

Public Works



Cai Guo-Qiang

Ring Stone, 2010

**A Percent-for-Art Commission for
the MIT Sloan School of Management**

MIT Building E62



Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang's *Ring Stone* (2010) is a Percent-for-Art commission for the MIT Sloan School of Management (Building E62). Santa Monica architects and planners Moore Ruble Yudell, in association with Bruner/Cott, designed this new building and worked with this internationally renowned artist to realize his first public work of art for a university campus.

Ring Stone is composed of twelve individual but indivisible links cut from a 39 ½-foot-long single block of white granite weighing approximately 14 metric tons. The massive stone block was quarried from the caves of Zhangbanzhen, Hui An County, near the artist's hometown of Quanzhou in southern China's Fujian Province, which also is where artisan stonemasons carved the work. Five graceful Asian pine trees, reminiscent of images found in traditional Chinese landscape painting, are planted inside five of the rings and another two pines reside nearby.

Cai Guo-Qiang, the son of a scholar/painter, was born in 1957 in Quanzhou, which lies across the straits from Taiwan and is believed to be the port from which Marco Polo embarked on his voyage home 700 years ago. Many of Cai's works reflect his early life in the ancient Chinese city. He lived his childhood years in the midst of an air war between China and Taiwan and his adolescence took place during the Cultural Revolution. At the age of eighteen, he went to work for a theater company in Quanzhou, producing stage designs for revolutionary dramas. He also experimented with filmmaking, contributing art production and acting in two kung-fu movies.

In 1981, Cai entered the Shanghai Theater Academy to study stage design where he was exposed to Western forms of art for the first time. Although he had begun to exhibit his paintings in various juried competitions, he was deliberating about his relationship to Western art history as an Asian artist. He decided to travel along China's Silk Road and to Tibet to study herbal medicines, pyrotechnics, and other traditional Chinese subjects, and what he observed on his journeys of the cycles of creation and destruction in nature would shape his future works. A trip to Gansu Province where the Great Wall ends would also inspire a major work later in his career.

In 1984, after his travels, Cai began to experiment with disparate materials, making drawings from gunpowder and paper or cloth. The destructive gunpowder, when exploded, etched delicate, smoky images into the paper or cloth without destroying it. These works would lead him later to create larger, more ambitious projects utilizing gunpowder and nature that would express his expansive view of the galaxy. He would also later call upon his four years of training in stage design to create his many dynamic installations that often utilized herbal medicine, *feng shui*, and Chinese history.

In 1985, the Chinese government designated Fujian Province as one of the nation's first "special economic zones." Cai was granted a two-year visa to study at a language school abroad and went to Japan in 1986. There, he began to exhibit his gunpowder drawings, which were positively received by the Japanese art press and presented on Japanese national television. His future wife, Hong Hong Wu, also an accomplished painter, soon joined him. Intermittently, he would return to China to lecture on contemporary Japanese art at Beijing University.

In 1989, Cai participated in the landmark first *China Avant-garde* exhibition in Beijing, which was closed by the police the day it opened. The disturbing events of Tiananmen Square later that year further convinced him that he needed to think about the small planet earth from the angle of the entire universe. Shortly thereafter, Cai began the series for which he is best known, his combustible *Projects for Extraterrestrials*,

created by painting with gunpowder and fireworks, using the earth, sea, and air as canvases. These feats of technical virtuosity involved teams of hundreds, including city officials, technicians, photographers, museum professionals, craftspeople, and many volunteers.

For his 1993 *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, executed in Jiayuguan, China, Cai ignited a 10,000-meter-long gunpowder fuse from the end of the Great Wall out into the desert, a distance of more than six miles. His *The Horizon from the Pan-Pacific: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 14* at the City Art Museum in Iwaki, Japan, in 1994 involved the detonation of a 5,000-meter gunpowder fuse on the horizon of the ocean. Each of these works could only be seen in its entirety from the heavens. While Cai was aware of the land art works in the Western art world and admired the work of Robert Smithson, his ultimate hopes for his own monumental yet ephemeral works were quite different: to make contact with life elsewhere in the universe.

The Earth Has Its Black Hole Too: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 16, executed in Hiroshima for the opening of the Asian Games in 1994, was a huge spiral of fiery gunpowder explosions, a mushroom cloud in reverse that sucked dark energy from the sky back into the earth. It was created as a celebration of the city of Hiroshima and an offering of prayers for those who died in the 1945 A-Bomb blast. (Among the many fireworks projects that Cai would undertake later in his career, were *Black Rainbow: Explosion Project for Valencia* (2005), commemorating the victims of the Madrid train bombings of 2004, which featured black fireworks explosions that were visible in daylight, and the electrifying fireworks programs he orchestrated as Director of Visual and Special Effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and for China's 60th National Day in 2009.)

