

Cai Guo-Qiang: A Chinese Artist at the Cutting-Edge of Global Art

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Abstract : Magiciens de la terre, organized in 1989 by the Centre Pompidou, became 'the first worldwide exhibition of contemporary art' by presenting artists from Western and non-Western countries, including three Chinese artists. For the first time, West turned its eyes to other countries not as exotic sources of inspiration, but as places where contemporary art was also being created. One year later, Chine: demain pour hier was inaugurated as the first Chinese avant-garde group-exhibition in Occident. Among the artists included was Cai Guo-Qiang who, like many other Chinese artists, had left his home country in the eighties in pursuit of greater creative freedom. By exploring artistic non-Western perspectives, both landmark exhibitions questioned the predominance of the Eurocentric vision in the construction of history art. But more than anything else, these exhibitions laid the groundwork for the rise of the so-called phenomenon 'global contemporary art'. All the same time, 1989 also was a turning point in Chinese art history. Because of the Tiananmen student protests, The Chinese government undertook a series of measures to cut down any kind of avant-garde artistic activity after a decade of a relative openness. During the eighties, and especially after the Tiananmen crackdown, some important artists began to leave China to move overseas such as Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei (USA); Chen Zhen and Huang Yong Ping (France); or Cai Guo-Qiang (Japan). After emigrating abroad, Chinese overseas artists began to develop projects in accordance with their new environments and audiences as well as to appear in numerous international exhibitions. With their creations, that moved freely between a variety of Eastern and Western art sources, these artists were crucial agents in the emergence of global contemporary art. As other Chinese artists overseas, Cai Guo-Qiang's career took off during the 1990s and early 2000s right at the same moment in which Western art world started to look beyond itself. Little by little, he developed a very personal artistic language that redefines Chinese ideas, symbols, and traditional materials in a new world order marked by globalization. Cai Guo-Qiang participated in many of the exhibitions that contributed to shape global contemporary art: Encountering the Others (1992); the 45th Venice Biennale (1993); Inside Out: New Chinese Art (1997), or the 48th Venice Biennale (1999), where he recreated the Chinese monumental social realist work Rent Collection Courtyard that earned him the Golden Lion Award. By examining the different stages of Cai Guo-Qiang's artistic path as well as the transnational dimensions of his creations, this paper aims at offering a comprehensive survey on the construction of the discourse of global contemporary art.

Keywords : Cai Guo-Qiang, Chinese artists overseas, emergence global art, transnational art

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