DAOIST ELEMENTS IN CAI GUO-QIANG’S INOPPORTUNE AND HEAD ON

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This thesis explores the Daoist elements in two of contemporary Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang’s (1957 - ) largest installations to date, *Inopportune* (2004) and *Head On* (2006). Comprising multi-media works including gunpowder paintings, simulated animal forms, and firework displays, the two installations explore themes related to the global threat of terrorism in *Inopportune* and the history of the Berlin Wall in *Head On*. In exploring these themes, Cai attempts to create a globally accessible dialogue by emphasizing universal elements related to the forces of creation and destruction. For this reason he implements the Daoist characteristics of yin and yang in *Inopportune*, and the flow of qi in *Head On*, in an effort to present examples of conflict as part of the eternal cycle of destruction and renewal. Chapters one and two explore the aspects relating to yin and yang in *Stage One* and *Stage Two of Inopportune*, and the elements of qi in *Head On*.

Keywords: Daoism, terrorism, Berlin Wall, yin, yang, qi
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INTRODUCTION

In examining the artwork of contemporary Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang (1957- ), reoccurring themes central to his oeuvre become apparent. In the same manner in which he transforms gunpowder from a force of destruction to one of creation in his renowned gunpowder paintings and firework displays, Cai routinely explores contradictory themes within his artwork. Whether merging ancient imagery with modern technology as in Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan (1996; Fig. 1) in which a sheepskin raft merges with three car engines in the form of a flying dragon, or juxtaposing a man-made, explosion-image of a mushroom cloud with that of a curative, Chinese medicinal lingzhi mushroom in The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Projects for the 20th Century (1995-1996; Fig. 2), his work persistently confronts dichotomous elements. This thesis seeks to achieve a more thorough understanding of this aspect of Cai’s work by examining two of his largest installations to date, Inopportune (2004; Fig. 3) and Head On (2006; Fig. 4). Each installation encompassed examples of his artistic scope, featuring multi-media works that range from his gunpowder paintings, to video projections of his firework displays, to his simulated animal forms. In addition, subtle elements of Daoism in the form of yin and yang properties in Inopportune, and characteristics associated with the flow of qi in Head On are employed by the artist in an effort to present the relationship between opposing elements as harmonious components within the cycle of creation and destruction.
Born to a historian-painter father (his mother’s occupation has never been mentioned) in Quanzhou City, in the Fujian Province of China, Cai witnessed conflict from an early age in the form of China’s Cultural Revolution which began in 1966. Despite the influence of Maoist orthodoxy, he received a comprehensive education in the form of banned, Western literature provided by his father, and the Daoist principles taught to him by his grandmother. Inspired by his father’s amateur endeavors in calligraphy painting, Cai’s own artistic training began in 1981 at the Shanghai Theatre Academy where he studied stage design. In 1986 he moved to Tokyo, Japan, where he resided for nine years. While there, he began experimenting with gunpowder as an artistic medium, eventually developing his signature gunpowder drawings and firework displays. Drawing upon a variety of influences including Chinese Daoist philosophy, pyrotechnics, metaphysics, and China’s Maoist history, interest in Cai’s work increased during the 1990s. By the time of his relocation to New York City (where he now resides with his family) in 1996, he had already achieved considerable artistic fame, winning the Japan Cultural Design Prize in 1995. His artistic successes continued, and he received additional awards including the coveted Golden Lion at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, the International Association of Art Critics (IACA) New England chapter award for best

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installation *(Inopportune: Stage One)* in 2005, the seventh Hiroshima Art Prize in 2007, the twentieth Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize in 2009, and the IACA first-place award for best project in a public space *(Fallen Blossoms)* in 2010. In 2008 his retrospective *I Want To Believe* opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. The retrospective traveled to the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, and the Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain in 2009. Marking the first solo show of a Chinese-born artist at the Guggenheim, *I Want To Believe* displayed over eighty works of art spanning nearly two decades. The retrospective highlighted Cai’s artistic ingenuity and prowess, exhibiting a broad spectrum of multimedia works ranging from large-scale installations to gunpowder drawings, sculptures, and video documentation of his explosion and firework demonstrations.

Stemming from his fascination with the explosive yet creative force of gunpowder, his multi-media works routinely confront themes of conflict as inherent components within the reoccurring process of creation and destruction. This aspect is manifested in both *Inopportune* and *Head On*. In both installations (which were created prior to their inclusion in his retrospective) Cai displays conflict by exploring the theme of contemporary global terrorism in *Inopportune*, and the legacy of the Berlin Wall in *Head On*. Although elements of destruction and renewal reoccur within his work, prior to the creation of these two installations these aspects were primarily explored through the exertion of Cai’s art-making process through his use of gunpowder as an artistic

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medium. However, in both *Inopportune* and *Head On* these aspects are explored in a less transitory and more palpable multi-media form through a combination of simulated animals, video projections, fireworks, and gunpowder paintings.

In *Inopportune*, the imagery of nine suspended, seemingly exploding, cars is juxtaposed with nine artificial tigers shown twisting through the air as they slowly die from the wounds inflicted upon them in the form of hundreds of bamboo arrows shot by an unseen assailant. Comprising four total components, *Stage One* (Fig. 5) of *Inopportune* displays the nine suspended cars along with a video-loop projection titled *Illusion* (Fig. 6) which shows an automobile exploding amid a stream of fireworks in Times Square. Meanwhile, *Stage Two* (Fig. 7) of the installation consists of the suspended tigers along with an untitled gunpowder drawing (Fig. 8) depicting nine cars shown in an elliptical configuration.

Encompassing three separate components, *Head On* consists of a video-loop projection titled *Illusion II* (Fig. 9) portraying a house exploding amid fireworks in the heart of Berlin, Germany. The second component of the installation is a gunpowder drawing titled *Vortex* (Fig. 10) depicting numerous wolves running in an endless loop, mirroring the imagery of the main feature of the installation *Head On*, in which ninety-nine man-made wolves are shown running towards, and ultimately crashing into a transparent glass wall. In each installation Cai confronts conflict not as an isolated, negative occurrence, but rather as a compulsory element within the endless cycle of creation and destruction.
As a central element to my interpretation, specific tenets from the ancient Chinese philosophy of Daoism will be applied to the understanding of these two works. This interpretation is an acknowledgement of Cai’s stated artistic interest in expressing Daoist elements within his art.\(^5\) Daoism openly embraces and acknowledges harmony as a balance which can only exist in relationship to an opposing force (i.e. light and dark, creation and destruction).\(^6\) As a result, both *Inopportune* and *Head On* express conflict as an innate component of existence and being, exhibiting the inherent dualities that exist within all elements. Daoism offers a way in which to regard conflict not as negative element, but as a component of a larger, continuous and transformative cycle. As a result, in regards to events predominantly viewed in an undesirable light, Daoism offers a perspective that proposes a broader understanding by seeking out the positive from the negative, and the negative from the positive. Cai’s work exemplifies this dynamic in that he unifies opposing elements in effort to deconstruct established connotations associated with the cycle of destruction and renewal.

In his essay, “Taoism and the Arts of China,” Stephen Little writes:

> Of the Three Teachings (*Sanjiao*) of ancient China – Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism – [D]aoism is the least understood in the West. Our understanding of Confucianism, a largely secular philosophy, and Buddhism, a religion originating in India, is much clearer. Unlike Buddhism, Taoism is indigenous to China. It has a history spanning more than two millennia, and its influence is clear in such diverse realms of Chinese culture as political theory, medicine, painting and calligraphy, and even Chan (Zen) Buddhism.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Lubow, 34.


Translated as meaning “the way,” Dao is believed to have begun as an empty stillness out of which the primal energy yuan qi emerged. “For many cosmic eons,” this energy swirled in a state of chaos called hundun, eventually forming into the corresponding forces of yin and yang. From this energy the universe was formed, encompassing the force of qi. Described as energy, qi permeates all matter, thus matter and energy are interchangeable, as expressed in the basic principles of nuclear physics. 

“Taoism teaches that to be content as a human being, one must accept that change (transformation) is the absolute reality, and that all things and transformations are unified in the Tao...A fundamental cosmological principle of ancient Chinese thought, and one adopted by religious Taoism, is that all things correspond to each other.”

In regards to the concept of all things being inextricably linked and corresponding to one another, Alan Watts writes in his book Tao: The Watercourse Way, “People who have been brought up in the aura of Christian and Hebrew aspirations find this frustrating, because it seems to deny any possibility of progress, an ideal which flows from their linear (as distinct from cyclic) view of time and history. Indeed, the whole enterprise of Western technology is ‘to make the world a better place’ – to have pleasure without pain, wealth without poverty, and health without sickness.” Of course, this notion is impossible, yet in light of our full awareness of the impossibility of such an ideal existence, in the wake of tragedy, conflict, and violence, we often as collective humans quickly lament our circumstances and ask questions of a personal nature such as, ‘why did this happen to me?’ However, from a Daoist perspective such a view is

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8 Ibid., 13-14.
9 Ibid., 14.
illogical, as all of our experiences in this world are interconnected. There cannot be the absence of suffering without suffering itself. There cannot be destruction without creation. Therefore, it is futile to struggle against suffering, as it will never cease. In contrast, Daoism promotes being in tune with nature, effortless action, and not struggling against our experiences. Nature, as we know, possesses the power to both create and to destroy. Therefore, it is a fruitless endeavor to struggle against nature’s destructive elements, wishing only to embrace harmony and serenity. In this way, the Daoist worldview offers a sense of peace through the understanding of the interconnectedness of the dual forces within all elements.

