

CA☆ FORUM ON ANTHROPOLOGY IN PUBLIC

“What Marco Polo Forgot”

Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global

by Aihwa Ong

In 1995, Cai Guo-Qiang set adrift a Chinese junk on the Grand Canal in Venice, marking the seven-hundredth anniversary of Marco Polo's return to Europe. In 2008, as the world spiraled into a far-reaching financial collapse, a historian warned that in the long haul, “New York could turn into Venice.” These two historical moments set the stage for a discussion of how contemporary Asian art navigates the world of conceptual geography. An anthropology of art expands beyond expertise on “native artifacts” corralled in Western collections to the active interpretation of contemporary art alongside artists, curators, and critics in cosmopolitan spaces of encounter. Drawing on Cai's exhibition *I Want to Believe*, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2008, I focus on the contrasting interpretations of Cai's key installations, that is, the perspectives that dramatize different notions of the global. Is contemporary art the latest form of Chinese entrepreneurialism or an expression of an emerging global civil society? Or should modern Chinese art be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics in undoing Western categories of knowledge? In an art of assemblage and juxtaposition, how is China repositioned from an object of Western knowledge to a tool of global intervention?

What Marco Polo Forgot

In 1995, artist Cai Guo-Qiang set adrift a Chinese junk on the Grand Canal, Venice (see fig. 1). The event was the 46th Venice Biennale. Marking the seven-hundredth anniversary of Marco Polo's return to Venice, Cai filled a junk with Chinese herbs and medicines that Marco Polo apparently forgot to take with him on his departure in 1291 from the port city of Quanzhou (Cai's hometown).

Cai's staging of this epic encounter has drawn intense controversy. An American scholar points out that in some Venetian monastery, there is a record of Marco Polo bringing back Chinese herbs. But anthropology goes beyond a literal truth to look for meanings in acts of cultural negotiation. At first blush, Cai's installation seems to be an ironical commentary for our times—that Marco Polo forgot to bring back to Europe Chinese spiritual traditions embodied in the medicinal plants. At the end of the twentieth century, a Chinese artist seems to ask, “What can China give the world besides opportunities for trade?” In the fall of 2008, as much of the world spiraled into a financial crisis, the historian Niall Fer-

guson (2008) warned that, with China as the global banker to indebted nations, in the long run, “New York could turn into Venice.”

The two historical moments—the opening of Europe's trade with China and the irony of Chinese state capitalism saving Western capitalism—are geopolitical shifts marked by Cai. These events raise the following questions: Is contemporary art the latest form of Chinese entrepreneurialism or an expression of an emerging global civil society? Or should modern Chinese art be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics in undoing Western categories of knowledge? In an art of assemblage and juxtaposition, how is China repositioned from an object of Western knowledge to a tool of global intervention?

From Structure to Juxtaposition

Like an “armchair Marco Polo,” Eric Wolf was a twentieth-century anthropologist tracing the itineraries of economic enterprises beyond the Western world. In the 1960s, at a time when anthropologists charted islands of culture, Wolf tracked the spread of European capitalism around the globe, spawning a mix of conquest, colonial adventures, and commercial production (Wolf 1982). Called a “systems Marxist,” Wolf analyzed the structural integration of entire regions into a single modern world system. The dispersal of capitalist trade and production, he argued, ultimately incorporated non-Western

Aihwa Ong is Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley (Kroeber Hall, Berkeley, California 94720-3711, U.S.A. [aihwaong@berkeley.edu]). This paper was submitted 28 I 10 and accepted 13 I 11.



Figure 1. Cia Guo-Qiang, *Bring to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*, 1995. At the Grand Canal, Venice. For the exhibition *Transculture*. Installation incorporating a wooden fishing boat from Quanzhou, Chinese herbs, earthen jars, ginseng beverages, bamboo ladles, porcelain cups, ginseng (100 kg), and handcart. Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

peoples at great cost to their well-being and cultures. Wolf's key achievement is his reorientation of the story of capitalism, from one of Western self-narrative to a transnational story involving a multitude of peoples, political struggles, and cultural contestations. The expansion of European capitalism subsequently destroyed non-European cultures and, in the process, produced "the people without history," as Wolf ironically called them.

This Europe-centric vantage point is still influential in our everyday thinking about the contemporary world. Scholars and policy makers continue to be guided by ideas of global transformation that view a progressive division of the modern world in two halves: colonial and postcolonial, backward and capitalist, the global North and the global South. Beyond the optic of capitalism making the modern world, a newer discourse of new humanitarianism also envisions a European postsovereignty ideal that will spread the growth of multilateral governance across the world. Both models of global order based on borderless capitalism and transnational humanitarianism fly in the face of actual world events, robust nations,

and geopolitical conditions. For instance, Wolf and others did not foresee the rise of Asia as a global region that raises doubts about the preeminence of North Atlantic nations and their reigning ideas. Human rights theorists who talk about the a "global civil society" do not sufficiently engage the realpolitik of resurgent nationalisms (Held et al. 1999). Entrenched theories of the world, defined by a singular system of political economy or a transnational regime of virtue, are clearly inadequate for engaging complex and dynamic conditions transforming global relations.

Today, the future recedes because it is no longer forecast by a sole historical horizon, an unchallenged cultural superiority, or an overwhelming sense of moral certitude. Many anthropologists no longer invest in theories of a world system or in the inevitability of universal transformation according to the precepts of Enlightenment ideals. We are skeptical that social phenomena can be read as stabilized or neatly reproducible structures or that social change can be thought of as unfolding according to some prescribed futures. Our accelerated interconnections have surpassed old geographies of

East-West divisions, and the linear temporality of universalist thinking, in its guise as hegemonic globalization, continues to apprehend the world in terms of structural binarism and predetermined outcomes.

Against such totalizing models of political domination, anthropologists have turned to an ethnography of the local. They seek to liberate non-European "others" from theories that render them fixed and subordinated in global peripheries. Leading anthropologists have called for presenting the local in terms of cultural particularities or resistances that challenge metropolitan power. Some have called for "the native's point of view" (Geertz 1973) or "letting the subaltern speak" (Spivak 1988), while others celebrate the local modification or even rejection of foreign ideas and products.¹ By privileging cultural spaces, particularities, and agencies, these approaches unwittingly reinscribe the binarism of a global North and South and view new spaces of global encounter subsumed within a hegemonic world system.² But the framing of a capitalist global versus a cultural local is overdetermined by spatial fixity that does not engage complex transnational dynamics that condition the politics of space and truth claims.

The philosopher Michel Foucault (1984) observes, "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment. I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (1). Practices of assemblages and reassemblage, I argue, are key to our understanding of the making and unmaking of contingent spaces that disrupt old notions of spatial division and connection.³ In an earlier time, world-exploring projects such as Marco Polo's voyages brought disparate peoples, places, and things into transborder interrelationships, thus configuring a new space of intersubjective exchanges. Today, in a world of far superior communications, there are myriad projects that variously link diverse actors and viewpoints and that in interaction crystallize novel conditions of possibilities.⁴

I view contemporary art as a distinctive mode of space rupturing and conceptual reconfiguration. Anthropologists have argued that the modern art world and market are global sites where bounded notions of observer and observed are being challenged. As international museums and exhibitions proliferate, George Marcus and Fred Myers note the increas-

ing role of anthropologists in mediating and critiquing Western "appropriation" and appreciation of ethnographic artifacts as "art" from the Third and Fourth Worlds.⁵ My approach is very different, focusing not on the circulation of indigenous art but on the circulation of contemporary artists exercising novel ideas in spaces of global encounter. I see the anthropologist as not merely an expert on "native artifacts" installed in Western collections but a cointerpreter alongside artists, curators, and critics of contemporary art, especially that produced by non-Western artists.

The artist Sol Lewitt notes that conceptual art is art in which the idea takes precedence over traditional concerns with craftsmanship. It can be defined as "the idea that becomes a machine that makes the art" (Lewitt 1967). There is a productive resonance between this definition and what Foucault calls criticism. Critique, he says, "consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based" (Foucault 1994:456). Conceptual art, I argue, as idea and critique, can be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics that engages a given situation as a question; that is, it is an art that simultaneously ruptures familiar modes of reasoning while anticipating emerging problems. It is critical therefore to consider non-Europeans and Europeans encountering each other as equivalent actors in reforming the global intellectual zeitgeist and in envisioning the world anew.

Bringing What Marco Polo Forgot

The Rise of Contemporary Chinese Art

Western readings of Chinese avant-gardism either reject contemporary Chinese art (CCA) as sham avant-gardism or celebrate it for its presumed cosmopolitanism. A brief account of the global emergence of CCA is in order. In the post-Mao period, Chinese artists had newfound freedoms to experiment with Western forms that broke with socialist or romantic realism intended for educating the masses. By the 1980s, they had found their own artist language to depict not "what the world should be like, but what it is."⁶ The rise of CCA is a momentous development, as heretofore, Asian conceptualists included only a few individuals, such as expatriate Japanese artist Yoko Ono and the Korean artist Nam June Paik. Chinese conceptual artists, variously inspired by Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Damian Hirst, had by the 1990s blossomed on the global art scene.

China has a vast pool of contemporary art talent, with

1. Peter Worsley's (1970) *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo Cults" in Melanesia* was an early study of cultural "resistance" to colonialism and capitalism. There is great variation among cultural resistance scholarship, including works on the "moral economy of the peasant" associated with James C. Scott. Recent anthropological approaches to "cultural globalization" focus on postcolonial resistances to new waves of consumer goods and ideas. See, e.g., Inda and Rosaldo (2005).

2. For the paradigmatic formulation, see Marcus and Fischer (1986).

3. For an earlier discussion of assemblage and reassemblage as transnational practices, see Ong (2005).

4. "Assembling the Global in Anthropology" series. Aihwa Ong, Stephen J. Collier, and Janet Roitman, eds. Palgrave-Macmillan, New York.

5. For this reason, they claim that "anthropology and its traditional subjects are increasingly involved in the production of art and the institutions on which its production depends." See Marcus and Myers (1995:4).

