

ANIMAL FIGURES INSPIRATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

For almost 30 years, Chinese art has been enjoying international triumphs and has been increasingly institutionalized. In the whole country, despite the unchanging political and social systems, new museums and galleries (state and private) are being created, dynamically expanding the space for art. And this is undergoing a spectacular transformation, undoubtedly influenced by the growing economic importance of China – which is becoming one of the main players among world economies – as well as the willingness to settle accounts with the history (also contemporary) of its own country. Many artists use new media, which does not mean abandoning their legacy of ink painting, attachment to the aesthetics of minimalism, or – on the contrary – decorative and fanciful excess. Traditional ways of creating art have been reconsidered, but the philosophies that guided them in many ways are still alive.

Searching for the meaning of contemporary Chinese art, I look especially for works related to the images of animals or zoomorphism, which results from my very personal relationship with the animal world, as well as the belief that it is the greatest source of inspiration, giving the opportunity to understand and convey universal values.

For many cultures and social groups in ancient China, as well as in later dynastic times, animals were the link between the human world and the cosmos; therefore, for example, animal keepers were willingly employed as diviners and advisers at royal and imperial courts.¹⁾ It was shamans who most likely exercised political power over individual social groups in the first cen-

¹⁾ Allsen (2006: 145).

turies of the formation of Chinese civilization.²⁾ From the shells of turtles and the entrails of snakes or birds, they read the prognosis of some events, thanks to which they were, in a way, able to manage the present.³⁾ This is how the Chinese writing was supposed to be created, thanks to the inspiration of the mythological official Cangjie 倉頡 – in the footsteps of birds and animals.⁴⁾

Looking at animals from the perspective of art, you can discover what they used to be and what the relationships of humans and animals looks like today in the context of religion, magic, aesthetics, and the spiritual life of both. Learning about animals helps you understand many of the relationships in life and thus form a better picture of the world. For hundreds of years, the Chinese have realized that all things, including animals, people, and the heavens, were governed by the same fundamental principles.⁵⁾

It seems that Chinese scholars for centuries have been aware of the need for man to initiate some methods of learning from animals that could productively enrich our knowledge.⁶⁾ Chinese sages, learned men and philosophers of ancient times, in accordance with their cosmological views, believed that the highest form of knowledge could be achieved when an animal prompted a person to think about universal principles.⁷⁾ Nowadays, I would distinguish a dozen or so artists who particularly embody this concept in their artistic statements, but for the purposes of this article, I have to limit myself to only a few; therefore, I chose the works of three: Huang Yong Ping 黄永 砮 (1954–2019), Chen Haiyan 陈海燕 (born 1955) and Cai Guo Qiang 蔡国强 (born 1957).

Huang Yong Ping was a kind of a scientist-artist who had the ability to create amazing object-concepts inspired by ideological tensions and different perspectives. To illustrate his reflections on human behaviour – especially in the context of the crossing of cultures, ethnicities, nationalities and political conflicts – the artist often reached for the world of animals, using both their images and themselves.⁸⁾ He developed a method based on juxtaposing east-

²⁾ Łakomska (2015: 23). Cf. Chang Kwang-Chih (1999: 61–63).

³⁾ Raphals (2013: 143, 173).

⁴⁾ Sterckx, Siebert, Schäfer (2011: 6).

⁵⁾ Waldau, Patton (2006); Sterckx (2002: 4); Sterckx, Siebert, Schäfer (2011: 6).

⁶⁾ Sterckx, Siebert, Schäfer (2011: 6). Cf. Zhao Xinggen (2013: 46).

⁷⁾ Sterckx, Siebert, Schäfer (2011: 7).

