer his own positions of subjectivity. In 1992, he produced *Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9*, in which he placed himself at the center of multiple rings of gunpowder with machines monitoring his heart rate and brainwaves:

I was interested in comparing the physiological effects before, during and after the explosion. So there's a record of all the vibrations throughout—not just during the explosion but afterwards as well. To ignite the gunpowder fuse I placed slowly burning incense near it, so the moment of the explosion wasn't directly connected to me... I wanted my explosions to take place in a vast open space, as if designed to be seen from well above the earth.<sup>14</sup>

Cai inserted himself into a violent and potentially disastrous environment that also served, by extension, as a metaphorical deconstruction of himself through the dialectic of death and renewal.

The structural field of the cosmos gives birth, by analogy, to new beginnings after the violent act. As Derrida notes, the violence of deconstructive critique is like an explosion that blasts the foundations and clears the path to produce anew.<sup>15</sup> In *Fetus Movement* rings of gunpowder circumscribed him while a group of scientists with seismographic tools monitored his physical and mental reactions, which, incidentally, were minimal during the detonations.<sup>16</sup> Cai relinquished his ability to act at the moment of rebirth, producing a thing forcefully subject to the gaze and control of others. He became part of the creative void, a deconstructed and cleared path, a fetus representing both potential and potentially nothing.

Transformed into an object for another's gaze, *Fetus Movement* brings into view his obsession with wishing to be seen from afar, by aliens from "well above the earth."<sup>17</sup> Because Cai seeks to view himself from the outside, his self-positioning enacts the kind of third-person consciousness that the philosopher Frantz Fanon so cogently articulated decades ago. Fanon describes the awareness of his own ontology as a black man in a world of white power. It is an ontology only viewable from the outside in its solidity, which makes it impossible to simply exist without the knowledge of this existence. "It is a third-person consciousness," describes Fanon, "I subjected myself to an objective examination... I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object."<sup>18</sup> Fanon explains how he "made a scene, a grand slam" by bursting out of his passivity, insulting a woman, which allowed him, for a moment, to forget his ontology before the illusion was shattered once again. Fanon's description of a third-person consciousness is more than illuminating for Cai's projects. *Fetus Movement* becomes a desperate dialogue with the negation, yet shaping of identities and, as I will show, it exhibits the remnants of a third-person consciousness left over from the visual ideology imposed during Mao Zedong's rule.

<sup>10</sup> Louisa Buck, "The Nature of the Beast," *The Art Newspaper*, no. 134 (March 2003), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Pollack, "Gunpowder Drawings: Cai Guoqiang," *Art on Paper*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Nov-Dec. 2003): 38.

<sup>12</sup> Cai Guoqiang, "The Foolish Man and His Mountaintop, 2001" in *Cai Guoqiang* (2002), 130.

<sup>13</sup> *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3 (2005): Cai Guoqiang. DVD.

<sup>14</sup> Cai Guoqiang, interview by Zaya (2002), 16.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson, trans. Mary Quaintance (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Cai Guoqiang, interview by Zaya (2002), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Fumio Nanjo, "Cai Guoqiang: One Who Lays Bridges," in *Cai Guoqiang: Une histoire arbitraire/An Arbitrary History* (Lyons: Musée art contemporain, 2001): 39-43, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," in *Anatomy of Racism*, edited by David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 109-110.

## Meta-Views and the Cultural Revolution

In his essay "Split China," Ching-kiu Stephen Chan argues for the significance of reading China's modernity in terms of a "becoming," based on a split subject: the simultaneous workings of a misrecognition of an image of the self as "complete" and a recognition of that selfsame misrecognition. The resulting rupture of the subject reveals an incomplete, but still desired construction of subjectivity. Chan notes that "like desire, identity is powerful only as form."<sup>19</sup> The visual cultures that emerged in twentieth-century China did not simply reflect changing attitudes and identities, but also created them. The appropriation of a schema in an attempt to take on and visualize different identities pervaded the collective imaginary. Decidedly, the Communist party in China understood the significance of representing an image of a collective identity. Paradoxically, yet necessarily, the result of the creation of Chinese identity meant frequently an objectification of the subject.<sup>20</sup>

Cai Guoqiang was nine years old when Mao Zedong's vision of the world was laid as a stencil onto society in the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1976, imposing his rigid forms on the masses and demanding they conform to his school of thought. During the most fervent years of the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1970, all development of art education, art journals and other cultural institutions were closed or cancelled, and artworks, ancient religious icons, and books were violently smashed or burned on the grounds that they reflected a line of thought too ancient or bourgeois in form. After 1970, most art students were comprised of workers, peasants or soldiers, and the ideologically optimistic images permitted no space for individual interpretation. It was thus an environment of

restraint and control that guided the hands and minds of artists of the Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao's portraits reigned supreme generating an almost religious aura that made the viewing of these images a forced experience.<sup>21</sup> Visuality, then, became a construct imposed upon the masses who were denied the possibility of a voluntary gaze.

