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A zone of danger and beauty

Head On, by Cai Guo-Qiang, Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, 26 August - 15 October 2006

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Portrait de Cai Guo-Qiang,
Courtesy Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin.



ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Berlin

A ZONE OF DANGER AND BEAUTY

Head On, by Cai Guo-Qiang, Deutsche Guggenheim,
Berlin, 26 August – 15 October 2006

I like the zone of danger and beauty.
It is an area of great possibilities.¹

Cai Guo-Qiang

The charge is immediate. Upon entering the Deutsche Guggenheim, the wolves demand attention. Already, the isolated animals near the entrance direct the visitor's gaze towards a pack of wolves, lifelike and life-size, leaping through the one-room museum. The close proximity to the wild animals heightens the charge, which, together with the application of the ancient Chinese art of feng shui – the consideration of en-

ergy fields – affect surrender. Traces of explosions of prior actions denoted on paper and video/DVD are also a part of this installation, which the local press called Berlin's "current best." What makes *Head On* so powerful? Is it that children could have fun, invent fables or recall Little Red Riding Hood and her encounter with a trickster wolf, while adults engage with history, ideology and pack attitudes? The possibilities are complex and fascinating. Here, craftsmanship – the wolves were manufactured in Cai's hometown of Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China – meets high tech and art as "destructive event," generating an aesthetic surplus that is overwhelming in its ap-

parent simplicity. Everything is in flow, nothing obstructs. Even the recorded sounds of the explosions have the right volume. And the double glass wall towards which the wolves – and we – are heading is hardly visible at first.

There is something beautifully eerie about standing close to a wolf that looks as if it were real, shot by a hunter, now stuffed and exhibited with its prized fur and voluptuous tail, only to discover that it is hyper-real. “Are they real?” I heard a small boy ask loudly. “I doubt it,” responded the woman whose hand he held tight. Her eyes were searching for information. Previous shows had introductory wall-texts. This time the art *is* the text. Only small, red letters in the form of labels read: *Head On* (99 wolves, resin, dyed sheepskin, straw, wire, marbles); *Illusion II* (two-channel video projection, 8:48 minutes on loop, videographer Araki Takahisa, editor Lauren Petty); *Vortex* (gunpowder drawing, 9 x 4 metres). The animals differ in stance, nuances of fur, facial expressions and gender. Marbles were used for the eyes, the resin (differently coloured) for the tongue and teeth. A guard encouraged the small boy to touch one of the straw-stuffed dummies to eliminate his fear. A fold-out listed family programs and invited children to present their own stories. Fear and fantasy could work towards creative possibilities.

Head On developed as Cai toured Berlin in the fall of 2005. “My goal,” he says, “was to create art that would initiate a dialogue locally and connect to Berlin’s history.” He visited museums, remnants of the Wall and Checkpoint Charlie, while looking for an explosion site. Checkpoint Charlie was the guarded point of transit from the Soviet to the American sectors, where on October 27, 1961, a tanked stand-off took place between the two superpowers – caused by the wall’s construction, intensifying the Cold War and nuclear buildup.² “On that day,” recalls U.S. veteran Vern Pike, “Soviet tanks rolled towards us, and the world was uncertain as to whether or not the tension between the East and West would escalate.”³ Significantly, on June 26, 1963, John F. Kennedy came to Berlin to see first-hand the Communist-built wall. As he spoke at Berlin’s Free University, Kennedy saluted the city as a shining example of humanity’s struggle for freedom, saying: “I do believe in the necessity of great powers working together to preserve the human race.”⁴

In preparation to and as part of *Head On*, Cai made small clay models of wolves and drawings that crystallized his ideas. Then on July 11, 2006, he illuminated Berlin’s evening sky at exactly 9:30 p.m. by igniting a small family home filled with rockets and other explosives. An impressive display of fireworks and an implosion resulted, cleansing Berlin from its traumatic 20th-century political past. Fifteen cameras recorded the 20-minute explosion. The films were edited and projected doubly above the isolated wolves. Each DVD showed a different perspective of the fire, ranging from motifs painted by the rockets in the evening sky to flames licking the roof’s wooden beams. The home was built to Cai’s speci-

fications in the Babelsberg film studios, famous for such classics as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and for Nazi intervention, causing a major exodus to Hollywood in the 1930s and ’40s. The house was burned on an empty lot against the ruins of the Anhalter train station (bombed during WWII) serving as scenic background and as historical marker for the Wall, which ran nearby. “The empty site,” Cai commented, “invited what *Illusion* is about: a reflection on the contradictory powers of violence, beauty and destruction.” In Theodor Adorno’s understanding, philosophy/art consists in reflecting on knowledge and not in the immediate transmission of information. Anyone who becomes seriously involved with art “has to be prepared to submit to the process of reflection, and to reflection moreover conceived as free, without any spoon-feeding”⁵ – hence the absent wall-text.