⁸⁾ On the work of Huang Yong Ping in the context of his zoomorphic works, see: Kleutghen (2016: 401–431).

ern and western zoomorphic symbols in order to make his audience aware of the complexity of cultural collisions and their impact on human relations. Undoubtedly, the personal experience of the artist who, in the 1990s, having left China for France, started a new life in transnational social space, was an aid in building Huang Yong Ping's creative statements. The starting point for many of his activities were concepts taken from the philosophy of Chinese Chan Buddhism, Taoism, the Book of Changes (Yijing), and Dadaism, in which he saw many similarities to Chan Buddhism. Inspired by the works of Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and the potential hidden in the phenomena of absurdity, chance and constant change, Huang Yong Ping founded the group Xiamen Dada 廈門 達達 in 1986. The experience from the period of the group's activity had an unquestionable influence on the artist's later artistic attitude.

For the purposes of this article, I would like to discuss only a few selected works by Huang Yong Ping over the last three decades. The artist, using the taxidermy (or imitation of this technique), as well as living creatures themselves placed in the exhibition space, has repeatedly obtained very controversial effects, both from the point of view of aesthetics and ethics. His actions might be considered as repulsive and yet convincing.

Such a dissonance can be noticed in one of the first zoomorphic works by Huang Yong Ping, entitled "Yellow Peril", especially made for the exhibition devoted to contemporary Chinese art entitled: "Silent Energy: New Art from China" at The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (June 27 - October 24, 1993). Huang Yong Ping used the term "Yellow Peril" to refer to a racist expression from the late nineteenth century, created for the purposes of American propaganda, describing the alleged threat to arise from the "invasion" of the United States of America by Chinese and Japanese immigrants at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.⁹⁾ Huang Yong Ping's "Yellow Peril" took the form of an installation composed of a structure resembling a white tent, in which the artist placed five living scorpions and about a thousand living insects. In the locusts – a shocking amount and associated with the specific migratory life of these animals living in large destructive swarms – one could see the metaphor of Asian immigrants: i.e., those "catastrophic invaders" who actually became victims of Western exploitation, absorbed into a colonial system designating "better and worse". The installation, with the participa-

⁹⁾ Hill (2019). <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/huang-yong-ping-1954-2019-tribute/> (Access 28.12.2021).

tion of insects, eventually devoured by scorpions, undoubtedly shocked the viewers, hinting that the condition of contemporary humanity is severely damaged.

One of the first installations / sculptures created by Huang Yong Ping with the use of pseudo-taxidermy was the work entitled “June 11, 2002, The Nightmare of George V”. This was presented by the artist at the Art Basel international contemporary art fair in June 2002, inspired by the specific stuffed animals he saw while visiting British and French museums. It is about a tiger exhibited at the Bristol Museum, shot (as the museum plaque says) in 1911 by King George V 1910–1936), and a tigress exhibited at the Grande Galerie de l'Évolution at the Natural History Museum in Paris, stuffed by Rowland Ward (1848–1912), based on the account of Philippe I, Duke of Orléans (1869–1926).¹⁰⁾ Although the title of Huang Yong Ping's work refers to King George V, the artist's installation vividly resembles the one from the Natural History Museum in Paris, which is a kind of reconstruction of the incident of March 26, 1888, the day that Prince Philippe I, while hunting in India, was (allegedly) attacked by an injured tigress jumping on the back of a loaded elephant (howdah). *Nota bene*: the stuffed elephant that Ward used to recreate this event came from another expedition of the prince in Ceylon. Huang Yong Ping in turn, used concrete, steel and painted animal skin to create the silhouette of his elephant. By borrowing the form from the Natural History Museum and following the story of George V – an avid hunter who all his life identified with the idea of a great empire (during his time, the British Empire became the greatest empire in human history), the artist gave it a new context.

