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## Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century

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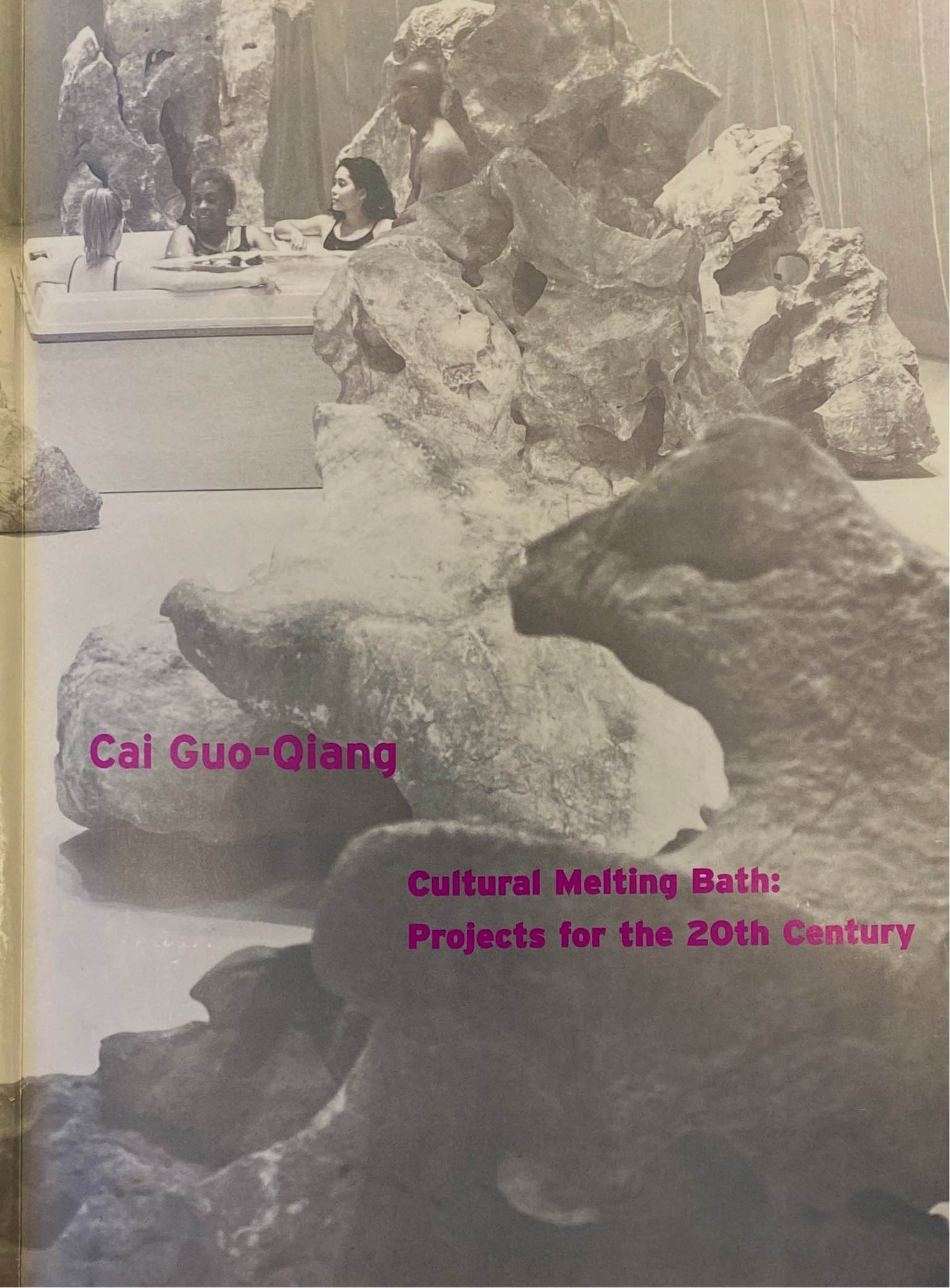
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**Cai Guo-Qiang**

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August 1-October 26, 1997

Contemporary Currents  
at the  
Queens Museum of Art

Essays by

Jane Farver, Curator

Reiko Tomii



Queens Museum of Art  
New York City

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#### Notes to the Reader

Chinese and Japanese names are presented in the traditional fashion, with the family name first, followed by the given name. Exceptions are made for those who primarily reside outside China or Japan and adopt the Western system.