Cai lived in Japan until 1995, studying at Tsukuba University School of Arts, and exhibiting widely throughout the country, in Europe, and at the 46th Venice Biennale. In the fall of 1995, he moved to New York City under the auspices of a grant from the Asian Cultural Council to participate in the P.S.1 International Studio Program. He is now a permanent New York City resident, although he also intermittently works in Beijing.

Ring Stone is not the only work in which Cai has used stones imported from southern China. In 1997, he created a stone garden/ installation using *Taihusi*—special limestone boulders "harvested" from the bottom of Lake T'ai near the city of Suzhou. The lake's turbulent water and sand eroded the stones that Cai used for *The Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the Twentieth Century* into the unusual shapes found in Chinese scholars' rocks. The works also featured live birds and a Chinese medicinal herbal bath contained in a Western style hot tub. Versions of the work were exhibited at Denmark's Louisiana Museum, The Queens Museum in New York, and The Lyon Biennial in France; and it has found a permanent home on Naoshima Island in Japan.

At the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, Cai presented Venice's *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a work that replicated an iconic group of more than 100 fiberglass statues with glass marble eyes. Originally, the Chinese Government commissioned *Rent Collection Courtyard* to



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1
Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot, 1995, installation incorporating wooden fishing boat from Quanzhou, Chinese herbs, earthen jars, ginseng beverages, bamboo ladles and porcelain cups, ginseng (100 kg), handcart, and other works by the artist presented as components: *Acupuncture for Venice*, 1995, *Water, Wood, Gold, Fire, Earth*, 1995, commissioned by the 46th Venice Biennale. Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu, courtesy Cai Studio

2
Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the 20th Century, 1997, 18 Taihu rocks, hot tub with hydrotherapy jets, bathwater infused with herbs, and pine trees, installation view at Queens Museum of Art, 1997. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio

3
Inopportune: Stage One, 2004, nine cars and sequenced multichannel light tubes, collection of Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Robert M. Arnold, in honor of the 75th Anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum, 2006, exhibition copy installed at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio

4
Footprints of History: Fireworks Project for the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, 2008, realized in Beijing, August 8, 2008, fireworks, commissioned by The International Olympic Committee and The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio

remind people of the hardships of feudalism during the famine years of the Cultural Revolution, and copies of the sculptures were placed throughout China and in North Vietnam, Albania, and North Korea. To make his replica, Cai brought to Venice a sculptor who had helped to create the original works as well as younger sculptors and artisans from China. Reconstructing the works in clay, they also imitated the working process of the Cultural Revolution, an experience that by then was foreign to the young artists. Cai's Venice's *Rent Collection Courtyard* was awarded the Golden Lion Prize, the Biennale's highest honor.

Cai's work has been exhibited in many of the world's major art museums, and he has participated in numerous international biennales and exhibitions. His 2008 solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York drew over 341,000 people, the highest attendance for a visual artist in the museum's history. He also has an impressive record as a curator, organizing exhibitions for the Bunker Museum in Taiwan and Shanghai's new Rockbund Art Museum; he also served as commissioner for the first China Pavilion for the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005.

MIT's *Ring Stone*, which celebrates the Sloan School of Management's educational ties with China, is both firmly fixed and ever changing. The interlocking, inseparable granite links form a chain, representing the individual's relationship to society. The rings or circles are simultaneously symbolic of both wholeness and emptiness; and while the stone timelessly grounds the work, the seven Asian pines will slowly grow over time and change with each season. The solid granite contrasts with the elegant branching of the pines, suggesting the enduring power of nature in a modern urban architectural space. The twelve inextricably linked rings refer to the twelve months in the Chinese lunar calendar as well as the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac, each of

which is associated with one of eight Buddhist patron deities. The pine trees, which retain their green foliage even in a severe winter, represent longevity and endurance in the face of adversity.