In Huang Yong Ping's work, a roaring tiger takes the same pose as the tigress at the Natural History Museum in Paris, i.e., climbs a basket carried by a motionless elephant. The contrast between a calm, distanced elephant and an active tiger is somewhat of a farce and seems to indicate an alleged threat to the concept of imperialism. Huang Yong Ping, as if to emphasize this very idea, added a small detail to the basket, namely the British royal coat of arms. The artist, referring to the taxidermy technique, returns to the outdated museum practice, revealing the roots of this type of institution, namely „wunderkamera” and the methods used by the oldest public col-

¹⁰⁾ Aldo (2015) <http://museummenagerie.blogspot.com/2015/10/duc-dorleans-tiger-attack.html> (Access: 29.12.2021).

lections.¹¹⁾ With time, they began to disappear due to the poor reputation gained by taxidermy, which is associated with colonialism and ecological destruction. And that is why Huang Yong Ping, fully consciously reaching for colonial connotations, created “something” that should create feelings of uncertainty or ambivalence in the recipient. As Kristina Kleutghen claims, the author also used the idea of taxidermy to minimize traces of the artist’s presence, to “give the creatures more autonomy”.¹²⁾

Another example of Huang Yong Ping’s use of zoomorphism appears in the evolving “bat projects”. The inspiration came from the disaster involving the American EP-3 spy plane, which collided with a Chinese military fighter in 2001. An American plane with a bat logo on its tail was intercepted by the Chinese and then dismantled on Hainan Island. Huang Yong Ping decided to recreate a version of the spy plane using the same type of EP-3 cockpit that was present in the 2001 incident. His work raised doubts among Chinese officials, and three versions of the project were not only censored but also withdrawn from three exhibitions: the first at the Fourth Shenzhen International Sculpture Exhibition in 2001, the second at the First Gunagzhou Triennial in 2002, and the third at Beijing in 2003 called “Left Wing”. Bat Project IV, which is the most fully conceptualized version of the whole work, was exhibited at the House of Oracles in the United States and was first seen in Europe in 2011 at the Nottingham Contemporary Gallery. All installations from the “bat project” series were built by the artist using full-size decommissioned airplanes, and their interiors were filled with stuffed bats. The Nottingham installation also contained documents recording previous censorship, thanks to which the artist combined historical events relating to his own work with the final work presented at the exhibition. Huang Yong Ping believed “artists should install their political views in their works”, and at the same time that “they should distance themselves from power to maintain independence of their thought.”¹³⁾ Both statements, as noted by Krisitna Kleutghen, seem to contradict each other. And this contradiction is perfectly conveyed by “Bat Projects”. Looking closely at all the installations, one can get the impression that the view of bats inhabiting a slightly bizarre machine is a double game. On the one hand, the shell of the plane with the mammals inside it (heralding prosperity, longevity and, generally speaking happiness in Chinese culture)

¹¹⁾ Kleutghen (2016: 405).

¹²⁾ Kleutghen (2016: 406).

¹³⁾ Kleutghen (2016: 406).

may seem like a safe haven, but on the other hand, it is an evident place of the catastrophe (bats are undoubtedly a reference to the logo of the captured American plane and can, for example, denote the exposure of US espionage technology that has simply lost its firepower). Both cases may unwittingly favour the image of China as an empire growing in strength. The question then arises, why have the Chinese authorities been so keen to impose censorship on all Huang Yong Ping's projects?

Another monumental project by the artist using the image of an animal is "Wu Zei 乌贼" (Cuttlefish). It was on display in 2010 at the Musée Océanographique de Monaco, which at that time began the implementation of an idea that continues to this day to combine art with science. A giant squid (7.4 x 18.6 x 16.6 meters), constructed of metal with the addition of foam, silicone, gauze, rice paper and taxidermy, became the dominant element of the Salon d'Honneur. The structure took up almost the entire ceiling, entering the remaining space of the salon with its hanging tentacles. Huge as it is, it seems utterly helpless: hanging upside down and completely immobilized in a sea of human hair. One can get the impression that it is dying, covered with some dark substance reminiscent of the black ink used by cuttlefish to defend itself or a harmful oil flooding the oceans through human error.