In transliterating the Chinese language, the pinyin romanization system is employed. In certain cases, as with *qi* (*ch'i*) and Xun Zi (Hsün-tzu), transliterations in the older Wade-Giles system follow in parentheses. The two systems also differ in word-breaks, e.g., *fengshui* (pinyin) and *feng shui* (Wade-Giles). For Japanese names and words, macrons are used to indicate long vowels, as in Yūko; commonly known city names (e.g., Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe) are given without macrons.

## Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century

Jane Farver

The Chinese have valued rocks and stones for their beauty and symbolic importance for many centuries. Wall paintings in the imperial tombs of the Tang Dynasty (618–906) depicted gardens with fanciful rock formations, but it was during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) that Chinese enthusiasm for expressively shaped rocks reached new heights. It was then that the aesthete Emperor Hui Zong (r. 1100–1125) charged his minister Zhu Mian to seek out and procure for him the finest rocks in the empire.<sup>1</sup> Zhu Mian zealously set out to acquire *Taihusu*—special limestone boulders harvested from the bottom of Lake Tai near his native city of Suzhou in what is now called Jiangsu Province. *Taihusu*, literally “Tai Lake stones,” were rocks eroded into unusual and fantastic shapes by the lake’s turbulent water and sand.<sup>2</sup> Zhu Mian attained infamy when he pressed thousands of laborers and a huge warship into service to transport an especially impressive 40-foot-high *Taihusu* specimen to the capital of Kaifeng, some 400 miles away. The convoy caused extensive damage to city gates and walls along the way, and incited deep resentment in the people, but Emperor Hui Zong delighted in his new rock which he named “Divine Transport and Shining Merit.”<sup>3</sup>

For a different kind of Chinese rock garden at the Queens Museum of Art, contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang also has chosen to use *Taihusu*, and in May 1997 over 30 tons of these rocks were shipped from Jiangsu to Flushing Meadows Corona Park. Cai also used *Taihusu* rocks in an installation he created for the Louisiana Museum in Denmark. In a conversation with me about these rocks, Dr. Reiko Tomii observed that what once was the purview of emperors may, in the 1990s, be that of the artist. We trust that in shipping these rocks for Cai, the Queens Museum has not caused the same kind of disruption and damage as Zhu Mian.

For his garden/installation, *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* (pls. 7–12), Cai Guo-Qiang has lined the walls and spanned the ceiling of the Museum’s largest gallery (a triangular space 83 by 103 by 69 feet, with ceiling heights of 30 feet) with translucent Chinese netting to create a second enclosed chamber. Within, the massive *Taihusu* rocks each carefully selected for its individual characteristics, and each weighing nearly three tons, have been placed by Cai according to the exacting principles of *fengshui*, the Chinese understanding of how *qi* (*ch’i*) or energy flows throughout the universe. *Fengshui*, meaning literally “wind and water,” is a complex belief system practiced in China since the Zhou Dynasty (1100–221 B.C.). Based on the concept that man and nature must exist in harmony, *fengshui* incorporates the concept of the *yin* and *yang* of balanced forces in every aspect of existence.<sup>4</sup> *Yang* symbolizes the heavens, mountains, and the dragon; while *yin* symbolizes the earth, water, and the tiger. *Yang* energy is male, active, bright, elevated, and hot. *Yin* energy is female, passive, dark, flat, and cold. Whenever anything in nature becomes too *yin* or too *yang*, it moves to become the opposite. The term *fengshui* can be applied to two different schools of Chinese geomancy: one utilizes a geomancer’s compass and elaborate calculations and is more astrological, while the other is based on a skilled “reading” of landscape elements to determine a confluence of auspicious influences. Both are used in siting and designing buildings and environments with reference to the physical attributes of the surrounding landscape, climate, and geographical location. Cai has used *fengshui* to site his rocks to stimulate the flow of energy in the space, and bestow beneficial *qi* on the Museum and its visitors (pls. 7–12).

Above the rocks, banyan tree roots from China have been hung to provide perches for live birds that define the gallery's new dimensions through their flight. At the far end of the garden, clustered rocks shelter a Chinese medicinal herbal bath, contained in a Western-style hot tub. The prescription for the herbs for this therapeutic bath were prepared by Dr. Su Qi from Cai's hometown of Quanzhou. As part of his art, Cai invites various individuals to bathe together in the healing waters.