Cai has placed *Ring Stone* in its location on the Sloan School lawn according to the exacting principles of feng shui, the Chinese understanding of how *qi* (energy) flows throughout the universe. The artist is a serious student of this complex belief system, which has been practiced in China since 1100 B.C. Based on the concept that man and nature must exist in harmony, feng shui incorporates the concept of yin and yang of balanced forces in every aspect of existence. Whenever anything in nature becomes too yin or too yang, it moves to become the opposite. Cai has studied extensively the use of feng shui in Chinese military history and architecture. He also has worked with officials in Mito, Japan, to analyze the city's feng shui to develop solutions to unblock energy within the city's circulation systems. In siting *Ring Stone*, Cai has used feng shui to bestow beneficial *qi* on the Sloan School by blocking the inauspicious energy created by traffic converging from Broadway and Main Street.

Cai has stated that the MIT Percent-for-Art program provided him a perfect platform to bring his first public work to a university campus, "I have a close relationship with MIT. I was in residency at the List Visual Arts Center in 2003–04, so I am glad to have a chance to work with MIT for my new creation."

Jane Farver

For more information about this and other MIT Percent-for-Art projects, please visit: http://listart.mit.edu/public_art

Cai Guo-Qiang was awarded the Japan Cultural Design Prize in 1995 and the Golden Lion at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999. In 2001, he received the Alpert Award in Visual Art. His solo exhibition at Mass MoCA won Best Monographic Museum Show, and *Inopportune: Stage One* won Best Installation or Single Work in a Museum from the International Association of Art Critics, New England in 2005. He also was awarded the 7th Hiroshima Art Prize in 2007. Cai also held the distinguished position of Director of Visual and Special Effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. In 2009 he was the Director of firework festivities for China's 60th National Day, and he also was awarded the 20th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize.

Cai was the subject of a large-scale retrospective titled *Hanging Out in the Museum*, which opened in November 2009 at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. In February 2008, his retrospective exhibition, *I Want to Believe*, opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City before traveling to the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in August 2008 and the Guggenheim Bilbao in March 2009. Among his many other solo exhibitions and projects include *Cai Guo-Qiang: Fallen Blossoms*, held jointly at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Fabric

Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in 2009; *Cai Guo-Qiang on the Roof: Transparent Monument* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2006; *Inopportune* at Mass MoCA, North Adams, MA, in 2005; *Transient Rainbow*, sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2002; *Cai Guo-Qiang*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China, in 2002; *APEC Cityscape Fireworks Show*, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, Shanghai, in 2001; and *An Arbitrary History*, Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, France, in 2001. He was commissioner for the first China Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, and the organizer and curator for *BMoCA: Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art*, Kinmen, Taiwan, in 2004. Along with DMoCA and UMoCA, BMoCA is one of three alternative art museums founded by Cai in the series *Everything Is Museum*. *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis* opened in May 2010 as the inaugural exhibition of the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai. Another solo exhibition, *Cai Guo-Qiang: Travels in the Mediterranean*, took place at the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice, France, in 2010.

Jane Farver is the Director of the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA.

About Public Art at MIT: MIT's Percent-for-Art program allots funds to commission or purchase art for each new major renovation or building project. The program was formally instituted in 1968, but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on the Institute's campus. When architect Eero Saarinen designed the MIT Chapel in 1955, sculptor Theodore Roszak designed the bell tower and sculptor Harry Bertoia designed the altar screen.

In 1985 architect I. M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on a Percent-for-Art program for the Wiesner Building, home to MIT's List Visual Arts Center and Media Lab. Other Percent-for-Art works have been commissioned or purchased from such artists as Mark di Suvero, Jackie Ferrara, Dan Graham, Candida Höfer, Sol LeWitt, Louise Nevelson, Jorge Pardo, Matthew Ritchie, Anish Kapoor, and Sarah Sze.

Cai Guo-Qiang was selected as the artist for the project by a committee of MIT faculty and staff that included: Dean Richard Schmalensee and Dean David Schmittlein; Lucinda Hill, Sloan School Director of Capital Projects; Buzz Udell, architect; Craig Halvorsen, landscape architect; Talitha Fabricius, MIT campus landscape architect; Pamela Delphenich, Director of Campus Planning and Design; Michael Hand and Milan Pavlinic, MIT Facilities Project Managers; and Jane Farver, Director of the MIT List Visual Arts Center. MIT List Visual Arts Center Public Art Curator Patricia Fuller oversaw the project.

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Wiesner Building, E15-109
20 Ames Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

Tel: 617.253.4400
Fax: 617.258.7265
<http://listart.mit.edu>

Cover: Cai Guo-Qiang
Ring Stone, 2010
Granite, five pine trees, approximately 11.95 x 1.3 x 0.81 m
Commissioned by the MIT Percent-for-Art program for the
MIT Sloan School of Management.
Photo by Timothy J. Lloyd, MIT List Visual Arts Center