6. "Orville Schell and Uli Sigg in Conversation." *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*. Berkeley Art Museum, September 14, 2008.

artists creating a wide spectrum of installations, performance art, and computer works. However, many artworks are highly uneven in quality, and those exhibited abroad have been dismissed as “formulaic and facile” in their blatant commercialism (Smee 2009). One trend is a seemingly automatic copy of Warhol’s style, by inserting images of Mao in novel contexts (e.g., *Marilyn/Mao* by Yu Youhan). Western observers tend to view the Warholian repetitive style in CCA as copycat techniques intended for a commodity economy shaped by the international gallery system.⁷ Though Warhol and Jeff Koons have been criticized on similar grounds, they are also often held up as exemplars that dramatize the banalities of affluence, while Chinese artistic citations of Pop Art or global icons such as Marilyn or Mao are condemned as crass commercial opportunism with reduced aesthetic value.

Swiss collector Uli Sigg, whose collection includes *Marilyn/Mao*, notes that there are about a hundred world-class figures among the thousands of artists who traffic in trivial commercialization, bad workmanship, and so on.⁸ The best works have been snapped up by Western art collectors who began to generate a market for CCA in the West. Art Biennales further exposed CCA to international audiences, thus increasing their demand by the global art market. American collectors and curators have also begun to look for fresh art in China, and to some extent India and other Asian countries are considered the new sources of innovative artwork.

President Jiang Zemin’s 2002 visit to Europe had also intensified global interest in modern Chinese art. Official China, which had considered contemporary art incomprehensible and ugly, began to sponsor it by building museums and tolerating avant-gardism. The rapid conquest of global art markets by CCA suggested the possibility that contemporary Chinese artists can help raise China’s global image as a cultural force. At the same time, however, the Chinese authorities have retained the practice of deciding which artworks are banned, that is, forbidden to be shown in public and yet not inaccessible to foreign buyers. Here, the depictions of Mao in compromising positions, such as swimming in a sea of blood or kneeling in remorse for wrongs committed;⁹ Mao as Mickey Mouse; or Mao as dolls with naked female breasts have been banned from public showings. The Public Security Office, as well as the developers that control the 798 Art District in

Beijing, frequently pose guards or shut down exhibitions that satirize Mao and other political figures. But the very vulnerability of the most provocative art to state censorship engenders the commercial art boom, as state repression seems to intensify the global commercial interest in forbidden Chinese art.

Many foreign collectors and curators attend underground exhibitions and play the role of gatekeepers, whose criteria and choices shape Western perceptions of modern Chinese art. For instance, a New York gallery set up PaceWildenstein in Beijing to collect works by painter Zhang Xiaogang and performance artist (“mystical madman”) Zhang Huan. Besides the obvious reason of their capacity to attract high prices, Peter Boris of PaceWildenstein commented, “We are not overly concerned with censorship. It creates a tension in China that is absent in New York or London. It allows for heroic art to be made. . . . In reality, we are witnessing the birth of an emerging identity” (Lankarani 2008). The productive relationship between state repression and an enhanced art value for foreign buyers fosters a dualistic perception that Chinese experimental art can be celebrated for its cosmopolitanism or rejected out of concerns of its propaganda or mere art entrepreneurialism. But much of their inspiration, I argue, comes from attempts to reframe modern mainland experiences and China’s relationship to the world.

Diaspora Artists and Cosmopolitanism

Thus, Western commercial and cosmopolitan interests, on the one hand, and the Chinese state’s ambivalent relationship to experimental art, on the other, have led to a bifurcated reception of CCA in the United States. Innovative elements in paintings and displays, for instance, are frequently read as avant-garde impulses in an unambiguous support of cosmopolitan freedom. A description of the Gwangju Art Biennale 2008 connects the florescence of Asian art to “global formations of civil society, where relationship between state & civil society hovers in a state of animation & contestation, e.g. civil society as a platform of the global multitude.”¹⁰

This view of the rise of a global platform for civil action is inspired by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) in their book *Empire*. Invoking Immanuel Kant’s notion of cosmopolitics, Hardt and Negri maintain that in a world dominated by capitalism’s empire, denationalized multitudes gathering in global sites of cities, exhibitions, and cultural fairs create a space of “communication and collaboration in a common political project” (Hardt and Negri 2000:218). The multitude in its desire for liberation is united only by its hostility to the system of national borders and its tenacious desire for cosmopolitan freedom (Hardt and Negri 2000). This global versus national framework underpins Western investments in

10. “Formations of Global Society and Domains of Public Culture.” Report for the Seventh Gwangju Biennale, Beijing, October 28–November 1, 2008.

7. The practice of embedding foreign or borrowed elements in artistic works has a long history in East-West trade. Think of the exports from China in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, when Chinese ceramic motifs and colorings were designed for the European markets; such Chinoiserie elements and blue-white schemes became standard English and Dutch china ornamentations.

8. “Orville Schell and Uli Sigg in Conversation,” *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, Berkeley Art Museum, September 14, 2008.

9. In *Ash Red*, a 2006 exhibition that was shut down, the artist siblings Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang displayed paintings of Mao swimming in a sea of blood. More recently, their sculptures of a kneeling Mao with a removable head and of many Mao figures aiming their rifles at Jesus Christ (echoes of a Goya painting) have also been forced underground.

experimental art as the medium with potential for spreading communicability and commensurability in universal values. It shapes a positive view of CCA as a vehicle that propagates ideals of world citizenship.

At the same time, leading New York art critics have been highly critical of the rapturous embrace of modern Chinese art and its display in storied museums such as the Guggenheim. They view CCA as sham avant-gardism developed in response to global market interest. The critics cite shoddy methods, art entrepreneurialism, and pretend or illusory avant-garde messages (Schjeldahl 2008). Accusations of modern Chinese artists as nothing more than veiled propagandists of the Chinese state claim that the "Mao craze" was abetted by European fascination with fascist art. Jed Perl, a New York art critic, puts it this way: "There is a world of difference between an icon freely chosen and an icon imposed from above, and the difference has more than a little to do with the difference between a liberal society and an authoritarian society. Warhol's way of blurring this distinction leads straight to the political pornography that characterizes so much of the new Chinese art" (Perl 2008). Perl's judgment echoes the kind of reflexive condemnation in the business world whereby foreign managers wish to remake Chinese workers as neoliberal subjects but these same workers and China are then criticized as prime examples of neoliberal opportunism run wild (Ong 2006).

Such criticisms are haunted by the apparent passing of avant-gardism to Asian artists and the worry that the explosive growth of Asian art markets threatens contemporary Western art. Given that the innovative energy in avant-gardism now arises in the East, will American critics be able to retain their position as preeminent arbiters in the world of modern art? Furthermore, the indirect style and allegorical tendencies of Chinese modern art are unsettling established aesthetic norms, thus undermining the authority of Western art experts.

In short, the overseas displays of Chinese conceptual art have sparked events that arouse both hopes of cosmopolitan commensurability and suspicions of sham art as propaganda. Such contradictory receptions, I argue, are framed by Western obsessions and fears of East Asia as an object of insurmountable difference. On the one hand, there is the insistence on the international relevance of neo-Enlightenment projects now taken up by "the people without history" or from the heretofore periphery; on the other hand, there is the expectation that the Chinese experimental artist must take on the tormented legacy of modern European history.

Indeed, Chinese experimental artists use their works to interpret historical events—Marco Polo's return to Europe, the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the rise of China—to index shifts in global and national orders. The question therefore becomes one of how conceptual Asian art in global contexts can change Western perceptions of China and a Chinese role in shaping the global. What are modern Chinese artists bringing to the West that Marco Polo did not (see fig. 2)?

Instead of viewing non-European artists as cosmopolitans or propagandists, we can regard them as catalysts of shifting geopolitical perceptions. Adorno's analytics of the political are recast by Espen Hammer as an "anticipatory politics" that responds to social configuration and are reached in a condition of social uncertainty and exception (Hammer 2005: 120). As a form of micropolitics or immanent critique, Martin Jay (2006) remarks, anticipatory politics "neither papers over contradictions nor forces" and does not even point to their positive or facile resolutions. It is an ethical practice that "gains leverage by defying the reduction of experience to the concepts that define it" (Jay 2006). I view conceptual art as a distinctive form of anticipatory politics that confronts existing social arrangements through border-rupturing experimentations. By assembling and juxtapositioning disparate elements (West-East, past and present, culture and technology, etc.) in global spaces of encounter, modern Chinese art is anticipatory of a new global, one that embraces inevitable heterogeneity, subversion, and uncertainty. I next track an aesthetic politics in Cai Guo-Qiang's installations at the Guggenheim Museum, against his critics who deploy notions of Chinese threat and the absence of advocacy for a cosmopolitan civil society in Chinese art.

Cai's Spectacles in a Space of Global Encounter

In spring 2008, Cai Guo-Qiang, an émigré artist living in Brooklyn, had a major exhibition in New York City. Called *I Want to Believe*, the show is the first by a China-born artist at the Guggenheim, and it delivered a mix of spectacular paintings and installations redolent of transgression and magic. A curator notes the "unique aesthetic iconography" that draws freely on Chinese medicine, maritime history, Taoist cosmology, fireworks, and Maoist revolutionary tactics (Krens 2008:11). There is no time to go into the many exhibits, including Cai's famous paintings by gunpowder and spectacles by fireworks. Cai has been viewed as an alchemist, spinning gold out of dirt and dust (Chan 2008). He also converts the American view of China as a cultural desert to an impassioned debate about the nature of Chinese experimental art. Is Cai a master of Chinese avant-garde opportunism or an authentic champion of artistic freedom?

That April, I walked into a crowded audience at the exhibition *I Want to Believe*. People were craning their necks to look at a chain of American automobiles tumbling from the ceiling. Electric light rods protruding from the cars emitted flashing lights, thus heightening the image of a sequence of car explosions. This vertical installation was called *Inopportune: Stage One*, indicating the imageries related to acts of terrorism and the violent uses of American technology (see fig. 3).¹¹

11. The Cai Archives provided images of installations from earlier exhibitions, but they are the same as the exhibits I observed at the Guggenheim Museum in 2008.