Due to the fact that Cai regularly incorporates Chinese themes into his work, in conjunction with the fact that he resided in Japan and now lives in the United States, he is often categorized as a global artist versus a Chinese artist in the likes of other diasporic Chinese artists such as Chen Zhen, Wenda Gu, Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, Xu Bing, Wang Du, and Wu Shanzhuan. One of the main reasons he is difficult to categorize is due to the fact that “Cai was peripheral to the 1980s [Chinese] avant-garde movements, such as the Stars group, ’85 New Wave, or Xiamen Dada, and did not participate in the historic China/Avant-Garde exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1989.” As a result, his work was not recognized in China until 1999 when his Venice Rent Collection Courtyard (1999; Fig. 11) received controversial publicity at the 1999 Venice Biennale. Re-creating the iconic social-realist sculpture ensemble from

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1965, the Venice Biennale was threatened with a lawsuit by the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute for exhibiting the work on the grounds that Cai copied it without permission and without any connection to earlier versions of the sculptural installation.\(^\text{13}\) Ironically, it was this very controversy which led to his work finally receiving attention within his homeland, as previously his work was largely ignored due to the decisive split between artists who left China versus artists who remained, with those who left being viewed as international and not Chinese artists.\(^\text{14}\)

Cai himself has eluded such definitions stating, “One time, someone gave me a form to fill out. The questions on this form were, ‘What is a Chinese artist? What is an Asian artist? What is an international artist? What is a contemporary artist? And what is a traditional artist?’ And for all of these answers, I wrote: ‘It’s me. This is what I am.’ Our times have given us the opportunity to be able to say that we belong to every category. We are free to be whatever we want.”\(^\text{15}\) Cai routinely avoids barriers in his work, attempting to make global connections by emphasizing universal aspects that apply to people of all nationalities such as in *Head On* and *Inopportune*. In both installations he builds upon specific events, applying universally relatable themes such as global conflict, violence, terrorism, and their eternal cycles. Although he incorporates Daoist elements into his art, they are subtly, rather than overtly, made. For example, in the works of Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping, references to Daoism are applied, not as global elements relating to universal forces such as energy in the form of yin, yang, and qi as in

\(^{13}\) Hung, 369.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 248.

\(^{15}\) Krens and Munroe, 23.
Cai’s work, but rather as specific references to items that hold a historic orientation to ancient Daoist practices. Born in China, Huang, like Cai, emigrated abroad (to France) in 1989, and is known for routinely incorporating Daoist elements into his artwork.¹⁶ In *The Pharmacy* (1995-1997; Fig. 12) Huang references Daoism directly by presenting a large-scale wooden sculpture in the shape of a gourd, a “receptacle for traditional Chinese medicine and an iconographic motif of [D]aoist immortals.”¹⁷ In addition, next to the wooden gourd sculpture is an actual, traditional Daoist apothecary kit made of lizard and snake skins. The installation references medicinal Daoist properties in an overt manner through the imagery of the re-created snake and lizard skin apothecary, juxtaposed next to the enlarged, wooden gourd sculpture which reinforces the imagery by its recreation on an exaggerated scale.

In contrast, although gunpowder figures prominently in Cai’s work and is a substance rich in Daoist history, unlike the medicinal gourd, gunpowder is now a widespread, universal element that has transmuted its identity as a Chinese invention, utilized the world over in the form of military weapons and fireworks. That is not to imply it has lost its history, rather it possesses a global resonance unlike that of the medicinal gourd and reptile-skinned apothecary. In choosing to focus on projects such as his 1989 series *Projects for Extraterrestrials*, in which Cai drew plans (in gunpowder) for a series of artworks with the intention to initiate a universal dialogue with alien beings, it becomes clear that his artistic aim seeks to avoid the constraints of borders of any kind, both global and universal. For this reason, he is indeed an artist that refuses to be defined. His focus

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¹⁶ Hung, 248.

¹⁷ Krens and Munroe, 31.
is bent towards the forces that know no limit such as energy and nature. For this reason, Daoism compliments his goal in seeking to find a language that may be universally understood, as forces such as energy and nature are indefinable, uninhibited, and globally applicable.

In regards to the scholarship concerning Cai’s work, information was collected from monographs such as *Cai Guo-Qiang* which features essays by Fei Dawei and Andrei Ujica, as well as *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want To Believe*, which includes essays by Alexandra Munroe, Wang Hui, David Joselit, and Miwon Kwon, and *Cai Guo-Qiang: Head On*, which featured writing by Tessen von Heydebreck, Friedhelm Hutte, Ariane Grigoteit, Dan Cameron, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and LaoZhu. The scholarly literature situates his work within the global art realm, focusing on his artistic trajectory from China, to Japan, and eventually to the United States, focusing on his art as a series of dialogues that transcend borders. For example, in Dan Cameron’s, “Blinded By the Light,” he references Cai first major project series *Project for Extraterrestrials* as exhibiting the artist’s ongoing desire to break down and avoid cultural and global barriers through his work. Such sentiments are also expressed by Fei Dawei in “Amateur Recklessness,” and in Alexandra Munroe’s, “Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want To Believe.” The fact that in each of the three monographs there exists an essay referencing Cai’s ability to transcend the boundaries that attempt to define him as a either a Chinese or International artist expresses his desire to transcend limits of definition through his artwork.

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19Ibid.
In contrast, the critical reviews of Cai, especially in regards to the respective
debuts of *Inopportune* and *Head On* at Mass MoCA and the Deutsche Guggenheim, tend
to focus on the local connection of the artworks rather than the global. For example, with
*Head On*, its connection to Berlin as a site-specific work is exemplified in Maria
Zimmermann Brendel’s article for *ETC*, “A Zone of Danger and Beauty,” in which she
focuses on Cai’s visit to the German capital in 2005, from which he drew inspiration for
the installation.20 Likewise, the reviews for *Inopportune* at Mass MoCA centered on the
imagery from *Stage One*, linking its terrorism metaphor locally to the events of 9/11
rather than viewing it as a comment on the international threat of terrorism. This was
exemplified in Gary Duehr’s article for *Art New England*, “Cai Guo-Qiang’s
*Inopportune*,” in which he questioned the appropriateness of the installation in regards to
the sensitive, post-9/11 atmosphere in which the installation was created. Expressing a
similar statement, in her article for the *New York Times*, “The Cars Aren’t Really
Exploding, but the Terrorist Metaphor Is,” Grace Glueck explored the imagery as related
to public reception of such art within the post-9/11 era.21 Unlike the scholarly literature,
the reviews seem unsure in nature as how to label Cai, often citing his work as a
“melding of Eastern and Western culture,” in contrast to the scholarly view of Cai as an
artist that defies such trivial labeling.22 In regards to references to the Daoist aspects
appearing in Cai’s work, the literature, both scholarly and critical is underdeveloped, with


January 12, 2011).

22 Glueck, 1.
only peripheral mentions save for Hasegawa Yuko’s essay in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Am the Y2K Bug*, “Circulating Qi (Energy) of Mind and Intellect,” and Barry Schwabsky’s, article for *Artforum*, “Tao and Physics: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang.”

This thesis presents the first consideration of the Daoist elements in *Inopportune* and *Head On*, drawing upon direct quotes from the artist that convey a desire to present universal elements within these installations.

Chapter one will examine the components of the installation *Inopportune*, with a specific focus on the yin and yang elements exhibited in each of the separate components of the work. The basis of Daoist philosophy, yin and yang express the cyclical nature of destruction and creation as inherent to all aspects of existence. Often explained as Newton’s third law of motion (forces always occur in pairs), the concept of yin and yang expresses that creative elements cannot exist in the absence of destruction. From this perspective, the multi-media works that constitute *Inopportune* offer an examination of terrorism as a counterbalance to peace and harmony.

Chapter two will explore the flow of qi in the imagery of the installation *Head On*. In the Daoist belief system, perfect harmony is achieved through the uninhibited flow of qi, while the manipulation of such energy causes ruin and destruction. The history of the Berlin Wall presents an example of creation and destruction, which Cai utilizes through the imagery of the wolves as representatives of qi energy. Highlighting qi as an essential element in the cycle of destruction and renewal, the wolves’ impact with the

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glass wall serves as a physical manifestation of the consequences associated with the manipulation of qi.

In viewing Cai’s work, it is apparent that he displays dichotomous imagery in an effort to confront and explore themes of creation and destruction. As this concept is an integral basis to the Daoist belief system, an understanding and application of Daoist elements is relevant to better interpreting the imagery within his art. Although he has garnered fame for his gunpowder drawings and firework displays, his work is not limited to these particular mediums. Whereas early in his career he confronted the cycle of creation and destruction through his art-making process in the application of gunpowder, its detonation, and alteration from a destructive base element, to that of a beautiful, explosive fire work display or a large-scale drawing, viewers have only been able to access the aftermath associated with these artworks. In addition, the works themselves are transient in nature; the explosions take place very quickly, leaving behind a remnant that fails to capture the totality of the process involved. For this reason, in confronting such themes as contemporary global terrorism and the history of the Berlin Wall, Cai moves beyond the parameters of his gunpowder works, presenting tangible, man-made animal forms and video projections of his elaborate firework projects, presenting a physical manifestation of the cycle of creation and destruction. These elements are presented not as negative aspects, but as inevitable processes which have permeated our existence since the beginning of time. The philosophy of Daoism acknowledges this aspect of the human condition; therefore this thesis explores this theme as manifested through the imagery of Inopportune and Head On.
CHAPTER 1

YIN AND YANG ELEMENTS IN INOPPORTUNE

Originally commissioned by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, (Mass MoCA), Inopportune presented audiences with Cai’s largest installation to date comprising four multi-media works, Stage One, Illusion, Stage Two, and an untitled gunpowder painting. Aside from its inclusion in his I Want To Believe retrospective which traveled to the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum in New York City in 2008, the National Art Museum of China, in Beijing (also in 2008), and the Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain in 2009, Inopportune was also shown at SITE Santé Fe, New Mexico in 2006. In addition, Stage One of the installation became part of the permanent collection at the Seattle Museum of Art in 2007, and was shown as an individual piece at the seventeenth Biennale in Sydney, Australia in 2010.24

Unlike Head On, a site-specific installation, Inopportune was not created as a response to its location in North Adams, but rather Cai was asked to produce a work that expressed his views on the state of global affairs as they stood at the time in 2004. Building upon his previous works such as Explosion Project for Central Park (2003; Fig. 13), and Bon Voyage: 10,000 Collectables from the Airport (2004; Fig. 14), Inopportune was Cai’s first large-scale installation made in response to the issue of global terrorism in the post-9/11 era. However, whereas Explosion Project for Central Park was created as a site-specific memorial for the city of New York in an effort to “[show] people how to

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24 Krens and Munroe, 222.
have courage and hope in the face of calamity,” *Inopportunity* was more closely related in theme to *Bon Voyage.*

Exhibited in 2004 at the São Paulo Biennial, *Bon Voyage* consisted of a plane weaved from vines and pierced with thousands of sharp objects confiscated by airport security in an attempt to represent what Cai referred to as, “the uneasy and absurd world we live in, where enemies may come out of every direction, big or small; and weapons may be in our own pockets. The dichotomy lies in our inability to travel and survive without the system that has created this situation.”