Contemporary Chinese artists have reacted in different ways to the Maoist restrictions. In her article "Gunpowder Drawings," Barbara Pollack notes that Cai's method with fire served as a response to the rigid educational purposes of art during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>22</sup> Cai himself notes, however, that he takes from Mao's method his use of collaborations with the masses for his projects.<sup>23</sup> To me, Cai's explosion events serve as a clear reaction to an environment of constant control and surveillance. It is not a reaction against Maoism; rather, it is in tangential agreement with it. Gao Minglu remarks on the Chinese continuation of the beliefs of the Cultural Revolution in Chinese political pop of the 1990s, arguing that its references to Mao do not express criticism toward Mao's ideology but, instead, an ambivalence toward nationalism.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, critics perceived Cai as criticizing socialist realist art when he exhibited his extensive collection of paintings by the Soviet artist Konstantin Maximov (1913–1994). Maximov's well-executed paintings of smiling Chinese workers had a profound impact on Chinese painting in the mid 1950s and introduced socialist realism to China.<sup>25</sup> *Cai Guoqiang's Maximov Project, 2000–present* was exhibited at the Shanghai Art Museum in 2002, the first retrospective to be held in China for a contemporary Chinese artist. The exhibition of Maximov's work was surely a means to reflect on the ideological influence of art in China.<sup>26</sup> It therefore comes as no surprise when a critic erroneously interprets Cai's exhibition of his gunpowder drawings next to Maximov's paintings in Shanghai as an attempt at irony.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ching-kiu Stephen Chan, "Split China, or, The Historical/Imaginary: Toward a Theory of the Displacement of Subjectivity at the Margins of Modernity," in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique*, edited by Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 70–101, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Under Communism, the idea of the ideal Chinese was represented in images: "The Right Cause," "The Common Good," "The Needs of Society" "Modern," "Man," "Woman," or "Chinese." The dissemination of these visualized ideals formed the collective imaginary and the individual's understanding of his or her identity. Take for example Cai Chusheng's film *Xin nuxing (New Woman)*, from 1934, where it is never quite clear which image of a new woman is the "proper" one—the bourgeois, financially and socially independent "subject" in Shanghai or the (masculine) woman subjected to Communist ideology, using her resources for the public good. On the ambiguities of the film, see Kristine Harris, "The New Woman: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture," *Republican China* 20, no. 2 (April 1995): 55–79.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China, 1949–1984* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998), 143, 168–9.

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Pollack, "Gunpowder Drawings: Cai Guoqiang," *Art on Paper*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Nov–Dec. 2003): 38–9.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Dow, "Beauty and Terror," 9 May 2010. <http://www.stevedow.com.au/default.aspx?id=503> (accessed June 17, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity: An Overview," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, edited by Gao Minglu (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Marek Bartelik, "Cai Guoqiang: Shanghai Art Museum," *Artforum International*, vol. 40, no. 20 (Summer 2002): 189.

<sup>26</sup> P. Jodidio, "Cai l'alchimiste," *Connaissances des Arts* 590 (January 2002): 118–23, 121–2.

<sup>27</sup> Heartney, 95–6.