Figure 2. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Bring to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*, 1995. Cai helping to load wooden fishing boat from Quanzhou, Chinese herbs, ginseng (100 kg). Boat: 700 × 950 × 180 cm. Commissioned by the 46th Venice Biennale. Museo Navale di Venezia (fishing boat), private collections (other components). Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu, courtesy Cai Studio. Figures 1 and 2 are of the actual Cai installations that took place at the *Transculture* exhibition, 46th Venice Biennale, 1995. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

In another room, there was a wooden Chinese boat, its surface studded with approximately 3,000 arrows, that was also suspended from the ceiling. Attached to the bow was an electric fan, blowing a red Chinese flag (see fig. 4). The museum copy notes that this work alludes to a legendary story involving a Chinese general (Zhuge Liang, 1812–1834) who provided a lesson on the importance of resourcefulness and strategy. In order to produce tens of thousands of arrows for an impending battle, Zhuge had his men fill 20 boats with straw figures and set out just before dawn. War drums attracted the enemies, who fired arrows into the straw dummies, thus effectively delivering Zhuge with the weapons. The curatorial statement notes Cai's analysis of China's emergence in the late 1990s through a tactical borrowing of Western technologies (Krens and Munroe 2008:204–205).

Whereas the work symbolizes technological borrowing, my own reading finds a deeper message about mobile weapons and different cultural deployment. Cai seems to set up a contrasting parallelism between the installation of exploding American cars and this display of a boat bearing stolen arrows.

Whereas American technology has been put to violent uses by enemies (and Americans?) against the source country (i.e., in a kind of technological blowback), in Chinese hands, Western weapons are combined with Chinese tactics to defend Chinese lives. A historical continuity of guerilla tactics is invoked in the display of an ancient Chinese boat sailing home after using their weapons to disarm opponents, with the national flag fluttering in the wind (also a condition of possibility enabled by Western technology). In other words, technology is meaningful only in the context of its strategic uses in anticipation of specific political outcomes.

Another display featuring indigenous knowledge and foreign technology depicts the ark used by Genghis Khan in his invasion of Eurasia. The ark is composed of 108 inflated sheepskins and three Toyota engines that are kept running to keep the raft aloft (see fig. 5). Museum curators interpret the juxtapositioning of Khan's skills as a warrior and the tale of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" as a caution to Western audiences about their fears of Asian dominance. Newsmagazine clippings that line the gallery wall "document the mutual de-



Figure 3. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Inopportune: Stage One*, 2004. Nine cars and sequenced multichannel light tubes. Dimensions variable. Seattle Art Museum, gift of Robert M. Arnold, in honor of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum, 2006. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. Photo by David Heald. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

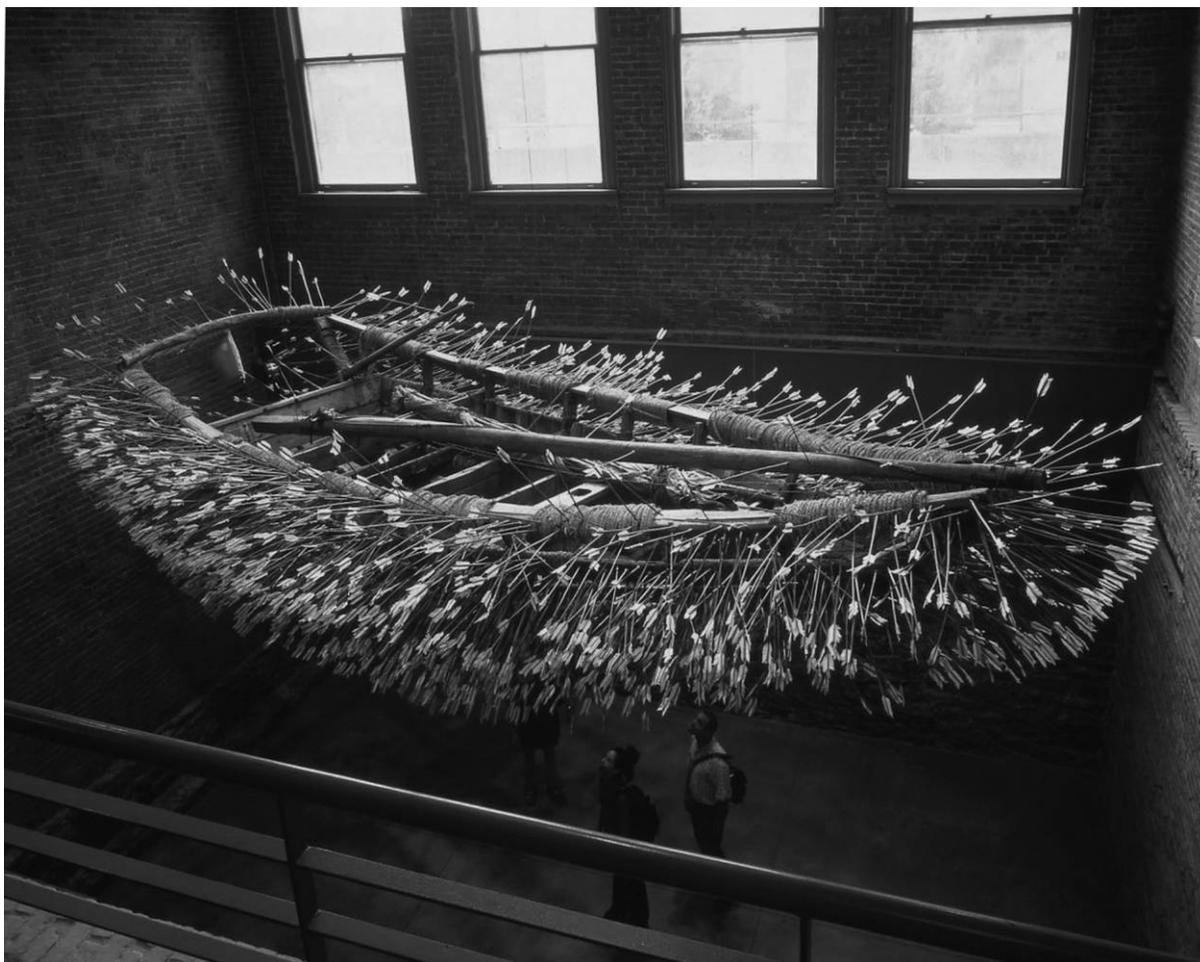


Figure 4. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*, 1998. Wooden boat, canvas sail, arrows, metal, rope, Chinese flag, and electric fan. Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros in honor of Glenn D. Lowry. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

pendence—characterized by attraction and repulsion—between East and West in the era of globalization” (Krens and Munroe 2008:193–197).

Again, the above reading seems to miss a more subtle and hopeful message. Asia’s historical resourcefulness in using technologies from different sources is exemplified by Kahn’s success in enlarging his dominion. Today, Cai’s magic dragon is an allegory of how our world is kept afloat by cross-cultural technologies that animate ancient skills. The Toyota engines allude to Asian companies making use of American technology to provide affordable transportation for the world’s population. Such novel combinations of disparate skills and artfulness should be viewed not as dangerous but as contemporary forms of cultural creativity that draw on disparate skills from many lands to form, in often surprising ways, bridges across political divides of time and space.

The broad reception of Cai’s works has been mixed. Cai is recognized as head and shoulders above many China-based

artists. Nevertheless, some American art critics have characterized Cai as a clever showman and sham artist who is overpromoted by greedy corporations. They note his past as a stage manager, identify technical flaws in his work, and criticize the use of factory products, such as stuffed animals, in his installations (certainly Warhol and Koons both used mass-production techniques and faced similar objections). The Guggenheim is vilified for using this avant-gardist opportunist to “turn the museum into a space of corporate spectacle” (Davis 2008). Because Cai refuses to speak on behalf of the Chinese government or use the language of civil society and human rights, he is viewed as lacking in ideology and interested only in making a lot of money.

Cai’s most explicitly political work at this exhibition was *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a pre-Liberation scene composed of life-size peasants bringing rent to a landlord. As a reproduction of an iconic socialist critique of feudal oppression



Figure 5. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*, 1996. One hundred eight sheepskin bags, wooden branches, paddles, rope, three Toyota engines, and photocopies of various magazine covers and article clippings. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

that originated in the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts in 1965, Cai's display is controversial on many fronts (see fig. 6).

In China, the original work has been used as a model for political and educational purposes that give voice to peasants and workers speaking out against class exploitation. In 1999, the director of the Venice Biennale asked Cai to reproduce a small-scale version of *Rent Collection Court*, perhaps as an ironic appropriation of what Westerners viewed as a Maoist

propaganda showpiece. Commenting on this example of socialist-realist aesthetics, Cai was reported as saying, "I do not know whether it is the artists of the Cultural Revolution or us who hold the strongest attachment to art, but the people of that time believed in a new society and an ideal for mankind" (Perl 2008). Invoking this quote, Perl, the New York art critic, condemns Cai for his "Stalinist double-talk," in suggesting that only "proletarian art, the people's art, is real



Figure 6. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Rent Collection Courtyard*, 1999. Realized at Deposito Polveri, Arsenale, Venice. One hundred eight life-sized sculptures created on site by Long Xu Li and nine guest artisan sculptors, 60 tons of clay, wire, and wood armature. Commissioned by the 48th Venice Biennale. Photo by Elio Montanari, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

art” and thereby seducing “the mass audience that visits today’s tonier museums. . . . These artists have pulled off a feat unprecedented in modern history: they have figured out a way to be communist fellow travelers and capitalist fellow travelers at the same time” (Perl 2008). Here is an instance of an impassioned reception that sees the world in black-and-white terms. The liberal West has free subjects; totalitarian China has robotic propagandist artists. Global spaces are now dangerously connected by copycat Chinese artists and greedy American collectors and curators who abet and showcase them in Western centers of prestige. Perl’s rancor is framed by an orientalist perspective incapable of viewing East Asian subjects as having independent thought, creativity, and political agency. The overseas activities of Chinese artists are rejected as propaganda efforts to aestheticize the catastrophe of the Maoist revolution and hoodwink free people everywhere with the aesthetic virtues of totalitarian art.