Exhibiting his characteristic interest in the presentation of dualities, *Bon Voyage* explored the intensification of airport security in the post-9/11 realm, merging the seeming fragility of the organic, vine-made plane against the innocuous threat of man-made, confiscated items that protrude from its form like artificial thorns. The piece seems to mock the futility of the increase in airline security measures in light of the global, human condition of relentless conflict and violence, highlighting the added threat of terrorism involved with contemporary airline travel, contrasted by the absurdity of the regulations put in place in order to protect us.

Building upon his work in *Bon Voyage, Inopportunity* continued Cai’s exploration of the dualities and contradictions involved with the contemporary threat of global terrorism. Following what he calls, “‘the laws of tolerance,’ declaring that an artist’s task is not to say whether something is good or bad, but simply to show reality in a new way,”

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25 Krens and Munroe, 36.

Cai created a work aimed at challenging the viewer’s perception of terrorism by “the presentation of another voice.” Cai states:

My work begins with things I observe and am interested in; this, then, gradually becomes the desire to produce a work. For example, I make explosions, so I pay attention to explosions. I can imagine the methods used and the mental state of the suicide bombers…Before igniting an artwork, I am sometimes nervous, yet terrorists face death unflinchingly. Along with the sympathy we hold for the victims I also have compassion for the young men and women who commit the act. Artists can sympathize with the other possibility, present issues from someone else’s point of view. The work of art comes into being because our society has this predicament. Artists do not pronounce good or bad… When most people approach the subject of suicide bombings, their ideas are very fixated and very stubborn. Everybody has the same, almost uniform reaction. What is ‘inopportune’ about this work is not the event itself, but rather the presentation of another voice.

In response to this statement Alexandra Munroe writes in, *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want To Believe*:

At first, the apparent neutrality of Cai’s stance with regard to victims and perpetrators of mass destruction can be perplexing. But upon deeper reflection, the violent transformation with which he is concerned reveal themselves as turning points in human history. The invention of gunpowder, the development of nuclear weaponry, and the current ubiquity of suicide bombings each identify paradigm shifts within the history of civilization. For Cai, the forces of destruction are in a dialectical process of creation, and the only constant is change itself. The wisdom that art can impart to those living in turbulent times may be just this perspective. If you want to believe, Cai’s creations unite us, for a brilliant flash, with the mind of benign and terrifying eternity.

For this reason, in his aim to remain neutral and present a commentary on terrorism that is neither positive nor negative, Cai focuses on the broader elements at play through the exploration of the unvarying cycle of creation and destruction as a force inextricably interconnected. Munroe notes the fact that Cai’s stance may be read as heartless in nature,

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27 Krens and Munroe, 34.

28 Ibid., 37.

29 Ibid., 38.
however, by presenting this perspective in a territory of neutrality he seeks to emphasize the universal themes that underlie events involving conflict and destruction. Thus, in attempting to bridge the gap between art (creation) and violence (destruction), he employs subtle references to the Daoist forces of yin and yang, as they represent the dissimilar, yet inseparable force of creation and destruction. In understanding the aspects of yin and yang within Inopportune we gain a more thorough consideration of Cai’s intention to present terrorism in a light neither negative nor positive, but as a corollary of universal forces.

Aside from a brief mention concerning the correlation between tigers and their affiliation with the yin symbol in Daoist cosmology by David Everitt Howe in his review for Cai’s I Want To Believe retrospective, the yin and yang symbolism within Inopportune was largely unexamined.\(^{30}\) The majority of attention focused on the imagery of Stage One and its allusion to terrorism in the form of a car bomb. For this reason, the aim of this chapter is to examine the yin and yang symbolism within the installation in effort to better understand Cai’s exploration of the unity of destruction and creation, and his subsequent aim not to “[heal] trauma once and for all, but rather [to] demonstr[ate] how destructive and constructive forces (even with regard to such events as terrorist attacks) are inextricably linked.”\(^{31}\) It is through this understanding that Cai offers a universal connection and understanding of global terrorism as a contemporary manifestation of the inherent violence that has, and will continue to exist in various forms indefinitely. It is not his aim to rectify the trauma associated with terrorism, but rather to


\(^{31}\) Krens and Munroe, 34.
present a space in which to reflect upon it as a global phenomenon, so that as viewers we may gain a broader understanding of its nature. By presenting dual perspectives, the viewer gains the potential for an understanding that may ultimately lead to a sense of reconciliation with conflict achieved through the contemplation of the universal forces that underlie all acts of violence.

Although *Inopportune* was made in reference to global terrorism, it was not a direct response to the events of 9/11, with Cai himself stating, “My starting point was not 9/11 itself, but the unidirectionality of culture and thought following that event.”32 As a result, the installation is not comparable to the art made at this time in regards to 9/11, as it is neither a memorial piece such as Art Spiegelman’s 2001 cover for the *New Yorker* (Fig. 15), nor is it a work made in direct reference to the imagery associated with the events of that day, as is the case with Eric Fischl’s sculpture, *Tumbling Woman* (2001; Fig. 16). In contrast, *Inopportune* was created as a response to the state of sociopolitical affairs in 2004, addressing the theme of terrorism from a perspective that considered the mindset of a suicide bomber. Regarding his intent for the installation Cai stated:

> Before 9/11, the attitude toward other religions - and especially the issue of how developed Western countries look upon Islamic society - was more nuanced and open to debate. After 9/11, people no longer discussed these issues, but instead demonstrated a near universal revulsion toward the display of endless suicide bombings by Arabic youth. Art cannot directly change society, but it can give people a new perspective for contemplation.33

It is for this reason that the installation stands apart from not only art made in response to 9/11, but also the art which addressed terrorism and the United States’ subsequent war on

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33 Ibid.
terror. In reviewing art made in response to both terrorism and the war, a clear agenda is presented in the denouncement of the United States’ involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, artists including Peter Kruper, Brian Stauffer, Tim O’Brien, Brad Holland and Scott Bakal, are featured in *Artists Against the War*, a compilation of illustrations taken from such publications as the *New Yorker, Mother Jones, The New York Times, Rolling Stone, Manifesto, News Day, Time*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*, showcasing fifty-six nationally renowned artists’ work made in opposition to the involvement of the United States in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The artwork ranges from the depiction of political figures such as (then) President George W. Bush dressed as a cowboy astride a horse running off a cliff in Tim O’Brien’s *Lone Rider* (2003; Fig 17), to non-figurative art such as Scott Bakal’s illustration *America’s Peace Campaign* (2007; Fig. 18) which displays numerous white doves spitting fire among an oil field littered with skulls. Such examples serve a politically charged message, one that Cai obviously sought to avoid, stating, “Generally speaking, most art is not politically correct; otherwise it would simply be propaganda. Art stands more in a blurred and troubled region. Yet, it often induces people to observe the two sides of a situation, and causes people discomfort, which elicits further reflection.” In this way, Cai circumvents what philosopher Jacques Derrida referred to as the predicament of the ‘autoimmunitary’ image, writing:

More than the destruction of the Twin Towers or the attack on the Pentagon, more than the killing of thousands of people, the real ‘terror’ consisted of and, in fact, began by exposing and exploiting, having exposed and exploited, the image of this terror by the target itself. This target (the United States, let’s say, and anyone who supports or is allied with them in the world, and this knows almost no limits

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35 Ma, 55.
today) had it in its own interest (the same interest it shares with its sworn enemies) to expose its vulnerability, to give the greatest possible coverage to the aggression against which it wishes to protect itself. This is again the same autoimmunitary perversion. 36

From this perspective, artistic images such as those found in Artists Against the War exploit the very media images of that which they attempt to protest, thus creating a circulation of imagery that is used to simultaneously justify and condemn the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In an effort to avoid this predicament of circular imagery and present a neutral viewpoint, Cai created Inopportune with the intention to present a dual perspective of the cycle of destruction and renewal. In this manner Cai continues his artistic investigation of themes involving violence and conflict from a viewpoint that seeks to investigate the common elements and forces at work within these global issues.

**Yin and Yang**

In understanding Dao as an invisible energy source, we may loosely define yin and yang as the dual forces bounded together within that energy. In his book Tao: The Watercourse Way, Alan Watts describes it as follows, “In Chinese the two poles of cosmic energy are yang (positive) and yin (negative)…They are thus like the different, but inseparable, sides of a coin, the poles of a magnet, or pulse and interval in any vibration. There is never the ultimate possibility that either one will win over the other…But it is difficult in our logic to see that being and nonbeing are mutually generative and mutually supportive.”37 Therefore, what is deemed ‘positive’ or ‘good,’ is intrinsically linked to what is perceived as ‘negative’ or ‘bad.’ The two cannot be

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36 Krens and Munroe, 59

37 Watts, 20.
separated, rather they exist together. Watts writes, “There is never the ultimate possibility that either [yin or yang] will win over the other, for they are more like lovers wrestling than enemies fighting.”38 Building upon the metaphor of yin and yang as two sides of a coin, the yin portion refers to characteristics associated with “softness, passivity, femininity, darkness, the valley, the negative, and nonbeing,” while the yang portion is associated with characteristics such as “hardness, masculinity, brightness, the mountain, activity, and being.”39 In this way, they may be understood as opposing ends of a spectrum, as they differ from one another, yet ultimately cannot be separated. However, the two forces, as stated before, are not in conflict with one another, as with metaphors where “light is at war with darkness, life with death, good with evil, and the positive with the negative, and thus an idealism to cultivate the former and to be rid of the latter.”40 In the Daoist world view, such a notion would be considered incomprehensible because of the inseparability of the two forces. Without destruction, there can be no creation. For this reason, “The yin-yang view of the world is serenely cyclic, fortune and misfortune, life and death, whether on small scale or vast, come and go everlastingly without beginning or end.”41 Through understanding the yin and yang aspect of Daoism, we may better interpret the imagery of Inopportune, as each component of the installation presents elements of the yin-yang principle as a frame for interpreting terrorism as a manifestation of destruction within the global cycle of chaos and harmony.