But such a viewpoint is worth questioning. For example, Cai's installation *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, from 1999, demonstrates how Cai's ideas are mediated by Chinese Marxism and Mao's ideology. This installation, which won the Leone d'Oro award at the 48th Venice Biennale, presented live artists working on a sculptural arrangement comprising a partial copy of the original *Rent Collection Courtyard*, first installed in the people's museum, Dayi, Sichuan, in 1965. The 1965 socialist realist sculptural arrangement in clay depicts 114 life-size peasants bringing rent to a landlord. The Sichuan leadership had commissioned a group of artists from the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts with the goal of representing the corruption of feudalism and the importance of class struggle. The authorities under Mao Zedong later made fiberglass replicas of the original and installed them throughout China as communist propaganda exalting Mao.<sup>28</sup> Cai, who saw one of the early versions when he was a boy, partially reconstructed the installation in Venice, hiring several Chinese artists, one of whom had worked on the original *Rent Collection*.<sup>29</sup> These sculptors created 108 life-sized sculptures in situ using clay, wire and wood armature while viewers at the Venice Biennale watched. Since Cai's human installation makes an explicit and controversial reference to his cultural heritage, it has been read as a critique of China's history and politics. But the project was by no means principally meant as a critique.<sup>30</sup> Rather, the tableau vivante concerns the mobility of human beings as representations, the human as a subject and, notably, one constituted by the other's gaze:

At the time I was thinking about turning 'looking at sculpture' into 'looking at making sculpture', using the very process as a work of art. That was the starting point. *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* expresses a number of different things. One of them is the tragedy of time, of people, of artists who were once full of passion and conviction in their beliefs. Reflecting upon the artist's work in particular, we see the discrepancy between ideology and reality, the tragedy of it all. It also reflects on us now; we're so busy working on projects, full

of passion and idealism, but what purpose do we serve?<sup>31</sup>

Cai speaks of the misfortune of the loss of conviction, but also cautiously remarks on current, perhaps purposeless idealism, which by no means equates with the cynicism often attributed to contemporary Chinese artists' recollections of their political past.<sup>32</sup> When Cai saw the original *Rent Collection Courtyard*, he was, at the time, deeply moved by the sculptures, losing himself in the passion of the piece.<sup>33</sup> Neither cynical nor derisive, Cai's attitudes toward the political beliefs during Mao's rule include the empathetic and nostalgic. "In some sense, Mao Zedong influenced all artists from our generation with his utopian romance and sentiment," declares Cai.<sup>34</sup> But most importantly, his method of portraying an image of subjectivity in *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* mirrors the sign systems of the Cultural Revolution by turning the visual field into a spectacle and framing the collective subject in a position determined by the objective gaze of the beholder, whether that gaze belonged to Mao Zedong, viewers at the Venice Biennale, or extraterrestrials.

Even an artist as anti-authoritarian as Ai Weiwei continues to work with a Communist ethos: "I was born in a society that emphasized critique, bestowing on self-criticism the highest value. Chairman Mao instructed us to carry out criticism and self-criticism, so we always looked at our surroundings and objects with a critical world-view."<sup>35</sup> Ai internalized Mao's ideal of critique and self-critique, a goal never practiced in earnest by Mao himself. Ai now seeks to improve society through public critiques and is, as such, arguably a

<sup>31</sup> Cai Guo Qiang, interview by Zaya, *Cai Guoqiang* (2002), 9

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Wu Hung, "Post-Cultural Revolution Experimental Chinese Art (1979-1993)," in the introduction to *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum and The University of Chicago, ), 20; see also the excellent introduction by Geremie Barmé, "Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing from China, 1989-93," in *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), xvii-li. And Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, edited by Gao Mingly (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 35.

<sup>33</sup> Cai Guo Qiang, interview by Zaya, *Cai Guoqiang* (2002), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Steve Dow, "Beauty and Terror," 9 May 2010. <http://www.stevedow.com.au/default.aspx?id=503> (accessed June 17, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Time and Place* (Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), 124. Quoted in Christian Sorace, "China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 402.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen Liang, *The Winking Owl* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 62.

<sup>29</sup> Heartney, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Heartney, 96.

true Communist in spirit.<sup>36</sup> Mao's worldview was also thoroughly visual in character, establishing collective rituals with the color red dominating the visual field and fireworks and explosions serving as a public announcements. Public dances served as a collective spectacle of loyalty toward Mao.<sup>37</sup> He spoke of the structural relations of society, and thus indirectly on the suppression of both subjective agency and the independent gaze, since citizens were always subordinate to the Central Committee.<sup>38</sup> The Cultural Revolution was the peak at which subjective and collective consciousness, visual culture and ideology, were forcefully merged from above.<sup>39</sup>