In 2009, at the Paris art gallery, Kamel Mennour and Huang Yong Ping presented another zoomorphic work entitled "Ombre Blanche" (White Shadow). This time, he made the Elephant the protagonist of his performance, as if emerging from a grey skin stretched on the floor. This is a sculpture made of a steel structure covered with resin, on which the skin of a buffalo has been stretched. The whole is deceptively like the taxidermy effect. The white elephant with its trunk raised looks as if it has shed its old, worn skin and has just been reborn. It appears invigorating: full of energy. While it is natural for some animals to shed their skin, nature has not yet foreseen this possibility for elephants. How then to understand this work? This seems to be a reference to the Buddhist belief that the white elephant represents the Buddha's penultimate incarnation before Queen Maya gave birth to him, and the shed skin resembles the regrowth of a snake's skin and is therefore a symbol of "rebirth". The grey elephant, in turn, symbolizes the uncontrolled mind, destruction and wildness in Buddhism that are trampled on in Huang Yong Ping's work.

In some sense, references to Buddhism are also used by Chen Haiyan: an artist who was perhaps the first among contemporary Chinese artists to develop an interest in dreams and the unconscious mind. In Buddhism,

dreams are used as tools to expand awareness and gain self-control as part of the path to enlightenment or the mastery of the body and mind.¹⁴⁾ One can get the impression that Chen Haiyan's works, created thanks to dreams, do not externalize the author's desires or fears, but allow her to integrate the alienated parts of herself,¹⁵⁾ enabling the artist to get to know and understand the world more deeply.

Chen Haiyan repeatedly refers to the images of animals in her work; nevertheless, she deals with this topic in a different way than Huang Yong Ping. For her works, she uses mainly graphic techniques – especially woodcut – which has a long tradition in China, including both printing Buddhist sutras and New Year pictures and perfectly resonates with the work of Chen Haiyan. Nevertheless, the artist's work shows some similarity to the works of German expressionist graphic artists.¹⁶⁾ In addition to graphics, Chen Haiyan also uses traditional Eastern painting, using brush and ink as well as acrylic paints on paper (and sometimes on wooden panels) to create monumental paintings.

Chen Haiyan's career is associated with the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, where she once studied and now works at the Department of Graphics. The artist has developed an innovative unpretentious style in part derived from Chinese cut-outs. The redrawn and distorted figures appearing in Chen Haiyan's works seem torn from dreams that seem to be places of great tension and struggle. However, all these human or inhuman figures, along with landscapes, buildings, vehicles, etc. indicate the real experiences of the artist.¹⁷⁾ However, it is not only about dreams that happened, but also about those that Chen Haiyan smuggled from sleep into post-dream memory and then filtered out in her paintings. Recalling dreams, especially right after waking up, when we are already in a conscious state of reacting to external stimuli, can trigger strong emotions. And it is on such experiences that the works of Chen Haiyan are largely based.

Apart from cats, snakes, elephants, birds, horses, goats, and monkeys, one of the most common animal characters in the artist's works is the rooster, fulfilling – according to Maya Kóvskaya – the task of the “spiritual totem”,

¹⁴⁾ Mota-Rolim and others (2020). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.555731> (Access 24.01.2022).

¹⁵⁾ Kóvskaya (2016: 38).

¹⁶⁾ Roberts (2005: 108).

¹⁷⁾ Majid (2014: 40, 43).

Chen Haiyan's *Animus*.¹⁸⁾ The rooster often looks pugnacious, full of energy and constantly alert. It looks at the viewer as if he is constantly investigating or suspecting something. This is what we see in two great works from 2011, made with coloured ink on wooden boards ("Rooster 1" 185 x 183 cm and "Rooster 2" 185 x 183 cm) currently in the Ink Studio collection.¹⁹⁾ The animal's temperament is expressed by the poses it takes and its intense – almost psychedelic – colours. It is not a cockerel, but a mighty rooster. It is not only reminiscent of Chen Haiyan's dream, but also a memory of a real animal: the artist's friend.

