

unworking with Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang has slowly risen up the chain of artists critics love to hate. His work is bombastic; his ideology is opportunistic; he designed the fireworks display of the Beijing Olympics, for Christ's sake. But sometimes in spite of the artist the work shines through. Consider his piece, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* (1995), made on the 700th anniversary of Polo's return from the court of the Great Khan. "What Marco Polo Forgot," according to Cai, is the "Eastern spirit," which some traditional herbs placed on a canal boat were meant to represent in the work.

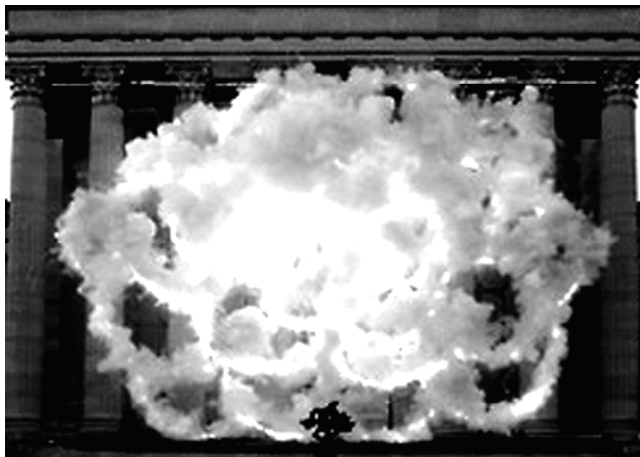
If it is critical fashion to mock pop art, then it is certainly also fashionable to mock pop spirituality as well. Slavoj Žižek has, for example, taken to condemning what he calls "Western Buddhism," and "Western Taoism," which he says form the perfect ideological counterpart to contemporary capitalism. Laissez faire economics, in other words, go hand in hand with a "just let it be," live in the present attitude.

Žižek's understanding of Buddhism and Taoism and their complicated cultural transmission is poor at best, but his point that certain forms of spirituality lack a critical edge is merited. As, indeed, are many critic's feelings that Cai's work is opportunist and that it participates in an art world gone overboard. But perhaps in the context of Cai's work, two wrongs really do make a right. At first glance, the Marco Polo piece can even be seen to carry within it Žižek's message: Western capitalism and imperialism (the dominance of commerce represented by Polo's voyage) can only function with a spiritual attitude to accompany these means of production, an attitude which has moved from Protestantism to Taoism as Žižek thinks Max Weber would now claim.

More than this, however, the piece calls into question the very categories of such an analysis. It is not just a question of "what Marco Polo forgot," it is also a question of scales. First, the scale of comparison between the huge system of global capitalism and the few traditional herbs on the ship which renders any thought that the herbs could cure one living in exploitative conditions risible. Second, the scale of Western understanding of Eastern religions, and what should be a slightly mocking idea that "the Eastern spirit" – a vague notion which erases any number of heterogeneous philosophical and religious practices – can be contained within a few plants.

Rather than Žižek's simplistic notion that "Eastern" attitudes are maintaining the status quo, Cai's projects point to the incommensurability between the scales of the spiritual and the material which, more than any critique in language, questions the assumption that spiritual calm can be fully achieved in a chaotic and unjust world. As well, and perhaps even against the artist's intentions, the work once again stages the difficulty of intercultural hermeneutics, and reminds us that the world becoming more closely connected does not mean it becomes more readily understandable as well.

I write "against the artist's own intentions," because for Cai the piece does not seem tongue in cheek at all, and the question of scale, I imagine he would reply, is a mistake, since it fails to grasp the ways in which the whole of "Eastern philosophy" (his phrase) is encapsulated in Chinese medicine. As he put it in an interview with the *Brooklyn Rail* responding to how he incorporated "Eastern" ideas in his work: "The example of Chinese medicine as a discipline, from the philosophy to the methodology to the execution, is a good one. Everything is within one system." This may be the case, I would want to reply, but the will to know and the actual knowledge of something (the totality in this case) are not the same thing.



Fallen Blossoms, 2009 (image from PMA website)

Should one visit Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop before March 1st to see Cai's *Fallen Blossoms*, a collaborative project between the Workshop and the PMA, it might be useful to keep such things in mind. As one watches five weavers "from the ethnic Tujia clan" live at work, or reads about "Chinese adages" (I can only assume they mean Mandarin), or learns about the "proverbs" of "Eastern philosophy," the way that all such contained works do their own unworking – that is to say, refuse, by their very nature, any attempt to contain them – might be the show's saving grace.

-Avi Alpert