Born the same year as Ai Weiwei, Cai Guoqiang also inherited a particular worldview from the Cultural Revolution. To use an explosion event as an expressive tool is, I would argue, not far removed from Mao's desire that all Chinese apply a tool—whether hammer, hoe, plough, pen, or gun—and become expressive critics. Mao wanted to turn the gaze objectively and critically toward the self and destroy bourgeois traditions in oneself and society. Cai wants to direct the gaze objectively toward the self, and critique the self and so defer the agency of the subject who reminds as of yet formless. Mao Zedong wrote extensively about contradiction and the necessity of not resolving the dialectic. For Mao, closing the contradiction with a solution constituted an attempt to answer a question in a subjective, one-sided, and superficial manner.<sup>40</sup> Dao's yin and yang finds its strange bedfellow in Mao's principle of the dialectic. Mao's denial of subjectivity has meant that artists in post Cultural Revolution China have had to come to terms with the negative associations with individualism in Chinese culture, and must do so while still adhering to Communist ideology.<sup>41</sup> Cai himself has noted how "psychological walls are less easy to dismantle than physical ones,"<sup>42</sup> so he demolishes the physical walls and withholds the question of individualism.

<sup>36</sup> Christian Sorace, "China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Winter 2014):

<sup>37</sup> Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics*, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Galikowski, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Galikowski, 147.

<sup>40</sup> Mao Tse Tsung, "On Contradiction" (August 1937), *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 323-24. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch22.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Galikowski, 209, 226.

<sup>42</sup> Including projects such as *Extraterrestrial projects* at the Great Wall (1993) and the Berlin Wall project (unrealized). Cai Guoqiang, "Light Your Fire," interview by Jérôme Sans, *Cai Guoqiang: Une histoire arbitraire/An Arbitrary History* (Lyon and Milano: Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon and 5 Continents Editions, 2002), 53-9, 54.

Under Mao's watchful eye, the visual field was not voluntary but artificially constructed. Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials* reflects the awareness of being observed by an other's gaze, a state of mind cultivated by authorities to prevent Chinese citizens from acting from a position of subjectivity. *Fetus Movement* requires that Cai be closely monitored from an objective and scientific point of view during the explosion event comprising his own metaphorical rebirth, as of yet unformed and in the hands of an external source. In both *Cai Guoqiang's Maximov Project, 2000–present* and *Venice's Rent Collection*, he asks the viewer to take a meta-view, a palimpsest of distanced views of looking at looking. The theme of failure appears repeatedly in Mao's writings and is expressed in the Chinese idiom "failure is the mother of success."<sup>43</sup> You must constantly adjust your subjective positions against the objective external world, for it is the latter that ultimately reigns. To Cai, the moments of being unable to attain control or fulfill his artistic actions reflect this reality.

### The Tension of Subject Positions

Cai Guoqiang describes himself as a "vessel" travelling between natural, cultural, and historical sites.<sup>44</sup> He positions himself as a vessel between sites, a hollow receptacle and carrier of the "arbitrary histories"<sup>45</sup> that happened upon him. Cai recently orchestrated one of his trademark explosion events at the Farschou Foundation in Copenhagen in 2012. From a small boat hoisted on a crane in the harbor of Nordhavn, more than 1800 mini rockets exploded outward in a short-lived display referencing the goddess of love in Norse mythology **Freja: Explosion Event for Farschou Foundation**. *Freja* inaugurated his Copenhagen exhibition *A Clan of Boats* showing gunpowder drawings as well as the boat serving as a continuous metaphor for voyage, but also himself as a vessel and the destruction of it.

While *Freja* summons both ancient Chinese and Norse traditions through the use of fireworks and the name of a goddess, these serve as devices pointing to, but not truly embedded in, the culturally specificity of Copenhagen. In fact, rather than the particular site of Nordhavn in Copenhagen or Freyja,

<sup>43</sup> "On Practice" (July 1937), *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 296-97.

