*Cai Guo-Qiang: a Pompeian "palingenesis"*

The city of Pompeii was likely buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in the month of October 79 AD, and not in August, as previously believed.

In fact, the latest archaeological discoveries seem to confirm what scholars have at various times suggested, that the eruption should be dated to 24 October of that fateful year, thus rectifying a historic date that was presumably wrong and stressing the ongoing contemporaneity of the Pompeii site. This is an oxymoronic archaeology that is *becoming*, or *forward looking*, which constantly changes because of the need to adjust the instruments of enquiry and update the criteria and methodology of archaeological research, in the light of the excavation campaigns conducted, the finds and their interpretation.

Since the discovery of Pompeii in 1748, two and a half centuries of Grand Tours have resulted in multiple rereadings, and hence rediscoveries, of this site. Every traveller, intellectual, artist, writer, musician, architect and scientist on this Grand Tour, still undertaken today, has added further critical opinions and interpretations. Seen as a whole, these form a collective archaeology of our public and private experience of the ancient city of Pompeii.

As the Museo Madre in Naples has recently shown in the exhibition 'Pompei@Madre*.* Materia Archeologica', 2017, contemporary art has not changed the site in terms of objective conservation, but in terms of extending the possible meanings of conservation, by opening it up to a multiverse of cultures, disciplines and hypotheses capable of collaborating, and interacting, thus inspiring the archaeologist's daily research.

Cai Guo-Qiang is also part of this contemporary story of Pompeii, as a site in a constant state of becoming, as a welcoming and collective legacy of human knowledge. An aesthetic configuration and ethical (political) awareness are essential components of this artist's working method, which is also influenced by his drama school background, and therefore dominated by aspects such as mise-en-scène (understood as the relationship between the setting and the story), group production, artwork and viewer interactions, performance and time-based practices.

An heir of that Cultural Revolution in China, which the artist experienced through demonstrations and public parades, accompanied by explosions and fireworks, Cai Guo-Qiang draws from *history*as his personal source of inspiration for his *stories*, which are both eternal and ephemeral, like the pieces that use gunpowder and fireworks.

In his *Projects for Extraterrestrials*, begun in 1990 and restaged and reinterpreted several times, the artist revives and enables us to experience anew sites, buildings, natural and anthropic landscapes. The energy released bursts forth like a generative force celebrating the beauty and joy, typical not of destruction but of creation, not of the end but of the beginning, not of inflicted violence but of ideas developed from shared intuitions. Rather than works as such, therefore, Cai Guo-Qiang's pieces are symbolic manifestations of the tenacity of identity and the resilience of the past, despite being immersed in the flow of change and transformation.

The drawings and sculptures that derive from them are also palimpsests of the free movement of ideas and the natural circulation of materials, understood as uncontrollable reactions, like propelling bursts of enthusiasm.

While the artist's projects have acquired a monumental scale and adopted multimedia over the years, they still remain epiphanic events due to their simple, direct and inevitable nature.

After participating in the Venice Biennale, 'Arte all'Arte', and the exhibition 'Flora Commedia' at the GalleriedegliUffizi in Florence in 2018, Cai Guo-Qiang has returned to Italy to present his propitious "palingenesis"[[1]](#endnote-1)in Naples and Pompeii, which is perhaps the ideal site for his *stories*.

Mao Zedong stated that the sky protects with love those it would not like to see destroyed, and Cai Guo-Qiang seems to remind us that at Pompeii, too, though deadly lapilli and ash fell from the sky, life went on to become eternal in myth and history, in the finds and the tales, impregnated with that "archaeological material". It is our duty to continue to unearth, study and preserve these things in order to recount and thus transmit them to all those who want to continue to be, like us, the marvelling protagonists and responsible custodians of the *history* consisting in the *stories*[[2]](#endnote-2) that they contain.

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1. From the Greek *πάλιν*, "again", and *γένεσις*, "creation or birth", hence "new creation" or "rebirth". [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I wish to thank Andrea Villani for telling me the many Cai Guo-Qiang*stories* on which this text is based. My relationship with contemporary art is much indebted to him. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)