While a conceptual work need not coincide with the intention of the artist, good experimental art unfurls a chain of ideas that takes us to different conclusions. Cai’s comments about the artists who built the original *Courtyard* project recognize their authentic passions, but such empathy for the

original artists who championed the suffering masses need not be read as an automatic support for the totalitarian regime that followed. First, the relocation of the *Courtyard* scene in a startlingly different way challenges the claim about a restaging of state propaganda. Especially for Chinese audiences, Cai’s model of this icon of peasant suffering and cry for social justice in prerevolutionary China can engender mixed emotions that rupture links to past culture and past politics. On the one hand, there is profound revulsion at the cruelties associated with Chinese feudalism and relief that many of its forms have been eliminated.¹² On the other hand, the recreation of an earlier socialist agitprop in contemporary times outside China can be a jarring reminder of the political mistakes and catastrophes that betrayed the dreams of the Chinese masses. There is deep embarrassment (perhaps not limited to ethnic Chinese audiences) in being forced to contemplate a revolutionary piece that embodies an unyielding tendency toward the past and the mindless adherence to the collective will.

12. For mainland criticisms of Chinese feudal culture, see, e.g., Tu Wei-Ming (1991).

Furthermore, a close inspection of the display discloses that the figures have been constructed of clay and wire, a technique that shows them going through various stages of crumbling. Is the disintegration of both the peasant and rent-collecting figures a subtle performance of the disintegration of the socialist-realist dreams over the passage of time? By assembling a propaganda icon in a novel context, while exposing its material form to the natural conditions of deterioration, Cai's project subtly erodes Maoist thinking and juxtaposes feudal violence with the larger revolutionary violence that haunts this work. In Cai's hands, *Rent Collection Courtyard* is stripped of its original power, and in its undisguised banality in the Guggenheim, the scenario becomes a message that the revolutionary past and its utopian dreams should be allowed to fade away. This oblique message about time and hindsight destroying faith in revolutionary politics and state authoritarianism is echoed, again in a paradoxical way, in another Cai installation.

In *Head On*, 99 wolves suspended in a stream slam into a glass wall (see fig. 7). Viewers tend to see this work as a celebration of individual freedom that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. But in a recent comment, Cai notes that the work can be read not as 99 individual wolves but as a single entity

in motion, one that repeats the same mistake over and over again (Davis 2008). So a project that is widely interpreted as individuals rushing to freedom can also be read as an oblique criticism of the herd instinct of the collective that drives the multitude to reproduce political disasters again and again. Can it be that *Head On* uses Eastern Europe as the stand-in for China and its disastrous blunders in recent history?

Although foreign audiences frequently miss the complex links to traumatic events and revisionist remembering of recent Chinese history, artists such as Cai trouble Western perceptions of and demands on Chinese art to perform according to their political assumptions. By challenging established thinking about time and space, Cai enacts a form of aesthetic politics in global sites that anticipates emergent experiences of the global.

American curators who defend Cai want to promote Asian artists as émigré artists whose art expresses cross-border freedoms and contributes to Western ideals of cosmopolitanism. However, leading Chinese artists refuse to give comfort to such assumptions about commensurable cosmopolitanism. Arthur Lubow, a *New York Times* journalist, notes that Cai is a global citizen who both discomforts his country and is also "very patriotic" (Lubow 2008). And yet, Chinese artists



Figure 7. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Head On*, 2006. Ninety-nine life-sized replicas of wolves and a glass wall. Wolves: gauze, resin, and painted hide. Dimensions variable. Deutsche Bank Collection, commissioned by Deutsche Bank AG. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio. Figures 3–7 are of Cai's earlier works similar to the installations in the *I Want to Believe* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008. Although my discussion is focused on the Guggenheim exhibits, Cai Studio furnished the images of earlier installations. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

stir unease because of their attachment to China as the motherland. Whereas in conventional anthropology of art, the focus is on the “authenticity” of “primitive” objects, here we have a new global situation where the problem is focused on the “authenticity” of the modern artist, a criterion that does not go with being an “authentic” Chinese subject as well.¹³

Authentic Artist, Inauthentic Chinese?

Such conceptual compartmentalization compels artists to swerve between being framed as genuine avant-garde artists (cosmopolitan) and being framed as authentic Chinese (Chinese patriots)—but not both at the same time. Assumptions about an artist’s distance or closeness to China as motherland enact a moral audit of his or her art. The new twinning of Chinese identity and global capitalist power also contributes to such binary oppositions. The question of what is “Chinese” in CCA is thus viewed as a source of geopolitical apprehensions as well as global market value.

In 2005, an Italian collector who opened a gallery in Beijing noted that “you cannot tell from their work that they are Chinese. They express strong ideas with a lot of freshness” (Lankarani 2008). Here is the familiar premise about the incommensurability of being a Chinese and an avant-gardist. Thus, Chinese artists have had to manage perceptions that they are interested only in commercial benefits and/or propagandist influence overseas. In Western contexts, many artists claim that their “Chineseness” is incidental to their art, even when global markets want art from China. At the same time, the very “Chineseness” in CCA has been an irreducible part of its cultural appeal to Asian collectors who may otherwise have been indifferent to experimental art. This divergent valuation of Chineseness—as having market value in Western and Asian markets but questionable political valence in Western art circles—has conditioned the more commercially driven artists to be highly sensitive about their Chinese identity. Given the politics of reception that require modern Asian art to be either lucrative or avant-gardist, but not both at the same time (as compared to Hirst’s works), Chinese artists have become agile in dodging “Chineseness” as a damning category. Cai was recently interviewed in New York about how he sees himself as a border-crossing artist. Cai replied that he checks all the boxes for “international,” “Chinese,” “Asian,” and “contemporary,” but the most meaningful category is as “a New York artist . . . [where] you can be a normal person.”¹⁴ Here is an instance of the entrepreneurial artist who wants to get passports and be welcomed in global cities

13. The debate on the political “authenticity” of the artist is an important problem that is underdeveloped in conventional anthropology of art, which tends to dwell on “authentic” versus “fake” art objects. See, e.g., Morphy and Perkins (2006).

14. See *Wall Street Journal*—sponsored event, “Art without Borders,” Summer Festival at the Lincoln Center, July 1, 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/video/art-without-borders/642509E4-957E-4A95-BC0C-CD5BEC7D38D3.html> (accessed July 3, 2009).

but who also knows how to play the Chinese card very well when necessary.

The question is, Are these artists also troubling authoritarian politics at home? What mode of politics is at stake here? Indeed, the adjacency of world-renown Chinese artists to the Chinese state is extremely troubling to Western observers who seek in CCA explicit critiques of the Chinese party-state. American obsessions about the threat of China’s capitalism to Western avant-gardism and suspicion of Chinese uses of art as propaganda can be traced to the uses of modern art by state socialism and for the glorification of the Third Reich. For art critics, there has been no problem with commissioning ethnic Chinese artists such as Maya Lin to create the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or I. M. Pei to redesign part of the Louvre Museum for the glorification of France. But contemporary Chinese artists who are nationals of China are always already judged as compromised when they work on national projects for China. The assumptions that one cannot be both an avant-garde artist and a patriotic Chinese, or be loved by Western art critics and love your Chinese homeland at the same time, block more nuanced interpretations of modern artistic experiments.

For American critics, the 2008 Beijing Olympics was a global show put on by a fascist state, and many refused to give it legitimacy by watching it. Thus, when Cai, Zhang Yimou, and Ai Weiwei variously participated in staging the Beijing Olympics, they were judged as selling out. Critics claim that by taking a position of adjacency to the state, they lend their talents to the glorification of China itself (Lubow 2008). But one can also read the involvement of leading artists as a way to convert a nationalistic show into a reimagining of the global. Zhang Yimou, the film director in charge of the Olympics cultural performances, said, “The Olympic circle is round. The National Stadium is circular. There is Cai’s circle in the sky. The circle is very important in Chinese thinking—the sky is round, the earth is square. Round symbolizes limitlessness, also fullness and completeness” (Lubow 2008). In the opening ceremonies, Cai orchestrated the fireworks spiral that suggested a dragon unfurling out of the “Bird’s Nest,” that is, a pyrotechnical display of China’s spectacular but peaceful rise in consonant with the Olympic theme of “One World, One Dream.”¹⁵ Such a legend issued by another country would be considered benign or a gesture to the Olympic global spirit, but these Chinese displays have been received as contamination by the state and not as a cultural celebration that anticipates a globality of spirit transcending the Chinese nation.

Chinese art is shaping global encounters that do not necessarily produce the kind of commensurable politics Western progressives associate with their ideal of a global civil society.

15. The slogan “One World, One Dream” is conspicuously borne on a giant banner attached to a major viewing site of the Great Wall. Here is a state promise that China’s new prominence seeks to promote global solidarity rather than division.

As anticipatory politics, experimental art tends to expose differences and conflicts, to generate conditions of possibility for new forces that do not fall neatly into a pre-given institutional form. For instance, Ai had collaborated in the design of the Bird's Nest, but he disputed the image of the new stadium as a container of Chinese culture or launching pad for China's political glory. Ai says that the design of the stadium represents emptiness and that the conception "was free of any obstructions of traditional notions" (Zhang 2008). His refusal of Chinese elements is an interesting contrast to Cai's redeployment of the same in his art. But Ai's iconoclastic move is to break from contemporary Chinese politics ("We must bid farewell to autocracy"; Ai 2008), a struggle depicted in the elliptical web of steel columns that seems to strain to contain intense activity within. Jacques Herzog, of the Swiss Herzog and de Meuron firm that built the structure, notes that "the building is made to be open. It is a work of public sculpture" (Ourossoff 2008:A1, A14). Although the Chinese government built a fence around it, the Bird's Nest anticipates a new politics of public space (in sharp contrast to the massive surveillance of Tiananmen Square). Ai feels that the state has (temporarily) misappropriated his symbolism of the national stadium (he refused to attend the Olympics). Clearly, the designers view the Bird's Nest as a free-flowing structure (redolent of Taoism?) that transcends public-private divides and reaches between national barriers for a new global openness.