Stage One

38 Ibid., 21.
39 Simpkins and Simpkins, 57.
40 Watts, 20.
41 Ibid.
In seeking to exhibit themes relating to global terrorism in a neutral manner, Cai presents elements of yin and yang within each component of *Inopportune*. This is done in an effort to present aspects of creation and destruction as coexisting elements in an effort to display violence and terrorism as a counterpart to harmony and peace. The entire exhibit hinges upon an order of balance in effort to achieve an element of neutrality throughout the installation. In regards to the imagery of *Stage One*, this objective is achieved by presenting terrorism from both sides. On the one hand, *Stage One* may be viewed as a force of creation from the perspective of a terrorist. Although this may sound contradictory at first, in the same way that Cai creates an artwork by exacting destruction upon canvas, paper, or through the explosion of fireworks, so too may we view the implantation of a plan carried to action by a terrorist as a work of creation, in that they instigate the creation of an event, albeit a violent one. From this perspective, the nine cars hurdle through the air as a result of an explosive force that catapults a sequence of events into being. The pulsing lights emanate from the car as if discharging a force outwardly, as would be the case in an actual explosion.

From this perspective, characteristics associated with yang are manifested within the imagery of *Stage One*. Like the nine, identical Ford Tauruses hurtling through the air, yang is associated with speed, strength, heat and masculinity.\(^{42}\) The suspended automobiles embody these elements as the cars appear to travel and spin through the air amid the neon lights that radiate outwards from them. From this perspective, the imagery is violent, reckless and animated. Playing upon notions related to our simultaneous fascination and abhorrence of violence, *Stage One* presents an act associated with fear

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\(^{42}\) Simpkins and Simpkins, 27.
(the detonation of a car bomb) as a still-frame from an action movie, slowing down the events so as to suspend reality and showcase conflict as something alternately terrifying and beautiful. The dichotomy in *Stage One* is manifested in the sheer spectacle and aesthetic quality of the suspended automobiles, as their forms present violence and beauty harmoniously. The seemingly opposing duality of aggression and visual splendor is reinforced by the creative aspect of the destructive act, presenting an explosion as ultimately, a work of art. The cars cycle through in an endless loop, lifting from the ground, twirling through the air, landing, and repeating. The intact bodies present the trajectory of one car, hurtling through space in a cyclical flow, symbolizing the flow of yin and yang and their eternal quality.

In contrast to the yang elements within *Stage One*, there exist yin elements as well. From the perspective of the outsider, meaning the opposing view of a terrorist, the automobiles are suspended in the midst of a destructive force, an explosion. Suddenly, the same automobiles take on new connotations. Removed of their strength, speed, heat and masculinity they embody the consequences of fragility, destruction, chaos, violence and death. The cars no longer seem powerful, but rather fragile, and vulnerable as they hurdle through the air as if weightless and insubstantial. Mirroring this effect, the car in the video component to the installation, *Illusion*, floats dreamily through the projected scene as the pedestrians continue to pass by, completely unaware of its presence. Emitting sparks from numerous fireworks exploding from within the car, the video emulates a real-life recreation of the suspended cars, save for the fact that it does not spin through the air, but rather floats through the scene harmlessly. As a result, within the video the notion of violence, like the title of the piece, is an illusion. It is unseen and
unrecognized, floating past in a ceaseless loop. In this manner the unseen car serves as a symbol for the underlying persistence of destruction amid the monotonous events of our everyday lives. Although conflict and violence is unseen, it does not cease to exist, as harmony and chaos are inextricably linked within the Daoist belief system. While one may seem to manifest and rise to the surface, it does so, not in the absence of the other, but as a cyclical force that interchanges between the two continually. For this reason, the imagery of Stage One exhibits cyclical loops in the form of the nine cars and their rotating sequence, as well as in the video-loop projection that is Illusion. In this manner, Stage One slows violence down, suspends it, and creates a space in which to contemplate its myriad forms. It is not presented as either negative or positive; it simply is. For this reason, it is shown as a never-ending cycle, reinforcing its presence as something eternal in nature. In this way, our fears are confronted as we are reminded of the perpetual existence of conflict and violence, leaving us to contemplate the broader influences which create and lead to incessant cycle of global chaos and destruction.

Within the Daoist cosmology nothing exists as static or fixed, but rather every element is perpetually involved in a process of transformation. For this reason, the cars represent both the illusion of violence, as in the type found in action-films associated with entertainment and pleasure, as well as the violence of a car bomb, correlating to that which exists within the corporeal world and results in pain and distress. Although both categorizations of the word involve dissimilar and opposing elements, they represent one, central concept. In our minds we already are familiar with these opposing definitions, knowing how and in what situations to define and apply them, however occasionally, we lose the ability to discern the difference between the two and the lines become blurred.
Through the imagery of *Stage One*, Cai manifests the opposing yet cohesive elements of violence, emphasizing its yang form, but acknowledging its opposing yin form as well. In this manner the notion of the cycle of continuous transformation is depicted.

In comparison to Cai’s previously exhibited works, *Stage One* stands apart due to the imagery of the suspended automobiles, marking a change within his artistic imagery towards large-scale installation forms. While the video *Illusion* presents Cai’s characteristic use of fireworks, *Inopportune* presents the first instance of automobiles being used within his work. Although Cai employed the use of car engines in *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*, *Stage One* presents the first use of an entire, automotive body within his oeuvre. In seeking to display characteristics associated with yin and yang, the imagery of the automobile presented the opportunity to balance the strength and speed associated with yang, with something soft and fragile, as the cars are depicted suspended in the air amid the stream of seemingly exploding lights. In this way, the car, a symbol of heat, speed, aggression and strength, is rendered helpless and vulnerable as it seemingly spins through the air. The balance between the fragility of their suspended forms amid the unseen force of destruction launching them hurtling through the air reinforces the dual nature that inhabits all elements. An automobile possesses a tremendous force of strength in its sheer mass and ability for speed, yet it is not impervious to harm, just as all things are, both animate and inanimate.

*Stage Two*
Stage Two was largely interpreted by scholars and critics alike as a manifestation of a Chinese tale taken from the book, Outlaws of the Marsh.\textsuperscript{43} According to this account, the tigers were read as representations of the famous, thirteenth-century tale in which the bandit Wu Song redeems himself by saving a village terrorized by a man-eating tiger by killing it with his bare hands.\textsuperscript{44} Although Cai himself originally offered this information as justification for the tiger imagery, eventually he retracted, stating:

Actually, Wu Song’s story was merely an excuse. The tigers being persecuted by the arrows, their struggle, distress, and pain, the physiological tension, the state of oppression and conquest, the juxtaposition of the esteem for power and empathy towards the tigers, the inappropriateness of their pain; these are my interests…If people ask, ‘Why tigers?’ the artist can retort, ‘Why not tigers?’ If they ask for more, I can tell the story of Wu Song, but too much if it is boring and deprives people of the opportunity to seriously consider the issues at stake.\textsuperscript{45}

Due to the initial perpetuation of this interpretation before Cai’s ultimate retraction and explanation, the Wu Song interpretation was disseminated by reviewers and scholars such as Robert Pogue Harrison, Katherine Myers, Ellen Berkovitch, Gary Duehr, Grace Glueck, Anne Wrinkle, and Laura Steward Heon. As with the wolves in Head On, Cai’s decision to use tigers in Inopportune was simply a personal choice, largely devoid of significant symbolism or cultural connotations. Although symbolism may be applied to the tigers, ultimately, as with the wolves, the tigers were chosen as a result of Cai’s wanting to represent an “aggressive, courageous animal.”\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Ma, 61-62.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
*Stage Two* was located in a separate, yet aligned space with the elements of *Stage One*, marking the two *Stages* as mirroring one another in imagery and theme. For this reason, the tigers move in the opposite direction of the automobiles in *Stage One*, reinforcing the cyclical nature symbolized throughout the installation in reference to the cyclical flow of destructive and creative forces. Heavily centered on the yin side, the imagery of *Stage Two* is less dramatic, quieter and more subdued. Whereas *Stage One* represents a force of creation and destruction in action, *Stage Two* represents the aftermath associated with conflict and violence. In *Stage Two* the action has already passed; the arrows have been shot and have hit their intended targets. As a result, the tigers are depicted in a passive state, weak, wounded, and tumbling through the air. They lack aggression, emphasizing a downturn of the flow of energy issuing from *Stage One* to *Stage Two*.

Within the Daoist belief system, the tiger represents yin, which is associated with femininity, passivity, softness, weakness, coldness and nonbeing.\(^{47}\) In direct opposition to the imagery in *Stage One*, there is little theatricality here aside from the peculiarity of the tiger’s suspended forms. While the imagery of *Stage One* emits a force through the imagery of the projecting lights and hurtling automobiles, *Stage Two* receives a force in the form of the arrows embedded within the wounded tigers. The focus centers on their pain as their bodies contort in agony with their mouths ajar locked in muted screams of anguish. It is a humbling and intimate scene, as the animals command our attention evoking sympathy for their situation. Although they are man-made forms, the excessive

\(^{47}\) Ma, 61-62.
cruelty of their plight and their realistic representations provokes compassion from the viewer.