Chen Haiyan was born in the industrial north-eastern China, in the city of Fushun, Liaoning Province, but she spent most of her childhood in the countryside, raised by her maternal grandparents, and – as she says – it was one of the most wonderful times in her life.²⁰⁾ The artist's grandparents played a special role at that time: people who did not complain about any difficulties, maybe not too effusive, but always caring and loving towards her. Although, with time she absorbed the rules of life in the city, but her grandparents' farm was a refuge to which she returned every summer vacation. It happened that on the way home she received chickens from her grandparents to remind her of the carefree days spent in the countryside. Among the chicks once brought by Chen Haiyan, there was a cockerel, whose identification was at first questionable due to its comb being too small (keeping laying hens in cities had not been a problem in the past; however, roosters were more often killed). However, when the bird grew older and it turned out to be every inch a cockerel, in addition to being very beautiful – snow-white with massive claws – no one had the heart to kill him. The bird ran carelessly around, responding exclusively to Chen Haiyan's call (showing her favour) and was absolutely unstoppable. It was feared among children and even adults. Haiyan adored him, seeing in "her" rooster limitless freedom and courage. It was unfortunate, however, that the animal – perhaps irritated by someone – had almost pecked out the child's eye. The animal's fate was thus doomed. Unable to save him, and at the same time afraid that someone's untrained hands would hurt him even more, Chen Haiyan personally – with a quick and efficient movement (with the help of the scalpel taken from her

¹⁸⁾ Kóvskaya (2016: 41, 48).

¹⁹⁾ <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/73-chen-haiyan/works/536-chen-haiyan-rooster-no.-2-no.-2-2011/> (Access 04.01.2022).

²⁰⁾ Kóvskaya (2016: 40).

mother) – cut the cockerel’s throat.²¹⁾ This traumatic experience must have left such a deep mark on the girl’s consciousness that even after many years it was still visible in the dreams of the mature woman-artist. A testimony to this is – in my opinion – a painting from 2004, made with coloured ink on a board, entitled “The locked-up water spigot” (162 × 102 cm).²²⁾ It shows an almost life-size figure standing astride, with a tilted head, slightly flowing hair and an expression of despair on her face. It is Chen Haiyan, embracing a rooster with intense red plumage around the wing and breast, from which a red streak of paint seems to flow incidentally, crossing the wrist of a dark hand holding the animal. The title tap, from which a drop of water falls, is visible in the upper part of the composition, right next to Haiyan’s head. And next to the tap, there is a couple: two people framed as if in a rectangular frame. Everything is done with fast, sweeping brush strokes using slightly muted colours, which mainly consist of gloomy greens, browns, and blacks. The whole is completed with the words registered on the left side (from our point of view):

„Dream: October 31st, 2003.

My big rooster got all muddy, so I found a water spigot to clean him up. The couple who ran the shop were not happy that I used their water. So, they locked the water spigot. I told my rooster we’ll just go back home and use some shampoo to wash him clean.”²³⁾

Childhood trauma influenced Chen Haiyan’s decision not to eat poultry again. Cai Guo Qiang, an artist whose Chinese zodiac sign is the Rooster, also does not eat meat of this species.²⁴⁾ This extremely versatile artist, who has lived mainly in New York since 1995, often uses the “aesthetics of pain”²⁵⁾

²¹⁾ The story of Chen Haiyan’s friendship with the Rooster was taken from: Kóvskaya (2016: 40–41).

²²⁾ The work is in the possession of Ink Studio Gallery. <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/exhibitions/35/works/artworks-3560-chen-haiyan-the-locked-up-water-spigot-2004/> (Access 07.01.2022).

²³⁾ Record of sleep in the original: „我家的大公鸡一身黑污泥，我找水笼（龙）头给它洗。那家开小店的夫妇不高兴用他家水。水笼（龙）头上已上了锁。还是回家用洗发精给它洗，我对它说。梦 2003.10.31.”

²⁴⁾ Konrath (2014) <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/t-magazine/the-art-of-eating-cai-guo-qiang-marianne-vitale-urs-fischer.html> (Access: 15.01.2022).