The vector of ideas unleashed by Cai's and Ai's works disrupts Western binarism and fears of Asia to suggest a new configuration of global possibilities. Their projects are commentaries on historical events that benchmark steps in the arrival of a new global era. Asia as an object of Western reflection is being taken up as an object of aesthetic revision and intervention in our confrontation with global realities. China's leading public intellectual, Wang Hui, has observed that "with Cai, 'China' or 'Asia' is no longer an object of 'Western' eyes. . . . Cai does not objectify his own experience and tradition, but rather methodolizes them in order to observe the world in which we exist. Precisely in striving to turn 'China' and 'Asia' into a method," Cai's style as an aesthetic catalyst draws on a literary tradition of using civilization (*wen*) to oppose savagery (Wang 2008:47–48). For this reason, perhaps, Cai can be compared to a traditional Chinese healer, a conjurer of possible futures out of the unpromising detritus of materiality, culture, and history.

Conclusion: The Artist Problematizes the Global

Marco Polo opened a route to China, but we are still grappling with the concepts of the world as an interconnected mutuality. Contemporary Chinese artists actively juxtapose Chinese and Western idioms in works that rupture and animate the global as a problem-space of ideas. CCA intervenes in the power relations of global representations.

As a distinctive form of anticipatory politics, Chinese art,

in addressing our global wounds and existentialist crisis, our loss of old certainties in politics and beliefs, unleashes a spiral of new ideas. Artists such as Cai take spatial and mystical leaps that do not follow logically from sociological causes and connections. The mobile art of anticipatory politics, through its novel combinations and disjunctions, can heal global wounds while anticipating new global possibilities. Chinese artists subvert old categories without being frozen into a political stance of being for or against China. Experimental Chinese art problematizes established notions of global civil society and avant-garde politics while proposing new ways of thinking that do not settle for predetermined resolutions or outcomes. Because anticipatory political art operates in the vector space that takes multiple sites as points of reference, it makes conflicts more visible and engages in a "continuous criticism" (Foucault 1994:457) of institutionalized relationships. It crystallizes conditions for reenvisioning the world as heterogeneous and always in motion.

In closing, I call for an anthropological engagement with art criticism that both interprets the art objects individually and also critically engages with interpretations of non-European refigurations of the global. As rooted cosmopolitans, mobile artists cannot be reduced to stereotypical figures of a global civil society or of a particular culture or state. Poised at the junction of nations, their novel reassemblages of disparate cultural elements are involved in a continuous interrogation of received categories that have long frozen our picture of the world. Conceptual artists are exemplary figures of what cosmopolitan anthropologists can and should be in contemporary times. As anticipatory political actors in the world at large, Chinese artists perform their role as "authentically modern" global subjects. At stake are new ideas that rethink the global.

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Comments

Lily Chumley

Department of Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University, 239 Greene Street, New York, New York 10003, U.S.A. (chumley@nyu.edu). 27 II 12

As Aihwa Ong suggests in her paper, international interest in Chinese contemporary art is framed by curiosity about China's reform era, in particular curiosity about cultural

transformations resulting from structural transition. English-language critical writing on Chinese art tends to refer to “emerging,” “developing,” and even “burgeoning” sensibilities, deploying the same spatial and temporal rhetorics that journalists use to describe China’s “rise.”

The politics of desire that surround the transnational circulations of images of resistance are an object of ironic reflection among artists in China. Here is a joke: why is it that even now, 35 years after his death, so much “contemporary” art (especially in the ’90s genre called “Political Pop,” which the collector Uli Sigg helped bring to international prominence around the turn of the century) *still* depicts the face of Chairman Mao? Answer: because he is the only Chinese political figure that Western buyers can recognize.

Western buyers of Chinese contemporary art have been consistently fascinated by work that seems to express political opposition. But it is not always clear what these collectors want Chinese artists to oppose or, rather, which object of resistance they want to see in the images they purchase: the communist past? the contemporary party-state? the excesses of unregulated capitalism?

The confusion of oppositions in which post–Cold War Western art collectors find themselves is paralleled in the often-conflicting political orientations and economic commitments of many artists and intellectuals in China. This political ambivalence is aptly described in a spoken-word piece by the avant-garde musician Yan Jun: *Fandui, fandui women ziji, fandui yiqie, fandui women bu keneng fandui de yiqie* (Oppose, oppose ourselves, oppose everything, oppose everything we cannot oppose). In this context, ostensibly political signifiers such as Red Guards in green uniforms tend to operate ambiguously, both at home and in the international art market. Inserting such images into a Chelsea gallery, rather than “undoing Western categories of knowledge,” may actually confirm them.

Certainly, many Chinese artists who came to prominence in the 1990s (often as émigrés to the West) had personal and political reasons for exploring the socialist iconography of the Cultural Revolution. However, they also understood the inscrutability of most of that iconography outside of China. In a time when the market for Chinese contemporary art was almost entirely foreign, the limitations of Western audiences set limits to their explorations, in many respects more confining than those set by censorship (given that many of these artists were living in the West and that the Chinese party-state apparatus has historically been relatively less concerned with restricting niche genres). The work of becoming cosmopolitan has never been equally distributed.

In a class in the Central Academy of Fine Arts that I observed as part of fieldwork in 2008, a young woman made a series of conceptual art pieces about Mao’s poetry. In one piece she wrote lines from his famous poems on toilet paper, in water. The teacher told her: “This is not your life. Why make work about the past?” He insinuated that she was trying to make something that would sell by repeating themes from

famous artists—integrating Xu Bing’s conceptual calligraphy and the ironic Mao references of Political Pop. However, the contrast between this student’s work and the famous art it recalled is telling. Her toilet paper calligraphy was heavily dependent on local references to specific texts and textual practices. To the teacher, those familiar lines of poetry seemed clichéd, but for an international audience, they would seem arcane and require rather more translation and interpretation than many venues are willing to offer young artists. In contrast, far from subverting “old categories” or problematizing “established notions,” Xu Bing’s famous text pieces avoid presenting Western viewers with the limits of their own interpretive capacities. What at first looks like inscrutable Chinese calligraphy turns out to be English after all, or else (in another piece) illegible nonsense, which there is no need to read.

Cai Guo-Qiang presents an interesting case in this context. Cai has persistently insisted on using textual explication to communicate with foreign audiences. Most non-Chinese visitors to the Guggenheim will be forced to read museum copy in order to even begin to interpret the *Rent Collection Courtyard* or *Borrowing Your Enemy’s Arrows*. It is not just a reference but also a history lesson. In that sense, it is certainly a “tool of global intervention.” But if this is an “anticipatory politics,” what kind of politics is it? Cai’s reproduction of *Rent Collection Courtyard* as a crumbling monument is evocative, even haunting. But is it a challenge to the dominant narratives of contemporary political economy, according to which we find ourselves in a capitalism that appears, for better or worse, as the “end of history”?

Sara L. Friedman

Departments of Anthropology and Gender Studies, Indiana University, 701 East Kirkwood Avenue, Bloomington, Indiana 47405, U.S.A. (slfriedm@indiana.edu). 17 II 12

A quick glance at the daily news reveals considerable anxiety about China’s status as a global power and growing Euro-American dependence on a country that has married authoritarian governance to unbridled capitalism. If the twenty-first century will be a Chinese century, what will this future bring, and how will it differ from the previous “American” century? Aihwa Ong insightfully interrogates this possibility by asking how contemporary Chinese art challenges Western categories of space, knowledge, and power by staging new global configurations and imaginaries. As in her previous work (e.g., Ong 1999, 2005, 2006), Ong integrates novel articulations of people, places, ideas, and forces to expose diverse formulations of the global with sensitive analytic flair. Here, she examines both contemporary artworks and the presence of Chinese artists in a marketplace formerly dominated by Euro-Americans. These artists, Ong argues, radically un-

settle Western arbiters of artistic excellence by deploying a form of "anticipatory politics" that shifts geopolitical orientations and foreshadows new global possibilities.

Ong rightly takes to task Western art critics whose particular brand of cosmopolitanism requires pigeonholing Chinese contemporary artists as either nationalist propagandists or advocates of global civil society and human rights. Although the works of Cai Guo-Qiang and Ai Weiwei certainly offer possibilities for transcending those binaries and Western-centric global orientations, the artists persistently encounter their own Chineseness as a problem around which they dance with care and some ambivalence. Yet, their ability to subvert national identifications may be more constrained than Ong suggests. Cai, for example, literally embodies the burden of modern Chinese nation building (his name, Guo-Qiang, translates as "nation strengthening"). Hence, in Cai's desire to neutralize his Chinese origins, to be known as a "New York artist," we sense a struggle to escape his very personal inscription in the nation.

At stake here is the nature of politics in "anticipatory politics." Contemporary art is a world of the elite, and the new global configurations that Ong astutely finds in these works speak to elite sensibilities more than to the aspirations of the masses. Another approach to anticipatory politics addresses how the urban poor strategize in relation to unexpected possibilities that may create new opportunities for advancement or simply reconfigure the contours of global marginality (Simone 2010). This attention to the everyday practices and experiences of politics offers additional insights into how different visions of the global take shape along a continuum of elite and popular interests.

Here I briefly sketch two lines of inquiry inspired by Ong's rich analysis. Contemporary art's potential for political critique emerges partly through its sheer materiality: defined by presence, scale, and detail, these works thrust themselves into the viewer's sight lines and demand engagement. The medium matters. Ong's perceptive reading of Cai's reassemblage of the high socialist work *Rent Collection Courtyard* demonstrates how his choice of clay and wire, media that slowly crumble over time, critically redefines the revolutionary attack on feudal oppression as a totalitarian project destined for the dustbin of history. This critique, Ong argues, creates a conceptual space for envisioning a Chinese politics that does not reject the animating passions of the revolutionary past but recasts them through the sobering reflections of a contemporary gaze. Yet, if the reassemblage of this work in the Western-inflected space of the Vienna Biennale unsettles existing cosmopolitan frameworks, it does so by demanding commensurability primarily from an exclusive group of contemporary art critics and aficionados.