Similar in imagery to Cai’s, *Borrowing Your Enemy’s Arrows* (1998; Fig. 19) in which an excavated Chinese fishing boat from Cai’s home town of Quanzhou was pierced with 3,000 bamboo arrows and suspended in the air, the tiger forms are entirely shrouded with hundreds of the bamboo arrows. However, whereas *Borrowing Your Enemy’s Arrows* drew inspiration from the legendary story of Chinese general Zhuge Liang’s resourcefulness and strategy in battle, the tigers represent destruction and chaos in the form of violence and pain; they are the representations of the consequences associated with conflict. As with the automobiles in *Stage One*, the action is suspended and stationary as to provide a space for extended contemplation. The notion of time is arrested in effort to create a space for quiet reflection. In the same manner that *Stage One* confronts the audience with the fear of violence and terrorism, *Stage Two* confronts viewers with emotions of pain and death, both physical and emotional.

Despite the immediate appearance of *Stage Two* as a symbol of yin, the tigers, though dying, represent a creative force in that they are in the midst of the cyclical nature of destruction and renewal. As with the first *Stage*, reinforcing the nature of yin and yang duality, there are elements of destruction embedded within the yin imagery. It is for this reason that in both stages there exist nine objects, with the nine automobiles in *Stage One* and the nine tigers in *Stage Two*. The number nine is an auspicious (lucky) number in

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48 Krens and Munroe, 204.
Chinese numerology, meaning to be “long in time.”

Thus, the number nine indicates a sense of infiniteness as related to the eternal quality of yin and yang. In addition, this notion of the eternal is reinforced by the untitled gunpowder drawing which serves as the final piece of the installation. As the final work of the installation, its imagery links back to the beginning of *Inopportune* completing and enforcing the concept of unity, circularity and harmony by presenting the image of nine automobiles arranged in an elliptical formation. Created with gunpowder, it enforces the relationship between creation and destruction, providing a sense of the aftermath of violence, as it presents the physical residue which results from an explosion. In this manner the installation is bookended by the illusion of an explosion in *Stage One* and the actual residue of one in the untitled piece, as both contain images of nine automobiles arranged in a circular sequence. Thus, the journey through *Inopportune* ends on a note which emphasizes the beginning, once again reinforcing the idea of circularity, dichotomies, yin, yang, creation, and destruction.

The force of yin and yang permeate all aspects of our environment in the Daoist belief system. Even in the perceived absence of one force, the two can never be separated, therefore they are ever ready to transmute and ascend to the surface in the natural flow of creation and destruction. For this reason, in the midst of trepidation, there is a sense of calm. Devastation is viewed as an impermanent force. Through the imagery of the dual *Stages* comprising *Inopportune* Cai presents representations of yin and yang as a comment on the nature of destruction and death as innate counterpart to the element of harmony and existence. For this reason, the installation was divided into two imitative

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halves. While Stage One is heavily yang-centered, referencing creation as an act that springs forth from destruction, Stage Two depicts heavily yin-centered elements referencing the downturn of energy in the form of death and devastation. However, the exhibit ends on a creative note in the form of the gunpowder drawing with its elliptical imagery and reference to Stage One’s imagery as reinforcing the cyclical nature of both positive and negative forces. In this way, Cai presents a space in which to consider controversial and uncomfortable themes such as violence and terrorism, yet he also provides a way in which to consider these issues as transitory aspects within the cycle of existence. As he states in an interview published in 2005:

No matter how extraordinary an event is, it is also nothing extraordinary. No matter how transitory life is, it is also infinite. No matter how lacking in energy, there is still energy. Impossibility is still possibility. Because energy is infinite, no one is capable of using it up. Understanding this allows the self to be relaxed and free, at one with the universe… modes of destruction and construction, in and through representation, are bound together in circuits of negotiation…different tempos characterize image-events whose meaning is largely derived from the changes in state and the locations they transverse.50

Although such a statement may be interpreted as heartless in light of the devastation and tragedy associated with events involving terrorist attacks, Cai’s art attempts to transcend the finite and connect to the infinite. He refrains from limiting his interpretation of an event within restrictive boards of time and space. Instead, he makes universal connections, placing an isolated event into the context of the limitless universal realm. He is an artist that attempts to expand our consciousness by presenting the light that exists within the dark. Without destruction, there can be no construction. While this concept may seem insensitive, it ultimately presents an understanding of the Daoist notion that no event is ever static or fixed. In viewing the process by which events possess globally. It is

50 Krens and Munroe, 58.
not heartlessness, but an opening of the mind towards compassion and understanding in an effort to alter the destruction that exists as a result of our own continuation.
CHAPTER 2

THE ELEMENT OF QI IN HEAD ON

Marking Cai’s first solo-exhibition in Germany, Head On debuted in 2006 at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin. Developed with funding by the Sammlung Deutsche Bank, Cai was invited to both visit and create the artworks in Berlin as a site-specific installation. In effort to draw inspiration for the exhibit he traveled to the German capital in 2005, during which time he visited numerous historical landmarks including Checkpoint Charlie, the Soviet Memorial, the Topography of Terror Museum, and the remains of the Berlin Wall.51

With an intended goal “to create art that would initiate a dialogue locally and connect to Berlin’s history,” Cai was specifically inspired by his visit to the remains of the Berlin Wall, viewing the ruins as a symbol for the “universal human tragedy that results from [a] blind storming ahead, from the uncompromising way in which we seek to reach our goals.”52 With the Wall serving as the catalyst for the installation, Head On came to fruition in August 2006. It presented audiences with a work that exemplified the cycle of destruction and renewal as expressed both locally, through references to Berlin’s history, as well as globally, through allusions to the Daoist element of qi, a universal energy that inhabits all elements.

51 Brendel, 76.

In drawing inspiration from the wall Cai initiated himself into a circle of contemporary artists including Agathe Snow, Tim Roeloffs, Sophie Calle, Vincent Trasov, Michael Wesely, Frank Thiel, Gerda Leopold, Wieland Speck, Shelly Silver, Stefanie Bürkle, and Michel Majerus, all of whom have created works in response to this infamous historical monument. Contemporary art that engages with the Wall encompasses a broad assortment of artistic styles ranging from Roeloffs’ Pop Art-influenced photomontage, *Berlin Works* (1992-2009; Fig. 20), to Calle’s series of photographs of the Wall ruins, *The Detachment* (1996; Fig. 21), to Trasov’s text-incorporated painting of former East Berlin street signs, *Strassenbild* (1991-1993; Fig. 22), to documentary films such as Silver’s *Former East/Former West* (1994), in which she conducted hundreds of street interviews in Berlin two years after Germany’s reunification.

A more recent example is Agathe Snow’s 2011 exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim *All Access World* (Fig. 23), which showcases large-scale, sculptural assemblage renditions of internationally recognized monuments including the Berlin Wall, the Eiffel Tower, Stonehenge, and the Roman Colosseum. Pop culture references in the form of celebrity figures such as Michael Jackson and advertising logos such as the McDonald’s golden arches are interspersed among the sculptures, presenting the monuments as smaller-scale copies of the originals, available for purchase and personalization per the buyer’s instructions. Although the exhibit features a rendition of the Berlin Wall, the focus of *All Access World* centers on international monuments collectively and does not operate as a site-specific artwork. *Head On* differs, as it serves as an artwork site-specific to Berlin in the same vein as Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s
Wrapping the Reichstag (1995; Fig. 24), or the works exhibited at the East Side Gallery (Fig. 25), a 1.3 kilometer-long section of the Berlin Wall that stands as an international memorial for freedom, featuring over one hundred paintings by artists from the world over.53

Aside from its status as a site-specific installation, Head On is particularly interesting due to Cai’s prominence as a contemporary Chinese artist. Although numerous contemporary Chinese artists including Ai Weiwei, Wu Shanzhuan, Liu Ye, Zhang Hui, Xu Bing, Fu Rao, Wang Chu, Jiang Jun, Cai Jin, and Yang Shaobin have all exhibited works in Germany, Head On is the first site-specific installation by a Chinese artist in Berlin that addresses issues directly related to the city’s history with a specific focus on the Berlin Wall. This fact is significant as currently, the majority of contemporary Chinese artists exhibiting work in Berlin shy away from addressing Western themes, as contemporary Chinese artists, critics, and curators such as Huang Yong Ping, Wang Lin, and Zhu Ling feel that Chinese artists are pressured by museums and galleries to make their work more accessible to European audiences by employing, “Westernized,” techniques.54 The proliferation of this perception is exhibited by the recent opening of Galerie Ling in 2010, a contemporary Chinese art gallery in Berlin owned by Zhu Ling. The gallery specializes in promoting and exhibiting “emerging young Chinese artists…to promote individuality and independent spirit in contemporary Chinese art,” in effort to combat Chinese artists “[trying] to be ‘Western’ from


54 Hung, 248-252; 356-365. (In this context the term ‘Western’ and references to ‘Westernization’ refer, geographically, to the regions of North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand.)
techniques, mediums, right down to the final look of their works.”

Zhu refrains from singling out specific artists; however her sentiments express a concern that has been felt by Chinese critics for decades.

As thousands of young Chinese artists began emigrating abroad in the mid-1980s following the lift of travel restrictions during the 1979 post-Mao reforms, a divide was created between the artists that left and those who remained behind. Professor Wu Hung, director for the Center for the Art of East Asia at the University of Chicago states that the divide between these particular groups of Chinese artists was “not only geographical and cultural but also a generation gap,” with “overseas artists directly participating in international contemporary art, and…developing projects in accordance with their new environments and audiences.” As a result, the Chinese artists working abroad were viewed as exhibiting art that expressed a “strong international flavor,” which in turn raised questions by Chinese critics concerning “the standards used by Western curators to evaluate Chinese art…revealing growing tension between Chinese artists and critics associated with the domestic sphere, and those associated with the international sphere.”