²⁵⁾ I took this term „aesthetic of pain” from an article posted on the Art Works for

in his artistic statements, to express his disagreement with the violence we commit collectively to nature. For over a dozen years he has been researching the place of humanity in the universe, returning to matters that already dominated over a thousand years ago in Chinese aesthetic thought and theory.²⁶⁾ He uses various materials, although he shows the greatest attachment to gunpowder, with the help of which he creates spectacular installations as well as restrained landscape compositions. The latter recalls the sophisticated works of writers, but the destructive power of the material from which Cai Guo Qiang draws them up calls for reflection.

An excellent example of such work is “Ninety-Nine Horses”, a painting and installation that are part of a solo exhibition called “Saraab” (Mirage), prepared in 2011 by Cai Guo Qiang for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art Qatar.²⁷⁾ The installation consists of 99 small models of horses, suspended from the ceiling, made of resin covered with gold flakes. The figures cast a shadow on a large-format drawing (4 x 8 meters), created with gunpowder on paper. The painting shows a desert landscape and galloping horse silhouettes resembling those from prehistoric rock paintings. All of them look phenomenal, the more so that some of them are shadows that are not permanently attached to the ground. Others, in turn, made of gunpowder, also have an element of mirage: they look as if they are slowly dematerializing.²⁸⁾ The title number “99” refers only to those actual “golden horses” hanging high above the heads of the audience. They are not only countable (as opposed to multiple shadows), but also embody a symbolic number relating to the ninety-nine names / attributes of God used in Muslim culture. What’s more, it is a number that indicates “incompleteness” and at the same time the expectation of completion, so in a sense it symbolizes duration, just like the number 9, which in Chinese culture is perceived as “lucky” due to the similar pronunciation of the word nine to the word 久 *jiu*, meaning “eternity”.

Change website:<https://www.artworksforchange.org/portfolio/cai-guo-qiang/> (Access: 15.01.2022).

²⁶⁾ Andrews, Shen (2012: 295–296).

²⁷⁾ The exhibition was open from December 5, 2011 to May 26, 2012: <https://www.mathaf.org.qa/en/cai-guo-qiang> (Access: 17.01.2022). Al-Khudairi (2012).

²⁸⁾ The method of Cai Guo Qiang’s work is as follows: the artist sprinkles the gunpowder on the paper to form a drawing, then spreads the cut-out templates of specific forms on it, then covers the templates with cardboards loaded with bricks or stones and fires the fuse; after the explosion, the cartons, weights, and templates are removed to see the final effect, which is partly due to chance.

In addition to the symbolic meaning of 99 in Cai Guo Qiang's work, we also deal with the allegorical sense of depicting the figure of a horse. Both in Asia and the Middle East, horses have played an important role for centuries. Fast, brave and strong, and at the same time extremely sensitive, they symbolize chivalry, nobility and pride.²⁹⁾ Nevertheless, the fact that Cai Guo Qiang's horses are "made of gold" may also be a symbol of the power and wealth of the Islamic world, especially that of the Arabian Peninsula. On the other hand, gold can be the source of many conflicts.

By exploring the iconography of both cultures, the artist recalled a vision of the ancient silk route that once played a key role in improving relations between East and West, both in economic, cultural, political, and religious matters. Nevertheless, "Ninety-Nine Horses" is a work in which perhaps – in addition to the potential for creativity and invention of our species – its ability to destroy life on Earth is also discernible. This dark spot in the upper left corner of the composition looks quite ominous – like an explosion – which, given the gunpowder with which Cai Guo Qiang "fired" this abstract form, seems to reinforce this negative association even more.