What does the staging of contemporary art mean for politics on the ground as experienced by the artists themselves? Ong concludes by identifying conceptual artists as "exemplar figures of what cosmopolitan anthropologists can and should

be in contemporary times." This suggestive equation underscores the simultaneously rooted and mobile personas of Chinese artists whose artistic vision and reception remain deeply inflected by national politics. Ai Weiwei's fate in the aftermath of the Beijing Olympics provides a cautionary tale for the future of cosmopolitan art and anthropology alike. Jailed for three months in spring 2011 (ostensibly for financial irregularities), Ai now faces restrictions on his movement within China and internationally. His outspoken critiques of the Beijing Olympics and iconoclastic artistic performances have made him more rooted than ever before, and although he has been commissioned to design a pavilion for the 2012 London Olympics, he is unlikely to see his work in person.

Whether the new global possibilities enacted through contemporary Chinese art and its transnational encounters transform politics on the ground is clearly an open question. As anthropologists, how can we cultivate a sensitive eye for the increasingly heterogeneous visions of the global emerging in diverse contexts while also remaining attuned to the possibilities and consequences of living those visions? Ong's article provokes us to ask how our futures as cosmopolitan anthropologists will be shaped by our responses to this challenge.

Laurel Kendall

Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th Street, New York, New York 10024, U.S.A. (lkendall@amnh.org). 22 II 12

Gunpowder Artfully Deployed

Witnessing the explosive presence of contemporary Chinese artists on the international scene—sometimes literally explosive, deploying gun powder—Aihwa Ong describes this work as symptomatic of the destabilization of "old geographies of East-West divisions," revealing the "complex transnational dynamics that condition the politics of space and truth claims." Ong takes Cai Guo-Qiang's 2008 Guggenheim Museum retrospective, *I Want to Believe*, as her primary focus, a mingling of traditional motifs and modern technology that makes playful and sometimes poignant allusions to Chinese history, both recent and distant. An artful shape shifter, Cai's work resists easy characterization as "Chinese" or "Western," "propaganda" or "critique"; it is, in Ong's terms, a "border-rupturing" experimentation. I applaud Ong's project and with it the particular challenges that any consideration of contemporary East Asia poses to tidy dichotomizations of the West and the rest. While Ong is primarily concerned with the rise of Asia as a contemporary global phenomenon, the region has always defied easy disciplinary generalization—peoples with history in spades and sometimes their own imperial projects. Ong's critique here puts indigestion to constructive use. But while

I applaud her “call for an anthropological engagement with art criticism that . . . critically engages with interpretations of non-European refigurations of the global,” all of this would be greatly strengthened had Ong resisted some simplifications of her own.

“Art critics,” and sometimes “New York critics,” are the *bête noire* of Ong’s piece, and some do, as she says, describe the work of contemporary Chinese artists as sham avant-gardism, blatant commercialism, or even veiled propaganda, but critics seldom speak with one voice, and others seem genuinely intrigued. Where critics repeatedly express puzzlement that Cai Guo-Qiang or even the overtly dissident Ai Weiwei can be simultaneously Chinese and cosmopolitan, critical and deeply patriotic, some among them seem genuinely intrigued by the capacity of this work to shake their own preconceptions about a place called “China” (e.g., Cotter 2008, 2011; Lubow 2008). When Peter Schjeldahl (2008), writing in the *New Yorker*, describes his own feeling of “provinciality” on meeting Cai, “of blinking in the face of an intricate sophistication that is grounded elsewhere,” he seems to be navigating Ong’s reconfigured world map. A more nuanced reading of art reviews and the possibility that at least some critics “get it” would actually support Ong’s notion of border-rupturing experimentations, testifying to the world-remapping power of the work that she engages in her own commentary.

In staking her own space, Ong is dismissive of the anthropology of art and apparently has not drunk deeply from this well. She observes that this field is concerned with the “authenticity” of “primitive art,” perhaps not realizing that far from policing this boundary, the work of Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim (1990), Ruth Phillips (1999), Christopher Steiner (1994), and others has done much to productively muddle it. Nor is the anthropology of art solely concerned with the morphing of ethnographic artifacts into museum pieces, although much good work has been done on this topic. The project initiated by Marcus and Myers (1995) also considers the context of art consumption: the markets where art circulates and the deployment of power within them (e.g., Geismar 2001). Ong’s throwaway comment about the gate-keeping role of foreign curators and collectors seems naive in the reconfigured universe that she invites us to contemplate: Chinese artists exhibit in MOMA, the Tate Modern, and the Guggenheim; Art Basil takes on a Hong Kong venue, art fairs and new art districts sprout up in Asian cities, contemporary Asian works command record prices in major auction houses, and Chinese buyers are visible players in all of these developments. The anthropology of art seems well positioned to take on the ethnographic challenge of these developments. Ong’s essay—focused primarily on the art itself—should energize such a project, and the combustion of these two approaches could be most illuminating.

Ralph Litzinger

Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University, 208 Friedl Building, Box 90091, Durham, North Carolina 27708, U.S.A. (rlitz@duke.edu). 24 II 12

Everyone is looking for something in the Chinese artist—hero, survivor of a government crackdown, champion of the marginalized, master, friend, and lover. Many are after the next success story—that artist who might sell a piece on the cheap and one day fetch a million dollars at a Sotheby auction. With this provocative essay, Aihwa Ong examines emergent global art spaces of capital, desire, and discourse. She calls for a new anthropology of Chinese art criticism, much of which has failed to see how Chinese artists are creatively reconfiguring the global. She also provides us with a kind of manifesto for how *not* to read the politics of the artist.

Ong’s intervention operates on many levels. As she details, the global Chinese art scene is about many things, but her main concern is the critics and experts who organize, stage, and interpret the meaning of a piece of art or an exhibition, thus her detailed focus on Cai Guo-Qiang’s Guggenheim exhibit and the buzz that surrounded it. Ong probes the liberal art scene’s obsession with finding artists and elevating them as antistate dissidents, and she shows how Chinese artists are often seen as commercial fakes or altogether inauthentic Chinese. She is critical of the tendency to see Chinese artists as participants in a progressive global civil society. These ways of “framing” Chinese art, she argues, are inadequate to the task of making sense of what artists such as Cai do when they make art: undoing universalist thinking, disposing of well-worn binaries, reconfiguring the global.

I find Ong’s arguments compelling. Questions remain, however. Does the attention to the assumptions and discursive orderings of the critic constitute a sufficient ethnographic entanglement with the global scene of modern Chinese art? Does the critic always write in English? What of art criticism that circulates throughout the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan? Does it traffic in the same universalisms and binaries? If part of the project is to consider “how non-Europeans and Europeans [encounter] each other as equivalent actors,” then we also have to consider encounters in multiple languages, locations, and scenes. I have often wandered into art “happenings,” heady openings, and walked the back alleys of artist enclaves in Beijing and other cities in China. In these varied spaces one finds all kinds of characters and practices. We see young entrepreneurs and experts on Chinese art, some European, most not. They raise capital to open galleries, create salons to discuss art; many travel the world, hopping exhibits. Expat connoisseurs of Chinese art mingle with hipster Chinese artists; languages, knowledges, dollars, and market skill all mix and collide in these spaces of encounter. These spaces surely have something to tell us about other ways in which the global is being reconfigured.

How does the critic read the *politics* of the artist? Ong argues

it is a mistake to find in artists such as Cai the making of a progressive global civil society, where the multitude is said to linger, remaking the world. The real object of critique here is not just the art critic but also the work of Hardt and Negri. Where Hardt and Negri might lead some to see the international art exhibit as a space for the articulation of a common political project, Ong sees their brand of theory enabling a global-national binary and the reassertion of universal values. This is a point for further debate. In this context, I do not see much value in going after Hardt and Negri. Rather, I think it makes more sense—which is what she does so well in this essay—to focus on how some curators and critics, in their relentless search for the political potentialities of modern Chinese art, traffic in all kinds of high theory, which they may or may not understand. Writing against the figure of the global multiple, Ong wants us to discard, once and for all, the global-national binary. For this framework, she asserts, forces us to read artists such as Cai and Ai Weiwei as either agents of the global multitude or always in an oppositional stance to the Chinese state. Neither does justice to the complexity of their work and the worlds they inhabit.

In the end, Ong wants us to see—one is tempted to say, liberate—these artists outside and beyond the narrative confines, the prison house, of Western universals and the philosophical traditions of liberalism. Hers is a vision of the artist as Taoist alchemist, blending styles, traditions, structure and form, East and West, the economic and the political, the complicit and the antagonistic. Cai and others are creating new mappings of the world, new geographies of time and space, and a new political sensibility that is decidedly not *reflective* of a singular identity, history, or particularity. Their work is indeed anticipatory of something new, perhaps of a radically contingent and unpredictable mode of being and acting in the world. Let us hope this mode of being and acting in the world continues to stir up trouble.

George E. Marcus

Department of Anthropology, University of California, Irvine, California 92697, U.S.A. (gmarcus@uci.edu). 10 III 12

I want to explore briefly one set of issues stimulated by Aihwa Ong's essay that concerns a relation of paraethnography, so to speak. Because of the strict word limit on CA comments, I am unable to develop a second set of issues that concerns the straightforward dimensions of an ethnography of Chinese artists in the scope of the distinctive art worlds in which they are situated and which they constitute for themselves, but I just wanted to place it on the agenda for future discussion of this very rich essay (with the example of work by Myers [2002] in mind and, more recently, that of the narrative ethnography by Marc Abélès [2011*b*], of his experiences in Beijing's leading artist district, Pékin 798, occupying a former

huge factory complex; his ethnography offers invaluable perspective on the mixed entrepreneurial/aesthetic/critical motives of the Chinese artistic avant-garde outside the heated, fearful cultural politics of their reception in Euro-American art writing and commentary).

So, how do the contemporary practices and ambitions of an anthropology of the contemporary (cf. Rabinow et al. 2008) align themselves with those of conceptual art, specifically, the distinctive variety of it being produced by the cosmopolitan and successful Chinese artists that Ong discusses? More seems to be at stake than an ethnographic interest in a global art world phenomenon coming out of China. Is "the circulation of contemporary artists exercising novel ideas in spaces of global encounter" a model for ethnographic method as well as a subject of it?