Within this context, Head On serves as a bridge between these two divides. On the one hand, the installation serves a domestic role as a site-specific work that addresses Berlin’s history, yet in addition, due to its reputation as an internationally recognized monument (as exemplified in Snow’s All Access World) Cai utilizes this fact to comment

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56 Krens and Munroe, 23.
57 Hung, 248; 365.
on the commonalities that exists between contemporary cultures, thus creating a work that resonates both locally and globally. The Berlin Wall stands as a monument that in part reminds us of the “profound disorder of the world.” Although its removal was a cause for celebration, its remains endure as a reminder of the Cold War, Soviet domination of the Eastern Bloc, and communist oppression. There exists obvious links between China and Berlin due to the role of socialism currently in place in China, with Cai himself stating, “In contemporary Chinese culture, there is socialism. And in socialism, there is Marxism, which is a system of thought imported from the West…Therefore we both find ourselves on a common terrain.” In an effort to emphasis this “common terrain,” Cai sought to convey universal themes as exemplified through the history of Berlin. For this reason, in its aim, Head On builds upon Cai’s Projects for Extraterrestrials series. Although never realized, one of the proposed endeavors for his Projects included a plan titled, Rebuilding the Berlin Wall: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 7 (1991). The intended project details were recorded as follows, “Gunpowder fuses will be placed along the former Berlin Wall for a length of 2,800 meters. The explosion will last 28 seconds. Upon explosion, the wall will be rebuilt in a flash of light and smoke. The event will be broadcast by satellite transmission around the world and into space. Through the momentary re-creation of a wall, this project attempts to remind the public of the existence of shackles and fetters from which we must free ourselves.”

58 Dawei, 13.
59 Ibid., 85.
60 Ibid., 97.
Begun in 1989 while Cai was living in Japan, *Projects for Extraterrestrials* was a “programme for a succession of large-scale explosions with the goal of transmitting signals to the universe and establishing a dialogue between Earth and the other planets.” Projects in this series included plans to revive the ancient signaling towers that existed along China’s ancient silk route (*Reviving the Ancient Signal Towers: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 8*, unrealized), recreating colossal-sized footprints of the legendary beast Bigfoot (*Bigfoot’s Footprints: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 6*, unrealized), and a plan to extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters using gunpowder to create “a wall of fire and light running through the empty desert,” (*Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, 1993; Fig. 26). In all, the series included thirty-three projects, fifteen of which were never realized, however as Fei Dawei explains, “The very impossibility of realizing others proves that the drawings are also autonomous works of art with a life of their own, independent of the initial intention which created them.”

Cai’s purpose for the *Projects for Extraterrestrials* series was to engage in a discourse that would transcend international borders and initiate “a dialogue with celestial bodies,” which he saw as “more urgent than communicating with the West because it allows one to escape constrictive logic and to find the veritable space of the human being through the ties interwoven between the cosmos and the self.” Concerning the overarching theme of the project, Fei Dawei writes, “Convening diverse and

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61 Ibid., 9; 12; 97; 138-145.
fluctuating methods, [Cai] ... attempt[s] to attain an organic, global vision of the universe that surpasses chaos."

At its most base interpretation, chaos may be defined as a lack of order or predictability. Although chaos may be viewed negatively, conjuring consequences associated with the eradication of systems that characterize order, such as systems of law and government, ultimately we know such systems to be neither faultless nor wholly predictable. It is as the Daoist philosopher Chuang Tzu said, “The true phase of being is chaos,” meaning that despite our efforts to control and determine our fate, there perpetually endures an element of the unpredictable. It is this element of unpredictability that Cai confronts in his work, whether by creating works of art using an unstable medium such as gunpowder, or by emphasizing the cycle of creation and destruction in his large-scale installations.

Chaos is universal, as is the cyclical course of destruction and renewal, both of which are corollaries of the universal energy of qi. For this reason, Cai presents subtle references to the energy of qi in the components of *Head On*, in effort to present a universal theme that is globally accessible. Qi is universal as it is symbolized by water, an element that possesses both universally physical and philosophical properties. Fei Dawei writes in, “Amateur Recklessness:"

As Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus said, ‘Water is the principle of all things.’ He was speaking of a materiality, however, not the water we drink. It refers to notions such as the ‘Indefinite,’ ‘Unlimited,’ ‘Fluidity,’ or ‘Black,’ ‘Dark,’ etc. Thales’ thoughts on this are generally considered as fundamental to Western philosophy. The father of Chinese Taoism, Laozi, had uttered similar

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63 Watts, 42.
words. For instance, he said that the world was born from Dao (way), and that this Dao is characterized as being virtual, unutterable, unnamable, and hidden in the shadows. The foundations of Eastern and Western philosophy share a single idea after all! With the appearance of Logos during Greek antiquity, however, the Western world embarked upon a path that completely spilt off from the one China was to pursue. No sign of change related to this rupture was to appear until two thousand years later. Western civilization has spent the 20th century in an attempt to walk out of the shadow of determinism in order to understand chance chaos...A new West and a new East are being born simultaneously building a ‘hotline’ that connects the two great civilisations. A grand epoch of the meeting of East and West is opening up before us.64

By recognizing and understanding the aspects of qi as presented in Head On, this contributes to understanding Cai’s intention for the installation as it builds upon his former idea for his Project for Extraterrestrials plan by using the Wall as a symbol for global understanding that “relates to the destiny of mankind.”65 It is for this reason that he chose this symbol of creation and destruction because it resonates both locally and globally. It unites Western and Chinese philosophy, and it breaks down global barriers by shaping how we can view something central to German history and apply it to internationally applicable concepts.

Aside from its debut at the Deutsche Guggenheim and its inclusion in Cai’s I Want To Believe retrospective, Head On was also displayed at the Taiwan Fine Arts Museum in 2009, and at the National Museum of Singapore in 2010. As with Inopportune, both public and critical response was largely receptive and popular, with the literature ranging from monographs such as Dan Cameron’s, Nicholas Mirzoeff’s and Friedhelm Hutte’s, Cai Guo-Qiang: Head On, to scholarly essays such as Maria Zimmermann Brendel’s piece for ETC, “A Zone of Danger and Beauty,” to numerous

64 Dawei, 13-14.

reviews in magazines and newspapers such as Mairi Beautyman’s article for *Interior Design* titled, “Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing.” As was the case with *Inopportune: Stage One*, the majority of attention focused on the installation’s theatrical appeal in regards to the imagery of the most visually striking and ambitious piece, *Head On*. Like *Inopportune*, *Head On* centers on demonstrating elements of creation and destruction. For this reason, the components of the installation, as with *Inopportune*, enhance and reinforce one another in their message concerning this cycle. However, instead of subtle references to yin and yang, Cai presents a similar, yet different aspect of the creative/destructive cycle of Daoism through an exploration of the flow of qi energy.

**Qi**

Qi is the essence of Dao, an invisible energy that constitutes all phenomena in the world. It is “both the animating energy and that which is animated,” perpetually imbibing and transforming in an effortless, endless flow. In order to better comprehend this concept, it may be likened to nature. Although no one object may define it, it is made up of, and expressed through myriad forms, constituting cycles of change and transformation. It exists without our making, continues without our involvement; it is both ceaseless, yet never static or the same, and it is most harmonious when free from manipulation. In expressing the essence of qi, Daoist texts such as the *Dao De Jing* often liken it to the properties of nature’s greatest force, water. Chapter eight of the *Dao De Jing* states, “The highest efficacy is like water. It is because water benefits everything (wanwu) /Yet vies to dwell in places loathed by the crowd/ That it comes nearest to

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67 Simpkins and Simpkins, 14.
proper way-making.\textsuperscript{68} As in a stream found in nature, water flows effortlessly, taking the lowest position. Edward Slingerland writes in \textit{Effortless Action}, “In all the world there is nothing softer or weaker than water, and yet nothing is better than it for attacking the hard and rigid. This is because water does not allow anything to change it;” the metaphorical implication is clear, “become still and enduring like water, and when you do take motion, you will be able to overcome all obstacles.”\textsuperscript{69} As the cycle of creation and destruction is both endless and unavoidable, Daoism proposes that the most advantageous manner in which to endure this fundamental aspect of existence is to simply be like water, and not attempt to struggle or manipulate circumstances, but rather accept things as they are and continue forward in an easy and gentle manner. Amid the chaos of destruction, the flow of qi continues, effortlessly. In attempting to make the unseen forces of nature visible, Cai created \textit{Head On} as an expression of this theme, making the invisible, visible.

In the Daoist view of the world, everything and every event “is what it is only in relation to all others…The principle is that if everything is allowed to go its own way the harmony of the universe will be established, since every process in the world can ‘do its own thing,’ only in relation to all others …Because of the mutual interdependence of all beings, they will harmonize if left alone and not forced into conformity with some arbitrary, artificial, and abstract notion of order.”\textsuperscript{70} Although Cai never confirms qi as a


\textsuperscript{70} Watts, 43-44.
reference or inspiration for *Head On*, in an interview with Ellen Pearlman for the *Brooklyn Rail*, he does acknowledge an interest in the “unseen forces of nature,” as being a reoccurring influence to his work.\(^7\) Qi is exactly that, an invisible, flowing energy, whereas the Berlin Wall is both a literal and figurative barrier. In an effort to present conflicting imagery, as well as the consequences associated with the desire to control and manipulate the natural, chaotic state of the world, Cai juxtaposes elements representing the effortless flow of qi against the man-made barricade of the Wall, conjuring to mind the negative implications associated with the construction of the Berlin Wall. The barrier stood as a symbol for communist oppression, the Cold War, and the political division between Germany and Western Europe. For this reason, Cai uses it as an example of human-made oppression, and the consequences involved when we attempt to manipulate and control our circumstances in defiance of the unpredictable chaos of the natural, cyclical progression of creation and destruction.