The number 99 is repeated in another work by the artist, namely in "Head On", realized in 2006 (August 26 – October 15) for the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin as part of Cai Guo Qiang's first solo exhibition in Germany. It is a monumental installation consisting of 99 full-size figures of wolves formed of gauze, resin, and painted sheepskin with the help of craftsmen from Quanzhou (Fujian Province) of the artist's hometown.³⁰⁾ The figures of the animals are arranged in a semi-arc formation, like a stream rising over the viewers' heads towards a transparent glass wall. The artist presented about 20 of the less than 100 animal silhouettes at the moment of collision with an invisible obstacle: how they break the spines, paws and jaws. Their twisted bodies shock with dramatically captured pain. Those who managed to "bounce" from the glass barrier without breaking their necks are shown how with difficulty they rise and go to the place of "jump", where they will force the glass wall again with solidarity and vigour. Undoubtedly, we are

²⁹⁾ Schiettecatte, Zouache (2017). <http://journals.openedition.org/cy/3280>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.3280> (Access 25.01.2022).

³⁰⁾ The information comes from the Public Delivery website https://publicdelivery.org/cai-guo-qiang-head-on/#Where_Head_On_was_produced (Access 30.01.2022).

^currently, the work is in the collection of Deutsche Bank <https://caiguoqiang.com/projects/projects-2006/head-on/> (Access 30.01.2022).

dealing here with a metaphorical representation of the uncompromising pursuit of a goal, which is timeless, but also very specific, because it refers to the events 30 years ago, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. Why did Cai Guo Qiang choose wolf characters to illustrate his message?³¹⁾ They are animals that have always been present in human culture, although they have often been viewed not very favourably, mainly as fear-arousing predators. However, this does not change the fact that they were simultaneously admired for their independence, strength, and perseverance. However, expansive human activity has led to a significant reduction in the population of these animals, which constantly results in a serious disturbance of the ecosystem. I think that Cai Guo Qiang is using the “magic” number 99 to materialize this time in the form of symbolic wolves, indicating the permanence (eternal duration) of certain actions and behaviours, which in the face of barriers limiting freedom only increase the effort, stubbornness and social cooperation to carry out a coordinated “attack”.

Cai Guo Qiang consistently uses the numbers 9 and 99 in the implementation of other projects, in which animal figures also play an important role. One of the most extraordinary – influencing the imagination as much as “Head On”, although using a different caliber of expression and a sense of aesthetics – is “Heritage”, an installation presented during the artist’s solo exhibition at the Brisbane Gallery of Modern Art in Australia (November 2013- April 2014).³²⁾ “Heritage” carries the same need to become part of the culture of the place for which it was created as works specially prepared for art institutions in Qatar or Berlin. Nevertheless, Cai Guo Qiang has this special gift of creating something in a specific context and at the same time with shared and timeless values.

³¹⁾ It is worth mentioning that among the younger generation of Chinese artists there are creators who also explore the theme of wolves like Liu Ruowang 刘若望 (born 1977). Particularly noteworthy is the artist’s exhibition organized in Pitti Square and Santissima Annunziata Square in Florence (July-November 2020), where the artist placed 100 life-size cast iron figures of wolves, thus wanting to express his concern about contemporary civilization values. The pack of 100 wolves is supposed to be „an allegory of nature’s response to the ravages and predatory behaviour of man towards environment”. <https://www.uffizi.it/en/events/wolves-by-the-chinese-artist-liu-ruowang-in-florence> (Access 31.01.2022).

³²⁾ <https://learning.qagoma.qld.gov.au/artworks/heritage/> (Access: 31.01.2022).

Inspired partially by the Australian landscape, especially that of North Stradbroke Island, Queensland, with the captivating beauty of pristine forests, lakes and magnificent Coral Sea beaches, Cai Guo Qiang created a seemingly utopian vision of an extraordinary place where 99 animals of various species meet to draw water from a small reservoir surrounded by white sand.

The main characters of Cai Guo Qiang's installation – the figures of kangaroos, tigers, bears, pandas, giraffes, horses, deer, elk, camel, zebras, monkeys, goats, cows, buffaloes, elephants (and others) – were created – just like the wolves from “Head On” – with the help of craftsmen from Quanzhou. Only this time, polystyrene was used to create the animal images, in which, after appropriate shaping, steel rods were inserted in part of the limbs to ensure the stability of the figures; the whole thing was covered with dyed goatskin, appropriately soiled and matted, so as to obtain the effect as close as possible to the natural fur of individual animals. What's more, it was very important for the entire project to obtain the right lighting that would give the impression of daylight; hence, 420 fluorescent lamps were installed in the ceiling of the exhibition room, covered by diffusers with a special shade that removes UV radiation over them.

