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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

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LIGHT SHOW ROCKETS' RED GLARE

The Chinese may well have invented everything except the forward pass, but some of their most important inventions were accidental. Did you know, for example, that the Chinese characters for “gunpowder” translate literally as “fire medicine,” because the alchemists who discovered it, in the eighth century A.D., were looking for a combination of minerals that would give their emperor eternal life? This information comes from the artist Cai Guo-Qiang, whose “Light Cycle: Explosion Project for Central Park,” scheduled for exactly seven-forty-five on the evening of September 15th, promises to raise the art of fireworks to a new level. The event, which caps a summer-long celebration of the Park’s hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary, will take place in three stages: “Signal Towers,” five towering geysers of colored fire at locations ranging from the Heckscher Ballfields, near West Sixty-fourth Street, to the Reservoir, at Ninety-fourth Street; “Light Cycle,” three horizontal rings above the tree line, giving way to a gigantic vertical ring, a thousand feet in diameter, that hangs over the Reservoir; and “White Night,” a canopy of brilliant, slowly descending white light that briefly illuminates the entire Park. The sequence will take less than five minutes from start to finish, but, if all goes well, our memory of it should last much longer.

Cai’s pyrotechnical breakthrough, which he developed with the assistance of the Grucci fireworks family, on Long Island, is to combine huge numbers of individual firework events into unified, massive forms in the sky. To make the vertical wheel of fire over the Reservoir, which will last for fifteen seconds, Cai and the Gruccis have allocated ten thousand rocket “shells.” “By comparison,” Cai said last week, “for a typical Fourth of July show by Macy’s, which is the largest in this country, they fire

about ten thousand shells per minute. Here we have ten thousand shells in fifteen seconds.” Cai, whose English is still shaky, even after eight years of living in New York, spoke in Chinese, and Jennifer Wen Ma, the director of the Cai Studio, on Great Jones Street, translated expertly. Given the complexity of the Central Park event, he was asked, was it possible that something might go wrong? “No one can say,” Cai said cheerfully. “It is all done by computer. We did many tests, but if there is any electrical problem, like a surge, you cannot go back and physically light ten thousand fuses.”

Sitting in his immaculate studio, at one end of a glass-topped table whose top had just been squeegeed and wiped dry on both sides by his wife, Hong Hong Wu, and a female assistant, Cai (pronounced “Si”) projected an affable but ineffable reserve. He is forty-five years old, with a head shaved clean on the sides, leaving only a small skullcap of close-cut pepper-gray hair on top, and he was dressed in dark clothes and yellow socks that housed each toe separately. Born in Fujian Province, China, the son of a scholar-artist in the old Chinese “literati” tradition, Cai studied stage design in Shanghai, became a painter, and eventually moved to Japan, where he lived for eight years, and where he became known internationally for his large-scale, avant-garde art projects and installations, many of which involved gunpowder. In 1995, he was invited to do a project for P.S. 1, the alternative art space in Queens, and he has been here ever since. “When I came here, I was still travelling all around the world doing various exhibitions, so New York was more like a studio,” Cai said. “I didn’t have a sense of belonging to the city. But that changed after September 11th.” He was in Italy at the time of the attack, working on a project, but

his wife and daughter were here—his daughter’s school is near the site of the World Trade Center—and afterward he felt differently about New York. “I felt tied to the city and to all the things that were happening here, and I had a strong urge to give back in some way,” he said. Then, just a few months after September 11th, the Museum of Modern Art asked him to organize a fireworks event. “I wanted to make something very unusual,” he said. The resulting piece, “Transient Rainbow,” was a giant colored arc of fireworks over the East River that signalled the museum’s move into temporary quarters in Queens. The rainbow impressed a lot of people, and led to an invitation from the Central Park Conservancy, which commissioned Cai to do “Light Cycle.” The arts group Creative Time coordinated the project.

“Everybody loves fireworks,” Cai observed, “but you cannot tell one year of fireworks from the next. You watch, you have a good time, you clap, and no one remembers it.” He continued, “One does not think of commissioned ceremonial works as art. I wonder why that is, and whether we could not explore that, to use it as a challenge. The cultural climate is different now. For example, here in the city an explosion takes on much different significance since 9/11. Something used for destruction and terror can also be constructive, beautiful, and healing.”

Calvin Tomkins