**Illusion II and Vortex**

The installation begins with a dual-channel video-loop projection titled *Illusion II*. Filmed in Germany, in the Friedrichshain Kreuzberg district of Berlin in July of 2006, Cai described the aim of the film as a reflection on “the contradictory powers of violence and beauty, destruction, glory, and heroism.” Per his instructions, a small “typical German house,” was constructed at the Babelsberg film studio located outside of Berlin. Following its construction, the house was filled with various explosive rockets and fireworks and taken to the corner of Stresemannstraße and Möckernstraße, a

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characteristic Berlin corner, save for the ruins of the Anhalter railroad station, one of three used to transport Jews away from the city during World War II. Cai specifically chose this location as he was fascinated by the history of the site, remarking that aside from the ruins of the Anhalter railroad station, the location appeared innocuous, resembling an ordinary Berlin cityscape. On July 11, 2006, at nine-thirty at night, Cai illuminated the Berlin skyline with an eighteen-minute long firework display, effectively destroying the model home he had constructed for the occasion.\(^72\) It is this event which *Illusion II* captures and displays on loop within the *Head On* installation. Combining the inherently simultaneous forces of creation and destruction associated with fireworks, this concept is enhanced by the video footage of the house transitioning from a position of stability and permanence to that of being obliterated in an eruption of explosive rockets and fireworks. The effect is visually powerful, as the scene unceasingly alternates between an image of harmony and intransience to that of devastation and ruin. As with the video *Illusion* from Stage One of *Inopportune*, *Illusion II* presents an image of violence that is illusionistic in nature. Although destruction does indeed take place in the form of the obliteration of the car in *Illusion* and the house in *Illusion II*, ultimately the audience is aware of the staged-factor of both images. No actual harm has been inflicted upon a living creature in either video. Rather, the objective of both video installations is to present a visual demonstration of the infinite cycle of creation and destruction.

In addition, the exhibit showcased Cai’s characteristic gunpowder art in the form of a nine by four meter drawing titled *Vortex*, which, like the untitled gunpowder drawing from *Inopportune*, depicts an endless loop of objects, in this case, a pack of wolves

\(^72\) Brendel, 76.
running in a continuous, oval-shaped loop. Mirroring the imagery of the nine automobiles arranged in an ellipse from the untitled drawing in Inopportune, both drawings serve as visual reminders of the cyclical nature of creation and destruction. Whereas the image of the automobiles point towards a modern interpretation of this cycle, the wolf forms, presented in side-profile outlines, are reminiscent of cave paintings, seemingly emphasizing the ceaseless progression of creation and destruction throughout history. Whether manifested in modern times through terrorist acts, or associated with the violence of ancient hunting rituals, the cycle of life and death has always existed, merely changing forms throughout the course of time.

Situated on opposing walls, the two works present images of the endless cycle of creation and destruction. In Vortex, this is expressed in the endless loop of the numerous, running wolves. Aside from the obvious quality of the imagery itself in the form of the unending loop of circling wolves, the medium itself fortifies the creation/destruction theme. Created from gunpowder, the drawing presents a physical manifestation of a transformative process, altering a caustic material into a singular and beautiful object through the process of a destructive explosion. In this manner, the drawing presents the process of transformation through both its imagery as well as its assembly. Both works involve the use of explosives, in the form of the fireworks in Illusion II and the use of gunpowder in Vortex. The properties of these explosive elements, both of which use gunpowder, contain the dual power to create (a force of energy in the form of an explosion) and destroy, as the fireworks ignite and ultimately demolish the house. The energy of the explosion is likened to the energy of qi. In her article, “Circulating Qi (Energy) of Mind and Intellect,” Hasegawa Yuko writes:
Cai accepts the contradictions that destruction and violence can be perceived as beautiful. His thinking is founded on Daoism (Taoism), the cornerstone of Chinese thought: each and every existence in this world—from humans to other living beings to lifeless beings—consists of qi (ch’i; invisible energy). To Cai, explosion is the simplest form of practicing dao (tao). Practice of dao becomes possible by being one with the explosion itself. It is said that only the human mind can control qi. At such a time, the mind is one whole existence, embracing both the body and spirit. [this] can create a relative relationship, or vibration, not only with the intellect but also with qi. Controlled by qi, violence can become beauty. Dao is a philosophy of action. Today, our times and values are thrown into…turbulent change. For Daoists, who consider themselves and the situations around them… [to be subject to constant change], no other time is as fitting as today to exert their power. What Cai the artist intends to do is to agitate and massage our… [rigid] thought[s], values, and soul[s].

The cyclical nature of both the video with its endless loop, along with the circular format of the running wolves in Vortex emphasizes the infinite, flowing nature of qi energy. In utilizing the circular format, Cai reveals that what is suggestive is ultimately impermanent, and only through the circle can anything be regained, rediscovered and recognized.

**Head On**

Interspersed among the gallery space containing Vortex and Illusion II are a small number of wolf forms, situated with all four legs firmly rooted on the ground, all facing the same direction, seemingly heading towards a doorway into an adjacent gallery space. Although at first glance their placement may seem arbitrary, this is indeed not the case. On the contrary, their forms serve to lead the viewer into the following gallery, marking a transition from the contemplation of the cycle of destruction and creation in the main gallery onto the next stage of the installation. In following the wolves into the neighboring gallery, the viewer is absorbed by the imagery comprising Head On in the

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73 Yuko, 50-57.
form of ninety-nine wolves running in a collective and unified arc towards a transparent glass wall. The number ninety-nine in significant in Chinese numerology as nine is an auspicious (lucky) number meaning to be “long in time,” as a result, when doubled as in ninety-nine, it means to be doubly long in time, or eternal. In this manner, the number of the wolves symbolizes the eternal force of qi, as something which, like energy, cannot be destroyed, thus exuding an infinite quality.

In light of the fact that wolves are no longer part of the natural habitat in Germany, it does not seem out of order at this point to ask, why wolves? In his own words Cai states, “The wolf is a pack animal, a metaphor for a blind run with the pack.”

For Cai, part of the intended goal for Head On was to represent “collective behavior,” indicating the dangers associated with group mentality, bringing to mind the emphasis on collectivism associated with communist rule, which, in the case of East Berlin ultimately failed and led to strife and tension between the Eastern Bloc and Western Europe. Unlike the tigers in Inopportune, which writhe through the air, suspended in separate realms of agony and distress, the wolves present a wave-like force of movement, unified as a collective entity, and reinforcing their status as a pack animal while highlighting this aspect as a shared human trait. In viewing the installation, the audience moves with the herd, following below as their forms gradually elevate into the air above them, moving and pushing towards the East in the same manner that the Soviet Union attempted to push and extend their borders beyond East Berlin into Western Europe.

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75 Brendel, 77.
Like the tiger, the wolf is a carnivorous hunter, revered for centuries by numerous cultures for the mix of heroism, bravery, and fear it inspires as a powerful and dangerous animal. In regarding Cai’s choice of wolves, aside from his statements concerning the correlation between wolves and humans as creatures that live, work (and once hunted) in packs, there is a certain mix of cultural references, folklore and fact that may be applied to the analysis of Cai’s choice of wolves for this particular installation. In relation to Germany, wolves have experienced a violent existence. During the Middle Ages they were hunted to near extinction, reappearing sporadically between events such as wars when borders and land became rearranged. Specifically, a sparse number reappeared in Brandenburg “where their territory widened as 1.5 million people fled East Germany after the Berlin Wall fell.”

From this perspective, the choice of wolves for Head On connects locally with Germany history, serving as a metaphor for the dispersion and relocation of Germans both, before and after, the building and eventual removal of the Berlin Wall. Also, the reintroduction of wolves into Germany coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall as, “Dozens were shot in East Germany during the Cold War. But the demise of the communist government and the rise, after German reunification, of environmentally conscious successors have given nature a foothold on land that had been lost to warehouses and iron mills that today languish like industrial ghosts.”

In this way, the return of the wolf may be seen as a symbol for Germany’s reunification, just as wolves were displaced from Germany in the same way many citizens were during the

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77 Ibid.
Cold War. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany reunited, just as the wolves were reunited with their formerly inhabited territory.

Although the wolves provide a multitude of possible symbolism, ranging from German connotations associated with Hitler’s first Eastern-front military headquarters, Wolfsschanze, to Chinese literature including the fairy tale, the Wolf of Zhongshan, or the contemporary, semi-autobiographical novel by Jiang Rong, *Wolf Totem*, ultimately, in the words of Dan Cameron, taken from his essay, “Blinded By the Light,” in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Head On*:

> It is tempting but probably fruitless to engage in the game for identifying certain symbols as standing for [the West], and others for China. What is probably more to the point is that we live in an age when warfare and the open struggle among nations for power are as real and palatable as the rising and setting of the sun, and the artist’s mission is in part to observe these struggles, and convey some sense of their meaning through artistic form.78

Although there are direct, symbolical references to German history within the installation such as with the transparent wall being realized to the same height and thickness as the Berlin Wall, and the house in *Illusion II* being modeled after characteristic, domestic German architecture (in conjunction with the specific site in which the video was shot), within the context of *Head On*, the wolves serve a global, rather than local, symbolism. They represent the collective, social animal aspect of human nature, symbolizing our history as cooperative foragers, living in groups as a means for survival. However, our innate predisposition towards mistaking collective intelligence for group thought has been attributed to not only the suppression of individual thought, but also the dangers involved with political and religious control. The history of Berlin serves as an

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observable example of this phenomenon due to the political strife incited by Nazi rule, and following the end of WWII, the rise of Soviet control over the Eastern sector of the city. It is this danger of collective thought that Cai addresses through the wolves. In *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want To Believe*, Michelle Yun writes, “Here, through the emblematic imagery of wolves, Cai intends to address the human fallibility of following any collective ideology too blindly and humankind’s fate to repeat mistakes unthinkingly.” The word, “mistakes,” is employed ambiguously, as although the installation, due to its location in Berlin, elicits references to the rise and fall of Communism in East Berlin, the installation’s imagery may be applied symbolically beyond the borders of Germany to additional examples of the power and potential danger associated with collective thought. After all, within the history of the world, the larger events and sociopolitical factors that influenced the construction and demolition of the Berlin Wall are not the sole example of the potential hazards involved with collective mentality, nor will they serve as the last example of such behavior. For this reason, the installation effectively creates a local and global connection, as viewers become members of the wolf pack, moving along with the herd as they run towards the invisible barrier of the transparent glass wall. In viewing the power and ultimate destruction of the wolves, viewers are free to create their own conclusions concerning the symbolism of the wall. For this reason, Cai refrained from having introductory wall-texts, and instead allowed viewers to simply walk through the installation and draw their own conclusions. In absence of any narrative, the installation operates on a foundational level of sheer theatrics exhibited by the visual display of the wolves. They exhibit energy (a force of creation) hitting the wall (a force of destruction). Displayed alongside the video-loop of the house in *Illusion II* endlessly exploding in a

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79 Krens and Munroe, 226.
burst of fireworks only to reverse back to a state of seeming permanence, along with the infinite loop of running wolves in Vortex, Head On as a whole, presents the elemental cycle of destruction and creation.