Neighboring galleries feature a 141-foot-long drawing made with gunpowder and neon with images that relate to Cai's many outdoor *Projects for Extraterrestrials*, a newly edited videotape of those projects, and a dispenser from which visitors may partake of hot tea made with the Asiatic mushroom *Ganoderma lucidum seu japonicum* (pls. 14-16).<sup>5</sup>

While Cai's *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* incorporates Chinese geomancy, herbal medicine, and drawings made with gunpowder, a Chinese invention, as well as the Buddhist concept of *fangsheng* (the release of an animal from captivity as an act of compassion in the hope of its being rewarded with good karma),<sup>6</sup> this is not a project about Chinese gardens, folklore, or religion. While Cai respects and performs these rituals, he also views these practices as useful strategies for contemporary Asian artists, and he employs them in an attempt to connect with all kinds of people through his art. Cai has written the following about *fengshui*:

...the ancient philosophy of *fengshui* aims at grasping human activities in broad perspective by searching for positive interaction with heaven and earth and a sense of unity between humankind and nature, as well as seeking for temporal and spatial unity in choosing auspicious times and directions for action. In this way, man-made structures, including works of art, can have a direct relation to the land, its life forms, and the culture and history that develop there. Thus what results is an active involvement in a shaping of society.

Today, as we begin to perceive the limitations of 20th-century Western-style Modernism, we are reluctant to adopt Western forms of expression and thought as they are, leaving us to view the world with Eastern eyes and reason with an Eastern methodology of thought. Considering the present lack of dynamism of Asian art as a means of expressing the world we live in, there is certainly good reason for us to reevaluate the significance of *fengshui* in the contemporary context. This process would be an application of a world view that grew out of the historical context of the land in which we live by means of an effective methodology.<sup>7</sup>

The remarkable diversity of Queens' population at the end of the 20th century is a consequence of the social, cultural, and political conditions of that century. It may also predict the social/cultural conditions of the world in the coming century. Cai sees his therapeutic *Cultural Melting Bath* as a metaphor for social healing; and he attempts to give literal reality to the term "melting pot," when he invites individuals from disparate backgrounds to bathe together, fusing East and West.

Cai has said: "The 20th century has been the American century: whether you love it or hate it, it has had a formidable influence on everything from art to politics."<sup>8</sup> We now look to a new century which many predict will belong to China, and which others predict will be marked by a new conflict between superpowers, China and the United States. The fall of the Soviet Union and shifting of the balance of global power has led China to reevaluate its status in the world. The student occupation of Tiananmen Square; the issuing of a U.S. visa to Taiwan's President Lee; the Chinese reaction to a U.S. decision to send the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* to the Yellow Sea in a show of force against North Korea in 1994; the Chinese war "games" using live fire in the Taiwan Strait in 1996; and the continuing disputes over trade and human rights are all indicative of new tensions between the two nations. There also has been a steady buildup in military armament and anti-American rhetoric in China since the Gulf War of 1991.<sup>9</sup>

In the Queens Museum of Art's smaller triangular gallery is another installation presented in model form (pl. 13). This represents a project which Cai had originally proposed to the Museum, exhibited together with the many months' worth of correspondence documenting his idea and the search for its realization. His original proposal would have utilized a World War II American PT boat or another similar military vessel about to be demolished for scrap, with the outer shell of the boat removed to reveal its inner hull. The boat's skeleton, covered with thatch, was to have been reassembled in the Museum upside down and resting on a large "stick" like a primitive animal trap. Underneath, a pile of the boat's remaining war-like elements would have been placed as "bait." This enormous work was to have been a simple and beautiful metaphor for the capability of humankind to be trapped by devices of its own making. Unfortunately, despite many months of concerted effort and the fact that the Museum had been designated an eligible recipient if such a vessel

American technological achievements, the 1964/65 Fair put forth a plethora of space-age exhibits including an *Underground World Home* designed to protect its inhabitants from nuclear fallout in nether-worldly splendor; impressive displays of might by the Mercury, Gemini, Saturn, and Apollo missiles, and Saturn V and Titan II rockets; and the opportunity for visitors to bring their children to watch "a demonstration of controlled thermonuclear fusion" at the General Electric Pavilion.

