

# IN'EI

## The centre of things

Pietro Gaglianò

**Opposing the Leviathan.** The Leviathan is the form Thomas Hobbes attributes to the political State, which he interprets as indivisible power exercised over its subjects (who are, however, completely free in this relationship, having voluntarily given up their natural rights in order to submit themselves -- fittingly, dreadfully – to a pact for survival)<sup>1</sup>. According to the biblical description of the monster that inspired the British philosopher, the Leviathan is a creature of whom it is said, "the mere sight of him is overpowering" and whose "chest is hard as rock, as hard as a lower millstone"<sup>2</sup>. This State-applied contract generates power which, inevitably, involves an imbalance of strength and ability with consequential dynamics of subjection and oppression; this is what power is, even when it doesn't seem to inhabit something recognisable or locatable, even when it should be analysed as a relation between individuals, "as something that circulates"<sup>3</sup>.

The only thing one can possibly juxtapose to this asymmetry, without yielding to the pitfall of a counter-power (very simply, another power), is the strength of art. Here the strength of art is taken as the undermining of the canon, as an interruption of hegemonic discourse, emancipation from need and function. Recalling Situationist International thought, we can imagine this strength in a series of "moments constructed into 'situations' [which] might be thought of as moments of rupture, of acceleration, revolutions in individual everyday life"<sup>4</sup>. A strength that is precipitated in the relationship between the artist and the art work, in the life unleashed in the encounter between the art work and the viewer. Gao Bo's artistic investigation maps out a series of these explosive events, where the strength of the possible emerges between the folds of the sensory universe. Through his array of materials and vocabularies, his spanning of political systems, cultural roots, the grammars of both body and image, Gao Bo executes a series of code violations while questioning the narratives of power. However, each time this occurs within the space of an exception: the space of art which, as we shall see presently, implies the sacred and intangible where, thanks to this dimension, he can treat imposed rules with indifference.

In this realm, Gao Bo's art works are like obstructions, accidents or epiphanies that are impossible to ignore. They manifest a strength that isn't so much antithetical to power as transversal to it; a strength that sidesteps the Leviathan, neutralising some of its branching heads and throwing open the space of the

---

1 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651.

2 *The Book of Job*, 41: 1: 9, 24 (NIV).

3 According to Michel Foucault, power cannot be circumscribed as "...a phenomenon of mass and homogeneous domination – the domination of one individual over others, of one group over others," but rather it's a function of relations, "...power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them."; Michel Foucault, lecture of 14 January 1976, in *Il faut défendre la société*, EHESS, Parigi 1997 [Eng translation by David Macey, *Society must be Defended*, Picador Publishers, New York, 2003, p. 29].

4 Translated freely from *Théorie des moments et construction des situations*, in "Internationale situationniste", n. 4, June 1960, p.11.

# IN'EI

possible. As an artist his work examines and deconstructs some of the structures through which power extends its hold on people's existence; structures like language and writing, access to representation and visibility, the body, The following reflections are devoted to these themes, always considering that they are there, underlying in all the artist's works, speaking one to another. Indeed it's important to emphasise the unity linking all his art works, as if they were part of a single large and comprehensive work, composed of voices, images and materials which, from time to time, are taken from a vast archive. A self-portrait, Gao Bo has defined it. Transversal to space and unheeding of time.

**The invention of writing.** A scholarly European convention decrees that the dawn of History coincides with the emergence of written language. Towards the end of that time we would later call the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE, the first documents, written to record economic texts, appeared in Mesopotamia in the form of clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform characters. From that period on, it is commonly assumed human civilisation made a leap forward in organising relationships within societies and managing goods; thus it's the moment when a structure of rules and relationships between citizens and civic, religious and military authorities is consolidated in order to satisfy, among other needs, control and order. Therefore, writing constitutes a code that traditionally is administered by power, so that access to its production and interpretation is expressed in mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion; this has been demonstrated throughout the long history of the ruling class's exclusion of the subjected people from being taught to write.

From another perspective, writing is also a passage that throws open the possibility of telling one's own version of stories and History. In this sense, writing equates to an act of bearing witness or resistance, and so inventing a form of writing means exploring another conceivable representation of the world. It is to this inclination we should refer the writing that Gao Bo has introduced into many of his art works since 2009. It's a language born from his desire for a universal encounter, above and beyond any idioms. Moreover, it also expresses the will to critically analyse language with its power of coercion, its risk of an incomplete understanding, its danger and dogmas which, in its official capacity, all frame reality.