At first glance, it is an insanely enchanting, fairy-tale-like vision full of peace and beauty, in which animals that trust and tolerate each other share a small space. However, after a deeper analysis, there is a reflection that the individuals humbly positioned on the shore of the pool, *de facto* act against their instincts, to satisfy their thirst and survive. Therefore, behind this beautiful scenery there is a great anxiety – even a sense of hopelessness – that defines our common heritage.

To conclude this text, I would like to quote a fragment from a book by Henry Beston, an American writer and naturalist whose thoughts on the natural world are, in my opinion, reflected in the works of Huang Yong Ping, Chen Haiyan and Cai Guo Qiang.

“We need another and a wiser and perhaps more mystical concept of animals... We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err and err greatly. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they

are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth.”³³⁾

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³³⁾ Beston (1928 [2019]: 40–41).

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1. Huang Yong Ping, *11 June 2002 – The Nightmare of George V*, 2002. Installation. Concrete, reinforced steel, animal skins, paint, fabric cushion, plastic, wood and cane seat. 243.8x355.6x167.6 cm. Exhibition view *House of Oracles*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. © Huang Yong Ping, Adagp, Paris, 2022. Courtesy archives Huang Yong Ping and kamel mennour, Paris



2. Exhibition view at Grande Galerie de l'Évolution at the Natural History Museum. From Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MNHN_Grande_Galerie_16.JPG



3. Huang Yong Ping, *Wu Zei*, 2010. Installation. Metal, silicone, foam and rice paper. Metal structure, foam, silicone, gauze, rice paper, taxidermy, various objects. 7,4 x 18,6 x 16,6 m. Exhibition view, Musée Océanographique de Monaco, Monaco. Pièce unique (Inv n°HP13). © Huang Yong Ping, Adagp, Paris, 2022. Courtesy archives Huang Yong Ping and kamel mennour, Paris.



4. Huang Yong Ping, *Ombre Blanche*, 2009. Buffalo skins on resin and steel structure. 250x450x210 cm. Exhibition view *Caverne* 2009, kamel mennour, Paris. © Huang Yong Ping, Adagp, Paris, 2022. Photo. Marc Damage Courtesy archives Huang Yong Ping and kamel mennour, Paris.



5. Chen Haiyan, *Rooster no 1*, 2011. Ink colour on woodboard. 185 x 183 cm. Copyright The Artist. Courtesy INKstudio



6. Chen Haiyan, *Rooster no 2*, 2011. Ink colour on woodboard. 185 x 183 cm. Copyright The Artist. Courtesy INKstudio



7. Chen Haiyan, *The Locked Up Water Spigot*, 2004. Colored ink on board. 162 x 102 cm.
Copyright The Artist. Courtesy INKstudio



8. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Head On*, 2006. 99 life-sized replicas of wolves and glass wall. Wolves: gauze, resin, and hide. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by Deutsche Bank AG. Deutsche Bank Collection. Installation view at Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, 2006. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio



9. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Ninety-Nine Horses*, 2011. Gumpowder on paper, gold-leaved resin models of horses. Gumpowder drawing: 400 x 1,800 cm, model horses: 14 x 24 x 5 cm. Commissioned by Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. Installation view at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, 2012. Photo by Daxin Wu, courtesy Cai Studio



10. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Heritage*, 2013.

99 life-sized replicas of animals: polystyrene, gauze, resin and hide Installed dimensions variable Acc. 2013.190.001–099 Commissioned 2013 with funds from the Josephine Ulirtek and Win Schubert Diversity Foundation through and with the assistance of the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. © Cai Guo-Qiang. Photograph: Natasha Harth, QAGOMA