A second portion of Cai's proposal featured videotapes made during his travels in 1996 to the nuclear testing grounds in Nevada where he filmed craters and bombed-out building sites (including a simulated Japanese village) that are relics of nearly a half-century of nuclear tests. As a means of "fighting fire with fire," Cai created a small mushroom cloud at the testing ground by detonating a gunpowder explosion, adding one more small crater to the thousands already there. The Nevada tapes have been included in this exhibition, along with the videotapes of his other gunpowder projects. Cai hopes one day to create giant mushroom clouds in New York City, the Gobi Desert where China tests nuclear weapons, and in other test sites around the world.

Cai Guo-Qiang's view of life is all encompassing, and he has written, "It is important for us to recognize and think about the small planet earth from the angle of the entire universe."<sup>10</sup> Like that of the birds' in *Cultural Melting Bath*, Cai's is a special kind of vision capable of focusing on different objects simultaneously. He can focus on history, contemporaneity, and the future all at once; and he is able to address interior and exterior reality concurrently. Cai acknowledges that creation and extinction can happen in the same instance; and he calmly accepts differences while vigorously insisting upon commonality. Cai's work mixes the beautiful with the banal, the sublime with the horrific. A number of writers have expressed the opinion that Cai's work is about the reconciliation of opposites, but it seems to me that he stages opposing elements and leaves it to the viewer to do the reconciling. Cai is the only artist I