Furthermore, Gao Bo's writing is manifested only in the graphic sign, as a layout of non-verbal graphemes, disjoined from syntax, grammar and phonetics. The artist employs characters taken from the Chinese, Tibetan and Latin alphabets and he rearranges, interweaves and overlaps them. In this unprecedented layout, Gao Bo's writing separates itself even from the conditioning bordering on the uniqueness of known languages. His writing acts in a space outside the discipline of the word, that is -- as has already been written elsewhere about his work -- "he extends the operative space of the word and the sentence into the realm of the non-origin"<sup>5</sup>. Starting from here, from this outburst of emancipation from structures, Gao Bo unfurls a reflection on the possibilities language can

---

5 Freely translated from François Tamisier, *Gao Bo. Une écriture libérée*, in *Gao Bo. Vol. 1-4*, Artron Books, Contrasto, Maison Européenne de la photographie, Shenzhen-Paris 2016, p. 41.

# IN'EI

open up when its reading no longer entails a sole interpretation but, rather, lends itself to new and unimaginable developments.

Gao Bo's is a freed tongue, a tool that acts antithetically with respect to the communication of power. Instead of functionally serving to administer rules, regulations, prohibitions, concessions, it denies all this and uses its freedom to invite the viewer to exercise inner reflection, being alone responsible, as reader, for the reading made of it. Often the lines of the artist's writing are placed like a diaphragm across the surface of several figures, as if, arranged in this way, the lines might be the key to solving an enigma, something that simultaneously seals and opens the vision of things.

The practice of writing, found throughout Gao Bo's entire artistic career, emphasises, with intensity, his long dialogue with Tibet, with its inhabitants and their faces, stories and iconographies, past and present. As the artist has stated, his exploration of this region since the mid-1980s answers his need for an unfamiliar territory in which "to practice, I believe, actions and constructions", in order to discover that "the word is not at all what we have been taught"<sup>6</sup>. For this reason, during a period in which international mobility of Chinese citizens was even more limited, Gao Bo chose a place where he could be a "foreigner in the centre of China".

**Politics of the visible.** Being a foreigner always imposes ambiguity in terms of visibility: the foreigner is often recognisable by their clothing, appearance, certain behaviours. At the same time, the foreigner is also invisible from the viewpoint of their rights, or their political status. This is the dimension in which Gao Bo moves, amplifying this exceptional status of artist, of which more will be said later. A stranger on a journey, who with every step, every metre travelled, takes a different view, able to discover and unravel.

In many of his works Gao Bo occupies the border between the visible and the invisible, between the image showing itself and becoming opaque, between the erasure and the return to the light and to the viewer's gaze. Rather than as a field of research, we could define this analysis of the visible as a real and true medium reinvented, from time to time, by the artist through his actions, installations, and combinations of materials; the latter are often juxtaposed in a discordant way with respect to one another such as, for instance, the printing of portraits on the surface of small stones, recalling a Buddhist ritual. This work, impressive both in quantity and in its visual impact, is part of a vast project, entitled *Mandala Offering, Tibet*, on which the artist has been working since 1995, and which continues to inspire new textural materials.

Anche qui, come in altri lavori, Gao Bo explores visibility and invisibility, the processes that allow these conditions as well as the infinite liminal phases contained between the two extremes; he treats them all as a poetic space in which to practice personal exercises of knowledge. However, his reflection on the realm of the visible contains and sparks a line of thought with a political edge, primarily where visibility is united with the double meaning of

---

<sup>6</sup> The artist in conversation with the author.

# IN'EI

“representation”<sup>7</sup>. Individuals and groups who aren't commonly represented (in optical and narrative terms) are rarely correctly represented in political terms (that is to say, they don't have access to the institutional and judicial debate for the creation or protection of the rights that apply to them). The two conditions are inextricable one from the other: the more invisible a weak social group is, the less their truthful image is communicated and recognised, and even less so are their interests safeguarded by the government<sup>8</sup>.

In keeping with these terms, the key faces of many works by Gao Bo are not those of an oppressed people but are rather a reflection of a human condition that can potentially affect everyone. As well as addressing issues of negated subjectivity and collectivity with an overt, mutual and painful reference to the situation in Tibet, the disappearance of the figures in Gao Bo's artworks critically addresses the action of power on the freedom, rights, and even very existence of citizens. When the artist works on the images – using other objects and structures, fire or painting – his action dramatically echoes the conflict between light and dark, between the visible and invisible, that predominates in every relationship of power.

However, in their symbolic form, these erasures also allude to another possibility: that of imagination and memory, a condition of existence that also embodies resistance. An erased image will always be an image that had seen the light of day; its perpetuation depends on the free will and the mind of the person who saw it. This responsibility attributed to the viewer, this secular miracle achieved by art runs, transversally, through every story of abuse, protesting it, fighting against it, and finds a *dénouement* in Gao Bo's choice made, from time to time, to free the figures from the dark or to return the human figure to the centre.