Though anthropologists and artists have very different publics, accountabilities, and forms of expression, they seem to share deeper affinities of purpose and practice. "Conceptual art," as Ong argues, "as both ideas and critique, can be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics that engages a given situation as a question; that is, it is an art that simultaneously ruptures familiar modes of reasoning while anticipating emerging problems." This sounds a lot like latter-day "anthropology as cultural critique," having located its expressions and purposes precisely in the same anticipatory temporality of the contemporary as have the Chinese artists that Ong describes. While, of course, conceptual artists and ethnographers are not the same (see especially Foster 1995; Marcus 2010), they crucially share an ethos of experimentation, perhaps more derivative of the former by the latter. By interpretative fiat that makes them subject to the ethnographer's gaze, and the artists become the surrogates of anthropologists in contexts of spectacle and bold public appeal. Yet, posing this affinity between the intellectual work of conceptual artists and that of ethnographers does not necessarily suggest partnership or collaboration, though those are possible and have occurred (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006; Kester 2011; Marcus 2008, 2010; Papastergiadis 2012). Rather, it does suggest a trading zone of methods (Galison 1997) in which ethnographers in their own tradecraft might be encouraged to ask what of the artists' practices, designs, and stratagems in producing spectacle might be incorporated in the far more low-key ethnographic research process. In her essay, Ong provides the impetus and some of the language to encourage such an exchange or, at this juncture, such an appropriation by ethnographers with the imagination for it and when the opportunity arises.

Recently, in connection with a team ethnography project situated in the headquarters villa of the World Trade Organization in Geneva (Abélès 2011*a*), I worked out a feasible design for an installation as an intervention in fieldwork (Marcus, forthcoming) that had become significantly blocked by a culture of diplomatic discretion and secrecy (see Deeb and Marcus 2011). We had considerable access but not

enough to overcome the formidable and contradictory constraints that policies of transparency imposed on us. The controlled spectacle of the installation artist within the space of fieldwork promised to generate “data”—talk, reception, directed engagement on the part of our subjects—crucial to ethnography but otherwise blocked by the invisibilities of transparency. Something like a controlled version of Cai’s act of conceptual art in Venice, for example, is possible within ethnography.

Perhaps this play within ethnographic method in terms of the practices and imaginaries of conceptual art is occasional and serendipitous and does not have much a future. More likely, as in Ong’s suggestive arguments, is a capacity to perform the ethnographic imaginary vicariously through what conceptual artists are able to do—but ethnographers are not. They share an ethos with an anthropology of the contemporary, but they are operators for it in ways that ethnographers mostly cannot be, who look on with admiration and, perhaps, envy. As Ong concludes, “Because anticipatory political art operates in the vector space that takes multiple sites as points of reference, it makes conflicts more visible, and engages in a ‘continuous criticism’ . . . of institutionalized relationships. It crystallizes conditions for reenvisioning the world as heterogeneous and always in motion.” This sounds like what the project of the ethnography of the contemporary would do if it could. Art is thus a spectacular extension of the more subtle ethnographic, or a possible model for it. What, then, is the proper or possible relation of anthropologists to such artists, if the latter are to be more than just the subjects of second-order ethnographic observation and commentary?

Li Zhang

Department of Anthropology, University of California, 311 Young Hall, One Shields Avenue, Davis, California 95616, U.S.A. (lizhang@ucdavis.edu). 13 II 12

I read this provocative and well-crafted article with great interest. As in most of her previous publications, Aihwa Ong is never satisfied with focusing on specific ethnographic cases of merely one place or group; instead, she asks important big questions confronting anthropologists and other researchers today across different regions. Her incisive analysis and bold thinking provide us with productive interventions in current debates on the shifting global configuration of power relations and identity, cosmopolitanism, and the cultural politics of contemporary art.

“What Marco Polo Forgot” is a piece of original and refreshing scholarship that urges us to rethink global connections through the lens of contemporary Chinese art at a time when China is gaining an increasingly prominent position on the world stage. It effectively challenges a series of entrenched

conceptual binaries that form the basis of a habitual way of thinking through compartmentalization (i.e., cosmopolitan vs. national patriot, avant-garde vs. authentically indigenous, civil society vs. authoritarian state, and so on). In developing the notion of “anticipatory politics” and pondering the new political possibilities that the twenty-first century offers, Ong highlights the techniques of assemblage and juxtaposition as a way of understanding the contemporary world. These theoretical insights, however, do not come from abstract claims; rather, they emerge from her careful reading of the artworks by Cai Guo-Qiang, an influential traveling contemporary Chinese artist. Further, the divergent and controversial interpretations of Cai’s bold art raise another important question about what is considered commensurable and incommensurable in the politics of identity today. Artists such as Cai frequently disrupt the logic of Western identity politics by refusing to follow the either/or mode of identification and categorization that does not allow the possibility of one simultaneously inhabiting multiple positions or speaking in diverse voices (i.e., being a genuine cosmopolitan artist and an authentic Chinese patriot, drawing from and glorifying certain Chinese cultural elements while not being afraid of making cultural critique).

Yet, a hegemonic paradigm of thinking about the world and politics as shaped by unequal power relations and uneven capitalist development continues to exist even though non-Euro/American conceptual artists among others have begun to challenge this dominant and often taken-for-granted framework. While fully recognizing the significance of this new critical trend and potential, I wonder whether Ong’s reading is a bit overly optimistic about the degree and extent of the impact such avant-garde artists might have. It seems to me that there is a long way to go before we reach the point where such challenges and cultural negotiations can take root among a broader social spectrum at home and abroad and thus destabilize the established global order of things. But precisely for this reason, I agree with Ong that contemporary anthropologists can and should play a more prominent role in fostering a radically different way of thinking about the world and envisioning a different future for a larger public.

While the article largely focuses on how contemporary Chinese art can serve as a means of global intervention, it also raises a crucial question of how it might alter the politics at home. Like Cai, several other internationally recognized Chinese artists all have a delicate and complex relationship with a state that itself is also undergoing transformations. Yet, as Ong rightly points out, such a complex relationship is often not adequately recognized by ideologically driven Western critiques that characterize any artistic participation in state-orchestrated projects (such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics) as a sign of “selling out.” Building on her observation, I would like to take the argument even further. The notion of “selling out” here suggests a mechanical one-way perspective on power and social change in postsocialist China shaped by the

lens of authoritarianism. For these critics, the Chinese state remains a powerful figure that can co-opt even critical social actors into its nationalistic projects with the lure of personal fame and status. This interpretation fails to acknowledge the possibility that the operating mode of state power is also shifting and that such high-profile participants are also able to transform partly the meanings of the projects involved. Entrepreneurialism and political ambitions need not be mutually exclusive for both the state and the artists. Another intriguing issue explored in the article that could be unpacked further is the unstable and sometimes unpredictable relationship between market value and political stance, economic capital and social capital for conceptual artists.

I have no doubt that Ong's article will appeal to a broad readership and stimulate further exciting and meaningful debates among scholars, artists, and the general public about how better to grapple with the complex conditions and new possibilities of contemporary human existence through new social imaginations and novel conceptions of the world. As Walter Benjamin reminded us a long time ago, art has great potential to transform politics and engender profound social change.

Yujie Zhu

Cluster of Asia and Europe in a Global Context, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University, Voßstraße 2, Building 4400, 69115 Heidelberg, Germany (yujie@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de). 22 II 12

What Can We Bring to the World?

As a China-born global artist, Cai Guo-Qiang is widely discussed, especially after the first success of his work *Bring to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* in 1995. Cai's work has been criticized by both Western and Chinese art critics, and he was even sued in 2000 for his work *Rent Collection Courtyard*. Different from solely looking at the circulation of art, Aihwa Ong uses an alternative approach to provide insight into the notion of the circulation of the artist, Cai's ideas in spaces of the global encounter. This approach, similar to Latour's actor-network theory, aims to use the network of Cai to illustrate the asymmetrical power relation between the Chinese and Western media and the Chinese artist's position in this dynamic relationship.

As Ong points out, the different gazes of the Chinese and Western critics are based on their expectation of how the global Chinese artist should present. When Western critics focus mainly on the authenticity of the art by judging him as a "showman and sham artist," they expect him to be an "independent, creative, and political agent." On the contrary, the Chinese media, especially the Chinese artists, have their own imaginaries of how Chinese-born global artists should

be. People expect him to present his art to change the Western perception of China instead of selling China to satisfy the Western media.

Thus, Cai has been trapped in a dilemma between both sides due to his dualistic position as a pure avant-garde artist or a pure patriotic artist. There is a popular Chinese saying that influences the current generation of Chinese, which is "a person's character decides his destiny" (*xingge jue ding mingyun*). Being a global artist, Cai is trying to pave a way beyond borders, of playing the Chinese role to shape Western perceptions of China. Being a Chinese cosmopolitan artist, he aims to search for a middle way in the process of dialogue between the world and China. This approach is very close to the Confucian's ideology of "Doctrine of the Mean." Through his work, consciously or unconsciously, he presents the artistic idea of value. Thus, as Ong states, Cai's experience with the world develops his lifelong pursuit of the artist career, which connects to the past, the contemporary, and the future.

The critics from both sides (China and the global) and his encounter with curators have forced him to create a certain "emergent identity." Being a cosmopolitan artist does not mean that he has a position to be both a border-crossing artist and simply a man. Cai's dream to be "a normal person" exactly presents his way of looking at the world and his art. He is presenting his emergent identity to the world through his "anticipatory" political position by "the dualistic perception that Chinese experimental art can be celebrated for its cosmopolitanism or rejected out of concerns of its propaganda or mere art entrepreneurialism."

In Ong's article, the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony perfectly presents this dualistic position and the complexity of identity. The event, presented by three leading Chinese artists, Zhang Yimo, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Ai Weiwei, showed the asymmetrical power relationship between both sides of the media and the dialogue between the world and China. If Zhang presented the voice from the Chinese authority and Ai used his idea of freedom "of any obstructions of traditional notions" to refuse the contemporary China politics, Cai's attitude and his work indicate his identity as a mediator. His approach showed the possibility to make a novel idea in the space of global encounter and "methodolize" his experience to observe and present the world, without being politically for or against China.