<sup>44</sup> Karen Smith, *Cai Guoqiang: A Clan of Boats*, edited by Karen Chen and Jannie Haagemann (Copenhagen: Farschou Foundation, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> To Cai, "arbitrary history" signifies possibility and the arbitrary nature of subjectivity. *Cai Guoqiang: Une histoire arbitraire/An Arbitrary History* (Lyon: Musée art contemporain, 2001), 12.

the goddess of fertility and destruction, the event appears to signal the mark of the artist's presence first and foremost. That is to say, Cai Guoqiang has become a celebrity, a global, transnational artist, hired to be present for cultural events. In 2015, Cai organized 36 gunpowder explosions for Cuba and Cubans, *Liberation of 7th Avenue: Explosion for Cuba*, 7th Avenue between 116 and 118th Street, Cuba, commissioned by Romerillo Organic Museum shortly after the Havana Biennale. His 2014 explosion event *Life is a Milonga: Tango Fireworks for Argentina*, held at Vuelta de Rocha, Buenos Aires, in front of the museum Fundación Proa and commissioned by the Patronage Cultural Arts District, Grupo Clarín, and American Express, renders thematic Argentina's love for tango. The assumed uniqueness of each place is authenticated by the artist's signature, his presence, and "interventionary services," quoting Miwon Kwon's critique of contemporary global interventions.<sup>46</sup> Cai becomes, then, a service provider, producing explosion events one place after another while arguably participating in art's commodification and homogenization.

If Cai Guoqiang's pyrotechnic interventions do not suggest site specificity as its primary concern, and if we consider the artist as the site who delivers authenticity, then who is the subject that Cai demonstrates with his gunpowder projects? Western critics and institutions tend to construct for him a subject position between "Chineseness" and the global. They map his practice as a temporal bridge builder connecting the ancestral and contemporary, philosophical traditions and experimentalism.<sup>47</sup> But this mediation of an imagined spatial and temporal continuity undermines the specific cultural political milieu under which Cai was raised. Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution appears as merely a faint memory in much of the art of his generation, and the critic Eleanor Heartney claims that Cai's work highlights "how much things have changed since the days of the Chinese Cultural Revolution."<sup>48</sup> This

essay has argued that Cai indeed enacts a "Chineseness" through his use of gunpowder. His explosion events and related work assimilate both Daoist thinking and the identitarian representations of subjectivity imposed during Chairman Mao's rule. The medium of gunpowder makes this very suspension of subjectivity possible: it is formless when actualized, has a volatile mind of its own, favors beauty and destruction, and demands an all-consuming spectacle of sound and vision. With gunpowder as a medium, there is no room for the artist at the front of the stage.

This deference of his own subject position brings into question what Cai currently delivers in his commissions as a globetrotting artist. When Cai Guoqiang produced **Freja: Explosion Event for Faursschou Foundation** in the Copenhagen harbor as part of the 2012 opening of Faursschou's new commercial gallery space, it begs the question of what he brings to that particular time and place. By naming his explosion event the Norse goddess of love, fertility, and war, he gains instant, albeit superficial, rapport with local tradition. It is Cai's name in the world of art that truly carries the project.<sup>49</sup> He authenticates the explosion event and caliber of the institution in a seemingly perfect conglomerate representation of "Chineseness," the global and local. Cai Guoqiang's artistic practices demonstrate the ways in which he holds in suspension his own identity making processes. Thus, while it is his biography that delivers the event, the subject position he enacts revolves around the very negation of it through his use of gunpowder. He displays, instead, the shell of a self after the explosion.

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## Biographical note

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<sup>46</sup> Miwon Kwon. "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity." In *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 103, n33.

<sup>47</sup> See for example, Matthew Guy Nichols, "Cai Guoqiang at Central Park & the Asia Society," *Art in America*, vol. 92, no. 1 (January 2004): 96; Judicaël Lavrador, "Art et Feux d'artifice: Étincelles Modernes." *Beaux Arts Magazine* 225 (February 2003): 74–77.

<sup>48</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "Cai Guoqiang: Illuminating the New China," *Art in America*, vol. 90, no. 5 (May 2002): 92. Wu Hung asserts that "many artists have finally bid farewell to the Cultural Revolution and all its visual and mental baggage." Wu Hung, "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern," in *Inside*

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*Out: New Chinese Art*, edited by Gao Minglu (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 64.

<sup>49</sup> According to a review in *Kunsten.Nu*: "med en kunstner som Cai Guoqiang fra den absolutte top af kunstmarkedet er tonen sat for, hvilket niveau af kunstnere man kan forvente at finde på Nordhavnen i fremtiden: Dem, de andre fem eksisterende (og non-kommercielle) kunsthaller vil have svært ved at finansiere. Boom!" Erik B. Duckert, "Er du underholdt?" *Kunsten.Nu*, 19 September 2012, <http://www.kunsten.nu/artikler/artikel.php?fauerschou+cai+guo-qiang+freja+a+clan+of+boats>