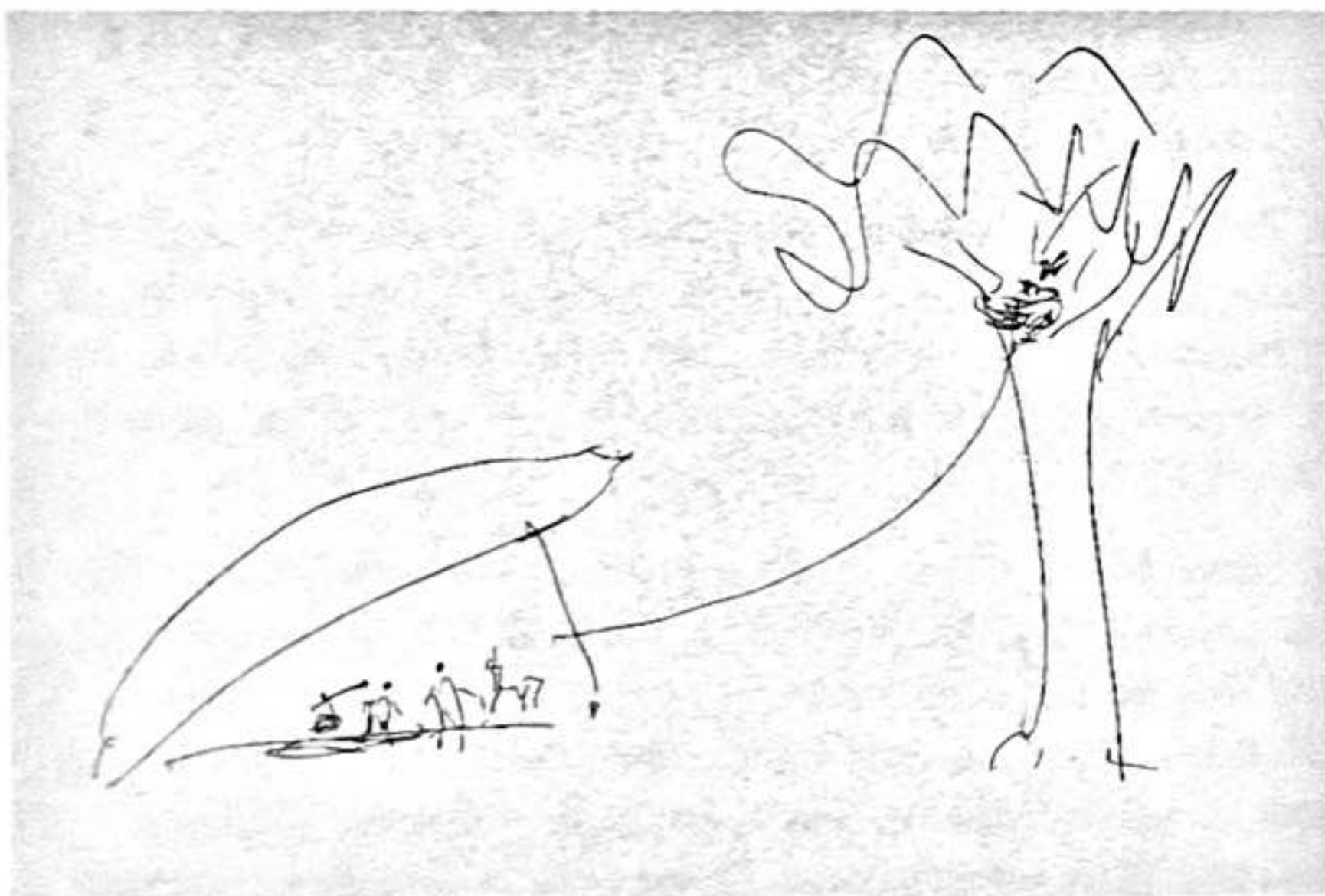


Figure 13. Drawing for *Trap: Projects for the 20th Century*, 1997, ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 11"

should become available, none did, and the project could only be realized in miniature—with an amusing twist Cai has added which gives new meaning to the term "birds of prey" (fig. 13).

Cai's unrealized project would have been particularly appropriate for presentation at the Queens Museum of Art, housed in a building that served as a pavilion for two New York World's Fairs in 1939/40 and 1964/65. While both Fairs offered utopian visions of



know whose work is easier to see with people around it than when no one else is present.

Many who have worked with Cai Guo-Qiang have written about how profoundly meaningful the experience has been to them. They use words like charismatic or shaman-like to describe him. Working with Cai has been very special to those of us involved in this project as well, but focusing on Cai's personality does a disservice to the power of his art. Although we were unable to realize all of his ambitions, this project nevertheless has been marked by numerous random acts of generosity and openness, some from individuals who never met Cai but who were infected by his ideas. Perhaps his work unleashed the *qi* in all of us even before it was installed. Please wander and rest for a while in this special world which Cai Guo-Qiang has created for us as we end one millennium and begin another.

## Notes

Full citations of references indicated by alphanumeric codes, such as E.1996, can be found in Selected Bibliography.

1. Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 73.
2. Lake Tai craftsmen did not hesitate to assist nature, however, as they would sometimes sculpt rocks to make them more aesthetically appealing, and return them to the lake to age for several more years. Alfreda Murck and Wen Fong, *A Chinese Garden Court: The Astor Court at The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 52.
3. Since that time, Suzhou has been famous for its many gardens containing *Taihusu* rocks. In 1980 the Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets in Suzhou was replicated as The Astor Court at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This court garden, which has some especially fine examples of *Taihusu* rocks, was recreated by Suzhou craftsmen as the first official, permanent cultural exchange project between the United States and the People's Republic of China. *Ibid.*, 1.
4. According to Dr. Evelyn Lip, *What is Fengshui?* (London: Academy Editions, 1997), 16, 17:

The *yin* and *yang* elements are expressed as the dual components that make up the *Taiji* (Extremity and Infinity), the symbol of perfect balance and harmony. The *Taiji* refers to the *yang* sign of *tian* (the heavens) and the *yin di* (the earth). From these, the Five Elements (Gold [metal], Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth) are produced.... To achieve a balance of *yin*, *yang* and the Five Elements in the built and natural environments is central to *fengshui* precepts.
5. This mushroom which once grew wild is now grown commercially to meet the demand for it, particularly in China where it is thought to provide a long and healthy life to those who drink it. Anneli Fuchs, introduction to *Flying Dragon in the Heavens* (A.1997), 8.
6. While this Buddhist custom goes back to at least the fifth century in China, its practice in the 20th century in New York and New Jersey is threatening both the well-being of the creatures being released (birds, fish, and turtles) and the gene pool of native wildlife. See Debra West, "Buddhists Release Animals, Dismaying Wildlife Experts," *New York Times*, January 11, 1997, Sec. 1, 27.
7. Cai, "On Thought and Action" (D. 1994).
8. As told to Carol Lutfy in an interview (E.1997), 84.
9. Apparently, the Chinese had underestimated the power of the weaponry the U.S. used against Iraq in the Gulf War. This gave new focus to China's military modernization involving the development of medium-range missiles such as those fired near Taiwan in March of 1996. These and other events are discussed in Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
10. Cai, interview in *Primeval Fireball* (A.1991).