In a comparable project, *No Destruction No Construction* (1998), realized by the artist in the renovated Taiwan Museum in Taichung, small explosions in each room were meant to chase out the old spirits of history.⁶ In Poland, Cai burned a giant *Red Flag* (2005) in Soviet red – in seconds – and, with it, totalitarianism – likely Mao Zedong’s version as well.⁷ When Cai left China in 1986, first for Japan then for the United States, contemporary art meant a controlled Soviet modernism. During the 1970s and ’80s, contemporary art, individualistic and free, was neither officially taught in art schools in China, nor exhibited publicly. Importantly, it was Robert Rauschenberg who in 1985, self-appointed and with a “self-styled teacher’s permit,” introduced students in Beijing to avant-garde modernism and postmodernism.⁸

Soldiers shot anyone trying to escape Berlin’s Soviet-occupied sector. The last Wall casualty was a 20-year-old man shot dead on February 5, 1989, as he tried to flee to West Berlin, only months before the wall collapsed on November 9 that year (as a result of Mikhail Gorbachev’s political course of perestroika [openness]). With the wall fell the Soviet empire and communism. (Slavoj Žižek foresees capitalism also collapsing.) With the Cold War ending at that time, hardly anyone in Europe could have imagined that another ideological divide of global proportion would soon come – one based on religious-extremism-turned-terrorism. This “new wall” is, when historically considered, partly the result of unresolved colonial issues, argues Jürgen Habermas. “While we have to stand up against terrorism, we have to recognize that [Islamic] funda-





mentalism is the child of an uprooted modernization process to which the West's derailed colonial past has contributed."⁹ Cai's wall points to both, and recalls Walter Benjamin's thesis that only by critically engaging with the past can we understand the present and the future.

On August 19, 2006, *Vortex* came about through gunpowder explosion. In the Deutsche Bank's atrium, Cai ignited three sheets of paper (placed side by side on the floor) covered with gunpowder, cut-outs in the shape of wolves, cardboard and stones. After the cloud of smoke evaporated, a fragile composition emerged marked by ashes, burned holes and singed spots.¹⁰ Placed vis-à-vis the entrance, *Vortex* should have been the primary focus but the wolves demanded attention. We followed the pack through a narrow passageway, built for the project, and marvelled at those leaping above us – a most unusual experience. (Germany no longer has wolves in their natural habitat.) Soon we realize that this beautiful wave of animal power charges into destruction: Twenty-two animals are dead or dying as a result of their run against the glass wall. Necks are broken, bodies distorted, limbs twisted, and faces contorted in agony. In their silence, we hear their scream and, with it, our own. The beautiful flow has cruelly been interrupted. Numbness and disbelief set in. We are shocked and drawn in

to constellations of meaning so as to recognize the knowledge that transcends the material confines.

"I wanted to make the invisible visible," says Cai when asked why animals and why the wall. "It is to give thoughts a physical presence." The wolf is a pack animal, a metaphor for a blind run with the pack. The wall is the zone of danger. It confines and separates. People conform and consume and are caught up in habits and daily routines. Some run with the pack of corporate greed; others with political ideologies. At this point, *Vortex* demands reflection. Its compositional turmoil around a central vacuum points to the wolves' deadly run.

Head On enjoins the oldest and best-preserved archaeological site of Native America: *Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump* in southern Alberta – a UNESCO World Heritage site. This breathtaking, windy place in the Canadian Prairies has ten-metre-deep sediments of cultural remains, almost undisturbed, where bisons have been hunted for at least 5,700 years. First Nation hunters have learned to exploit the natural topography and bison behaviour by channelling a herd grazing on the high-lying grasslands and driving them in a pack to their death. An 18-metre cliff, facing east opposite prevailing winds, prevented the buffalos from smelling the killing site toward which they were headed.¹¹ Such hunting methods may have been necessary for First Nations people to get food,



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Vortex* (Making off).

clothing and tools. The cruelty of the kill through manipulation into packs has a global resonance. Cai's art transcends any national or regional designation, as Chinese or Asian, through an aesthetic surplus that has roots reaching around the world. He uses space with the sense of purpose and builds on his cultural heritage while extracting locally as world traveller. In so doing, he opens up a zone of danger

and beauty for adults and children to enter simultaneously so that great art powers can do their work.

MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDEL

NOTES

- 1 Artist's quotes are taken from the press pack. *Head On* is a joint venture of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Deutsche Bank. It entered the Deutsche Bank's art collection. Thanks go to Dr. Nina Roy for editing and to the team in the Deutsche Guggenheim's Press office for superb visuals.
- 2 The soldiers at Checkpoint Charlie are now "replaced" by a photographic installation showing an American and a Soviet in their respective uniforms.
- 3 Lars von Törne, "Auf dem Pulverfass," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 25, 2006.
- 4 *The New York Times*, June 27, 1963, reprinted on the same day in 2004. Kennedy was made an honorary citizen of Berlin during his visit.
- 5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2001, 23.
- 6 Dan Cameron, "Blinded by the Light," *Cai Guo-Qiang: Head On, Sammlung Deutsche Bank* (Frankfurt a/M: Deutsche Bank Kunst), 2006.
- 7 "Mao is still the icon, even thirty years after his death," writes Ralf Schlüter, "Das Spielfeld," *Art Das Kulturmagazin*, 9, 2006, 80.
- 8 Alexander Ochs, "Contemporary Chinese Art: 3 Generations," public talk at Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, September 21st, 2006. Ochs is the pioneer who 15 years ago opened a contemporary-art gallery in Beijing's Danshanzi district, which is now the contemporary-art area in Beijing.
- 9 Jürgen Habermas, *Der gespaltene Westen. Kleine Politische Schriften X* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp), 2004, 109. *Head On's* double video projection may recall the twin towers, with 11 (the date of the explosion) as a date for reflection.
- 10 The video *The Making of Vortex* was projected as supportive material near the museum's coffee shop.
- 11 www.head-smashed-in.com

Maria Zimmermann Brendel, who holds a Ph. D. from McGill University, Montreal, is working as an art critic in Berlin.