In following the movement of the wolf pack, the reference to the flow of qi becomes apparent as they present a physical manifestation of moving energy. For this reason, they are depicted in a wave-like formation, reinforcing the association of qi with the qualities of water. This concept is manifested in the arrangement of the wolves in Head On, as at the forefront of the installation the wolves trickle in, their bodies firmly rooted on the ground. The wolves at the start of the pack appear still and motionless, however as the herd begins to narrow, acceleration begins as they coalesce into a suspended, weightless, wave-like formation. Like individual drops of water, the separate wolf forms merge together into a unified structure, building momentum as they move continuously upward, ultimately forming a rudimentary arc configuration as their combined power crests in a wave-like form in the immediate moment before their collision with the invisible glass barrier. The flow of energy is palpable, causing the interruption of the glass wall to be all the more visually jarring and disrupting, as the immense number of the wolves collectively displays a sense of united strength and power that appears impenetrable in nature. As a result, the abrupt halt of the sinuous flow of the wolves causes one to consider the oddity that is the glass structure. It is there that the graceful, effortless flow of their suspended bodies abruptly ends in discord, destruction and violence, as twenty-two of the wolves lie wounded and mangled, a result of their collision with the glass barrier. Unlike the imagery of the wounded tigers in Inopportune, where the focus centers on physical pain as manifested in the numerous arrows that
pierce their hides, the imagery in *Head On* is more graphic as the viewer is able to follow the path of the wolves and closely interact with, and examine the twenty-two mangled corpses lying on the gallery floor. In her article, “A Zone of Danger and Beauty,” Maria Zimmermann Brendel writes, “Necks are broken, bodies distorted, limbs twisted, and faces contorted in agony. In their silence, we hear their scream, and with it, our own. The beautiful flow has cruelly been interrupted. Numbness and disbelief set in.”\(^80\) It is here at the wall that the energy of the wolves abruptly halts, allowing the viewer to pause as well and consider the conflicting imagery of the installation manifested through the juxtaposition of the momentum and strength of the wolf pack against the barrier of the wall.

**The Wall**

As the wolves represent the creative flow of harmony in the form of qi, the wall symbolizes a force of destruction. However, whereas in *Inopportune* the forces of destruction were displayed through symbols of physical threats such as the violence associated with the implied menace of terrorism, in *Head On* the force of destruction is exhibited in a radically different manner. Instead of being presented as an innate counterpart to the cycle of harmony, the force of destruction in *Head On* is invisible. In this manner, Cai demonstrates that although the cycle of creation and destruction is a natural occurrence, on occasion, the forces of destruction may not be obvious or easily recognizable. As a result, by attempting to manipulate the natural flow of energy, on occasion, we may accelerate the journey towards our own ruin.

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\(^80\) Brendel, 77.
In the *Dao De Jing*, a warning is issued, stating, “Racing and hunting cause one’s mind to be mad,” warning that we should “not dare to be at the forefront of the world.” Cai epitomizes this lesson through the imagery of *Head On*, revealing the consequences involved when we attempt to manipulate the natural flow of qi. Just as the wolves become engrossed in the movement of the herd, unable to see the barrier before them, so too may we fall victim to the madness associated with humanity’s pursuit for such things as status, wealth and power, ultimately causing us to ignore or fail to see our own invisible barriers. Although the sheer force of the run is awe-inspiring in its momentum and strength, the consequences are clearly delineated at the journey’s end.

Aside from the elements connected to the house in *Illusion II*, the wall is the only additional component within the installation that directly engages with Berlin’s history, as (when first realized at the Deutsche Guggenheim) its dimension were the same height and thickness as that of the Berlin Wall. However, the material used to build the wall, glass, does not match with that of the actual Berlin Wall. Instead, the wall is invisible, emphasizing the invisible forces of energy, such as qi, as well as representing the fact that destruction and chaos are not always easily recognizable. In discussing the installation, Cai himself stated:

I was inspired by the history of Berlin and I wanted to make something that was related to the history of the city and related to the destiny of mankind. As we know, glass walls are not structural and invisible walls are the hardest to destroy. I made ninety-nine wolves. They’re moving very tightly, very collectively in a pack. They’re moving very heroically, very strongly in collision with this invisible wall. After they fall down, they get up and they run around ceaselessly, and then [continue] the cycle. I’m hoping that this reflects the destiny of mankind when they make mistakes repeatedly. On the surface this looks very realistic and

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81 Ames and Hall, 170.
very figurative, but I’m hoping to convey something more abstract, something more spiritual.\textsuperscript{82} The cycle of the wolves repeatedly running into the wall again and again reinforces the cycle of chaos; humanity will continue to do things that will later be viewed as mistakes, such as the totalitarian regime that dominated Berlin and caused the construction of the Wall in 1961. Although several of the wolves lie dying and mangled on the floor of the gallery, other wolf forms seem to turn and circle back, ever ready to repeat the process again. In his desire to relate something capable of extending beyond reference to Berlin’s history, Cai presents a consideration of collective behavior, a comment on humanity at large and our failure to notice our own, individual, invisible barriers. The installation traveled beyond the German border; therefore the references to Germany are subtle as Cai’s main point of interest in creating \textit{Head On} was to present a consideration of universal themes that could be easily understood and applied to all audiences no matter the setting. For example, when viewed by \textit{Newsweek} art critic Cathleen McGuigan at Cai’s \textit{I Want To Believe} retrospective at the Guggenheim, New York “she connected Cai’s enigmatic work on the one hand to the financial crisis, in which, ‘that wild pack of Wall Streeters finally hit the wall. At the same time, she remarked, [the wolves] impart[ed] an almost philosophical message –‘that every living creature is racing toward oblivion.’”\textsuperscript{83} As a result, the installation successfully achieved Cai’s intended aim, creating a work that expresses the universal theme of creation and destruction and the consequences associated with the manipulation of the natural flow of energy.


Reminiscent of *Transparent Monument* (2006; Fig. 27), which was completed in the same year as *Head On*, the project consisted of a single panel glass wall erected on the roof garden of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Like *Head On*, at first glance, the invisible wall seems innocuous, barely visible to the naked eye. It is only upon closer inspection that one notices the bodies of four, hyper-realistic dead bird forms lying at the base of the glass panel. Despite the differences in setting and animal forms, the symbolism is the same as with *Head On*, emphasizing the destruction associated with the human-made manipulation and interference with the natural order and energy of the world. This is exhibited in *Transparent Monument* by the absurdity of the glass wall situated on a rooftop, juxtaposed with the tragic deaths of the lifeless bird forms. The symbolic ramifications are boundless, with implications associated with the consequences of environmental manipulation, to the growing danger of religious-extremism and its connections to terrorism. However, in light of its site-specificity, the glass wall in *Head On* evokes a historical nostalgia in connection to German audiences. At the time of its opening, Berlin was nearing the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall (which occurred in 2009), marking nearly two decades as a united city.

For citizens of Berlin and Germany viewing the installation, the imagery of the wolves hitting the wall certainly evoked an engagement with the past, calling to mind the actions leading up to the building of the Wall, its eventual collapse, and the challenges of understanding the nature of totalitarian regimes, as they still exist outside the borders of contemporary Germany. Thus, ultimately the installation succeeds in creating a bridge between local history, the past, and the destiny of the global world. By presenting elements associated with the flow of qi, a global connection is expressed in an
intrinsically German structure, highlighting the Wall’s contemporary status as a monument internationally recognized, with a message that, ultimately, transcends the borders of its country.
CONCLUSION

In the same manner that Cai avoids the confines of labels such as, ‘Chinese artist,’ ‘international artist,’ or ‘hybrid artist,’ so too does he transcend boundaries within his artwork. As exemplified in his early Projects for Extraterrestrials series, he seeks to communicate on a level that surpasses global application, seeking to initiate a dialogue which embodies a universal scope. Even when exploring specific, localized themes such as the Berlin Wall or the threat of terrorism in a post-9/11 world, he seizes the opportunity to extract from such examples characteristics that are universally relatable.

For this reason, Cai demonstrates through his work the ways in which a traditionally Chinese method of thought, such as Daoism, possesses characteristic that defy boundaries, exhibiting universal elements and application. At the root of Daoist beliefs such as yin, yang, and qi are the fundamentally universal energies of destruction and creation. By emphasizing the commonality of elements through the application of Daoist elements, Cai effectively removes the invisible barriers created in our attempts to define, categorize, and separate ourselves. His work seeks to emphasize the ways in which we are similar, rather than the ways in which we differ. Through the exploration of the Daoist elements in Inopportune and Head On, this thesis displays a new avenue in which to view Cai’s use of Chinese elements (such as Daoism) as a means to express how commonalities may be found even within structures associated with a specific culture. By focusing on the universal nature of destruction and creation, the imagery and symbolism within the two installations resonates as universally relatable. It is for this reason that the intention of this thesis was to express the Daoist elements within these two specific installations as examples of Cai’s artistic aim to present art that transcends cultural the
contemporary art world. By understanding and exploring the understudied Daoist aspects with these installations we gain insight into the new direction of Cai’s art, as well as a more thorough understanding of both his previous and continuing artistic goals. Cai’s work seeks to provide an understanding of his mutable status as both a Chinese and International artist. Although he incorporates Chinese elements into his work, he does so in effort to reveal the commonalities that exist between all cultures. By drawing attention to such themes as conflict, chaos, creation, violence, and destruction, he offers a way in which to view such issues as universal elements that affect all of humankind. In this manner his art transcends categorization, presenting globally accessible works through the framework of specific, localized events.
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