Ong's work does more than call for an anthropological engagement with art criticism as a cointerpreter. Her approach raises a similar question of being both a Chinese anthropologist and a global anthropologist, that is, how to play the role as a mediator for both Western and Chinese academia. Similar to Cai's case, the border-crossing identity leads such anthropologists to acquire a dualistic position. Their work can be interpreted as selling Western theories by the Chinese domestic scholars or criticized as inauthentic without touching the real ground by the Western scholars. Is it possible, as Cai's story illustrates, to use what they have learned and their cos-

mopolitan experience and tradition, to present to both Chinese and global academia? It seems that the Chinese global artists or scholars can hardly be understood as “normal” people. Nevertheless, their continuous struggle with the situation will never end. Thus, we return to the first question put forward by Ong: What we can bring to the world and to the global?

Reply

The above comments richly expand the conversation on contemporary art on the world stage. In the essay, Cai Qu-Qiang’s 2008 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum was the event that crystallized contested meanings of the global. I deployed the global in many registers: as concepts of heterogeneity and exchange and as emerging configurations of cosmopolitanism. The plunge of world-famous Chinese artists into the New York art scene also raises broader questions about an anthropology of the global. I accept the invitation to expand on the anticipatory strategies—crouching in the wings, rupturing borders, messing with the props, and casting spells—that deploy things Chinese as a global method.

Double Positioning

Mobile artists not only rupture national borders but also recast them in relation to shifting norms of cosmopolitan art. The Cai exhibition is the event and the field through which contemporary Chinese art negotiates the forms, meanings, and experiences of cosmopolitanism. Remarks on the double positioning of mobile artists identify different kinds of cultural sophistication in two very different milieus—New York, China—and what the effects of the artworks may be.

It should be clear to the attentive reader that my focus is on specific responses to Cai’s art at the Guggenheim and not on implicating all New York curators and media scholars. From her perch at the Museum of Natural History, Laurel Kendall doubtlessly has a privileged view she is free to elaborate upon, but it is not the subject of my essay. I have a sense of the New York–Chinese art world. My sister works at Wildenstein, New York City, which in 2008 opened a gallery in Beijing devoted to works by artists such as Zhang Xiaogang (see Ong 2010). This is a fairly new phenomenon. While there is a contemporary Asian art expert, Melissa Chiu of the Asia Society Museum, the Guggenheim Museum is the first of its kind to only recently hire a senior curator of Asian art and to seek exchanges with contemporary artists working in the developing world.

More on target are remarks on how border-running artists experience limits of interpretation by respective audiences. Lily Chumley identifies “the politics of desire” among Western

buyers or critics who may not “get” the messages embedded in Cai’s artworks. She captures the fluid ambiguity of the artists, intended perhaps not to fully disclose the “history lessons” but rather to disrupt Western expectations of political opposition or resistance in the installations. The political significance of Chinese art is less in embedded cultural messages than in the act of challenging Western definitions of cosmopolitan norms.

When it comes to potential audiences in the People’s Republic, comments focus on the limits of artistic subversions among the public. Obviously, international exhibitions are still mainly the stuff of elite cultural exchange. I agree with Sara Friedman and Zhang Li that the masses in China may not grasp any challenges to nationalist sentiments posed by Cai or Ai Weiwei in their various works.

Rather, my point is that major Chinese artists are also playing subterfuge with categories of the national and the international among intellectuals and politicians at home. Instead of anticipating “optimistic” effects of such artists (Zhang), my attention is on the play of strategies that may alternate between the alignment and the disarticulation of artistic “entrepreneurialism and political ambitions” (Zhang). In short, when it comes to the Chinese milieu of art reception, I do not claim the artworks in question are transforming politics “on the ground” (Friedman) or challenging the idiom of “contemporary political economy” (Chumley). Rather, I merely wish to highlight the role of artists in shaking up conventional mappings of national and global spaces and how we may think about cosmopolitanism today.

Anticipatory Politics

The politics of Cai and his colleagues therefore both disorder and reorder geopolitical definitions of what is modern, contemporary, and global in art. I am not able to examine the burgeoning inter-Asian art markets, but New York is the pre-eminent global site of art as “capital, desire, and discourse,” as Ralph Litzinger notes. By staging their works in New York (rather than, say, Hong Kong), Chinese artists co-construct art cosmopolitanism beyond the “prison house” of “Western universals and the philosophical traditions of liberalism” (Litzinger). Indeed, there is perhaps no “correct” way to interpret the work; the politics of anticipation surround how the intrusion of Chinese artists into an elite West media center can stir up unease and unsettling feelings about one’s location in the shifting terrain and practices of contemporary art.

Here the comments suggest two ways of thinking about the reframing of the global. First, paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan, is contemporary art a particular instantiation of “the medium is the message”? Is the reconfiguration of the global context more politically fraught than the content of the art itself?

Second, when it comes to the definition of modern Chinese art, the politics of reflecting on the past moves forward by



Figure 8. Jacob Ki Nielsen, Ph.D. fellow, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen, *Urban Imaginaries* poster, 2012. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

engaging non-Chinese forms or styles of art. Such anticipatory politics unsettle what is “Chinese” at home and in the world, as well as conventional reception in international settings.

What Can China Bring to the World?

As different commentators note, by seeking to slip by judgments of what is commensurable or incommensurable in art practice, content, identity, and media power, the Chinese artist operates as a mediator of value in the space of global encounter. Yujie Zhu notes, in the search for a “dialogue between the world and China,” Cai seems to pose the question “What can we bring to the world?” Zhu seems to invite me to say more about China as an unsettling and dispersing gesture. Cai’s shamanistic style seamlessly circumvents old borders and heals old wounds of East-West encounters. He returns ghosts to the past (ghosts of Western obsessions about China, the universal, as well as ghosts of Chinese narratives of the West, cultural revolution, national identity, etc.). Cai’s works perform Daoist flows of nowhere and everywhere, rupturing labels that fix us to places and identities. His installations enact the dance of dualities and the interplay of concepts and non-concepts in a constant process of appearance, animation, and creation. Beyond the works described in the essay, Cai’s gunpowder paintings, mushroom imageries, and fireworks art express an animistic energy that unsettles spatial and temporal orders in suggesting a world without beginning or end. Can Daoist sensibility, a kind of thermodynamic theory of the world, deconstruct contemporary cosmopolitanism and animate a rethinking of the global contemporary?

The Cosmopolitan Anthropologist

George Marcus poses a provocative question of what is at stake in an anthropological encounter with novel contemporary art. “Is ‘the circulation of contemporary artists exercising novel ideas in spaces of global encounter’ a model for ethnographic method as well as a subject of it?”

The question triggers another one. Are not anthropologists presumed already to be cosmopolitan researchers, experimenting with appropriate tools for studying globalized situations? Like mobile artists, anthropologists unsettle designated spaces (of culture, resistance, human rights, and power) by being attentive to practices and ideas that shape emerging spaces of the global. My view on contemporary ethnography is that one needs to be skeptical of some of the hype and the misnomer surrounding “ethnography” (the “ethnos” within the disciplinary confines of territory, race, or culture has been destabilized). Rather, stripped of its more precious claims, the anthropological method is vitally based on (first- and second-order) observations, a low-flying technique that Stephen Collier and I have called staying “close to practices” (Collier and Ong 2005). Instead of describing an ethnos, anthropological observations track the variability of practices and strategies

that destabilize concepts and social arrangements but also conjure up new configurations of politics, ethics, and sociality.

So, while I greatly admire the incandescent effect of Cai’s works on multiple publics, I am not proposing that the anthropologist borrows the artist’s arrows for our decidedly less flamboyant display of “the ethnographic imagination.” Whose imagination, and from which vantage point have we collectively been imagining the changing world? The ethos of experimentation is coming from sites undergoing great transformation. The anthropological method is challenged by an array of startling changes and novel configurations not anticipated in older frameworks, concepts, and obsessions. I therefore see the anthropologist not as an envious bystander but rather a cosmopolitan cointerpreter and comedator of cosmopolitan artists. Exercising different sets of skills, anthropologists and artists are engaged in contemporary venues, having vital roles in molding international cultural conversation and understanding (see Ong 2011a).

One kind of cosmopolitan ethnographic approach can involve the study of art projects in an unstable field of power that includes artists, collectors, curators, and critics. The interactions of commentaries, political goals, and cultural sensibilities shape emerging global forms that anticipate our overlapping futures. It has been some time since the Cai Guggenheim exhibition in 2008, but the sense of China’s expansion into international art shows is still relatively novel. Recently, the *New York Times* reports on the intrusion of Chinese art into major New York museums, citing the reaction of Fan D’ian, the director of the National Art Museum in Shanghai: “For the Western point of view, the 20th century is Western art, and the art of Modernism. I don’t think that is fair. These days, when Western scholars discuss modernity, they should also discuss Chinese modernity” (Perlez 2012). These comments, perhaps, are pertinent as well for an anthropology that would be contemporary.

From the vantage point of Southeast Asia as well, the sense of being poised at a momentous juncture is palpable. On his return trip to Venice, Marco Polo in 1292 stopped in Sumatra and discovered evidence of Islamic culture. In 1511, Afonso de Albuquerque arrived in Malacca (bearing gunpowder that Marco Polo had encountered in China) and set off the first salvo in the centuries-long Western rule of huge swaths of South and East Asia. Five decades later, in 2011, Asian leaders quietly noted the end of the long shadow of Western domination of the region. The future, as reflected in the spectacular skylines of Asian cities, is being reimaged rather differently than through the lens of the past (see Ong 2011b).

For the cosmopolitan anthropologist, truly significant cross-cultural debates, whether in art, anthropology, or the social sciences more broadly, are haunted by the ghost of civilizations vanquished and resurgent powers in contemporary times. New ethnographic sophistication is needed to grasp complex social practices circulating in heterogeneous sites and conversations. For instance, by putting old ghosts

to rest, do contemporary Asian artists also rethink "civilization" as a modern force in Asia's modernity (see Chakrabarty 2012)? Cai was born in 1957, in the ancient seaport of Quanzhou on the southern Chinese coast. It is richly ironic that his personal name, as Friedman points out, means "nation strengthening" (an effect of the post-1949 mode of subjectification). But wielding gunpowder, arrows, and fireworks, Cai adroitly subverts and disperses disciplinary definitions of culture and nation, carving a global space that is neither East nor West but their radically reglobalized intermingling.

—Aihwa Ong

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