**The body of the artist.** Gao Bo's work of 2009, *Dévoilement – Nouvel Auschwitz*, including an installation and a performance, calls for a reclining human figure in the centre of the composition. The presence of the body, his body, is not merely a performative resource; it also assumes the value of a statement of responsibility, that of the author towards his own work and towards the proliferation of its semantics: it is a consubstantial participation in the life of the art work.

Elias Canetti, in his dense and thorough analysis of the forms of power, entitled *Crowds and Power*, highlights how, in this condition of the body, there is a total laying down of arms, an abdication of any form of control over space, the definitive abandonment of power over other people. Therefore, the choice of

---

<sup>7</sup> In Italian two different terms, *rappresentanza* and *rappresentazione*, express the exercise of a political mandate on behalf of others and the portrayal or description of a thing, respectively. By contrast, both definitions coincide with one word in English ('representation'), and in French (*représentation*).

<sup>8</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere, “the problem of the visibility of citizens must still answer a long list of questions about the meaning of being represented, both politically (by whom? And with what rules?) and in terms of figuration or portrayal (what is society's image? Who authorises it? How much and by what means is it communicated?)”, see Pietro Gaglianò, *La sintassi della libertà. Arte, pedagogia, anarchia*, Gli Ori Publishers, Pistoia 2020, pp. 219-220.

# IN'EI

portraying himself this way -- albeit relying on the tacit protection of the art work's intangibility and of the raised elevation of the platform on which it's found -- expresses a total identification with the destiny of those who have been annihilated in the concentration camps of all regimes throughout history, victims of the dynamics of abuse operating even during what we call times of peace. Such identification, however, is not harmless because as, once again, Canetti wrote, "A human being who falls down reminds us of an animal we might have hunted and brought down ourselves."<sup>9</sup> So there's a motion of accusation towards the viewer as well as a silent and fearful warning that reminds everyone that this fall is possible. To quote the Bulgarian writer again, the fallen body exerts another effect over its observers by temporarily remaining excluded "from the community of those who are standing upright: for a certain period he will no longer possess all his prerogatives"<sup>10</sup>. Here, as an artist and a provisory pariah of the world, Gao Bo embodies a state of exception: a *homo sacer*, the archetype of a subject who places himself in a dual condition, holy like a god yet untouchable like a taboo; he is completely immersed in the world yet is foreign to the state of his own rights<sup>11</sup>.

This alienation allows the artist to act in a free zone, a location lying outside the boundaries of those social constructs of which he is the accuser. The fall, taken as subjective disorientation but also as the loss of values that hold up shared life, guarantees the status allowing Gao Bo to stage his art work; here, as in other pieces, he combines elements of the European and Chinese cultures -- religious symbols, wreckage, tools of ancient times and technological means -- that precipitate in a formal result of monumentality and drama. From his state of exception the artist faces the disappearance of things and, in this dissipation, he ransoms the possibility of indicating new perspectives through the experience of art. It's essential that all this take place at the convergence point of the two elements introduced here: the choice of the body as a sign and the reclining pose which, taken among all the possible positions, allows the most ample surface contact between man and the earth. The body, reclining yet vital, bears witness.

The rest of the work – starting from these ruins of the civilisations unearthed and assembled in the anomalous space and time of the art work, the daily practice, the hard work to stitch the gash highlighted by the artist – is up to others: it is up to the viewer.

**Arrival in Venice.** Gao Bo reached Venice laden with many stories, completing a circular journey between Europe and Asia, a journey reflecting those of many Europeans and many Asians, who over the centuries have travelled through the

---

<sup>9</sup> Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, Claassen Verlag, Hamburg 1960.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Einaudi, Turin 1995.

# IN'EI

two continents, bringing them into contact with each other. History is a chronicle of the concerns and the wonder of these journeying people. The shape of this journey is therefore circular, since in its arrival there is already a return, the same shape as the mandala, with all the interlinked spiritual and universal meanings carried along with it.

Gao Bo's mandala includes a passage over water, and once again exposure and removal, disappearance and visibility. The stones from *Mandala Offering, Tibet* turn like rosary beads, like the tesserae of a mosaic spread through the earth's regions, like the unearthed bones of the vast, gigantic body of the planet's sorrows, like tears falling on the opaque surface of the lagoon, creating ever-widening circles. But also like the notes of a consoling song, because the story, whether created with images, with bodily action or the sounds of words, is already healing, already redemptive. And however wide the surface illuminated by the shape of the art, in its symbolic, tangible or immaterial existence, just so deep will be the power of this connection.

The ritual stones Gao Bo uses to build the brittle, transient edifice, in which time inhabits space, form an offering to the world, a great, open mandala, a celebration in continuous production, because the end is also the beginning, and arrival in Venice is also a return to Himalaya.