Keep on dreaming

Art in a changing Beijing

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President Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’, promising prosperity and progress, is by and large mapped onto the city. In the case of this dream, it can primarily be found within the fifth ring road, with its cultural heritage sites and fancy buildings designed by ‘starchitects’. But what about the people, most of whom are migrant workers, living beyond this significant demarcation? Are they allowed to partake in the China Dream too?

How does art intervene?

Indeed, China’s global rise is epitomized by the changing central cityscape of Beijing. Xi Jinping’s China Dream finds itself materialized in shiny skyscrapers, speedy ring roads, fancy buildings designed by starchitects, and green parks. This dream is quite firmly located within the fifth ring road. As we will see in this article, art intervenes, challenges and interrupts such dreams. The invisibility of life beyond the fifth ring road inspired the Second Floor Publishing Institute in Beijing to launch the project 5+1=6 in September 2014. In their open call for participation, the initiators invited cultural practitioners to “choose one of the villages/towns between the fifth ring road and sixth ring road to conduct an investigative project in an artistic way.” The participants were asked to live in their chosen villages or towns for at least 10 days, and to spend no less than 8 hours per day there to conduct their project, either individually or collaboratively. Most of the participants were artists and art students; some were designers, architects and other creative practitioners. From September 2014 to August 2015, 40 such investigative projects were conducted in 40 villages and towns in this area. From these, we have selected the project by artist Ma Lijiao (b.1985), to ponder the question: how does art intervene in the processes of urbanization in China; what does it do to, but also what does it call for? This question is not new. By now, quite a significant body of work explores the links between art and urbanization in China; for example, the work of Yom Baersten, Robin Visser, Zhang Zhen, Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen, as well as a 2015 special issue in Chinese Information, edited by Meiqin Wang and Minna Zhen. As the latter two scholars observe, “[t]ransformations of urban space and the phenomena and problems associated with urbanization – such as the construction boom, high mobility, technological innovation, dislocation, social inequality, and environmental deterioration – have been repeatedly addressed in Chinese visual arts since the 1990s.” From this list, Ma Lijiao’s work interrogates especially the increased social inequality that accompanies China’s economic rise.

In probing into this link between art and social inequality, we are inspired by the invisibility of life beyond the fifth ring road. What are the implications of this invisibility? Following French philosopher Jacques Rancière, what is rendered visible and what is not, is part of the distribution of the sensible. This is “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.” It is the system that produces in- and exclusion that renders things visible or invisible, sayable or unsayable, audible or inaudible, through which the status quo in society is maintained. What is rendered invisible is often that which may challenge the status quo. Art, by its practices and forms of visibility, intervenes in the distribution and reconfiguration of the sensible in the social space; its aesthetics, “is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.” Thus, aesthetics can help to contest naturalness and obviousness.

According to Maurizio Marsella, the artworks by Zhang Dali, Dai Guanyu and Jin Feng enact such a redistribution of the senses amidst the urban revolution in China, following Rancière’s philosophy. In his words, “I contend that these artists contribute to an aesthetic revolution in the making, which can be defined as the redistribution of the visible, the audible, the sayable, and also the tactile and the olfactory. These artists are enacting a total revolution of the senses.” These three artists treat the urban objects – either the dilapidated walls in the hutongs of Beijing, or the petitioners from the ‘petitiers’ village’ in Beijing, as passive objects who silently tell their stories via the artists’ compositions and interpretations. As such, “they are making ordinary people assume the importance of the extraordinary.”

We will show how Ma Lijiao is doing something more: he does not render the people silent, nor does he attempt to transcribe concerns into art at work. Instead, his artwork consists of an enactment of their concerns in which the artist becomes respectively a migrant worker, a journalist and a student. The title of the project, 5+6=6, could be gesturing towards a redistribution of the sensible and something more: 5 is the 5 ring roads that are part of the regime of the sensible, the +1 points to the intervention, which suggests that it wants to add something – new visions, new sounds, new smells, new words, from the artists and also the people living there who exercise their agency. How does the work of Ma Lijiao do that?

Becoming a migrant worker, journalist and student

Ma Lijiao participated in 5+1=6 in November 2014 for 10 days in the Xiaojiage East Village (Xiaojiage dong cun), located in North-West Beijing. In his project, Ma Lijiao morphed into different roles; he acted as a migrant worker, a journalist and a student. Through these enactments, he succeeded, in our view, in rendering parts of life in the urban village sensible that remain otherwise insensible. Whereas in global discourse, migrant workers are often represented as a horde of nameless and faceless rural people working in urban areas, Ma Lijiao tries to give them a face, a life and aspirations, by participating in their social media groups. In Ma’s words in an interview with us: “social media platforms can gather people from different locations of the real society to internet and make their voices heard together. There are anonymous social apps like Youmi which allows users to hide themselves behind their words. I think this (way of expression) is more real.” For example, he joined WeChat groups of the village such as the ‘Xiaojiahe Community Youth Group’ on which Chen Yan, a young lady, said: “I’ve enrolled in a vocational school (…) I have some regrets.” Two other members of this WeChat group encouraged her to re-sit the college entrance examination the next year in order to get into a college. It turned-out that Chen Yan was not a fresh graduate from high school – she had worked for a year already. The screenshot of this conversation was part of the exhibition. It shows the mundane nature of their conversations on social media, it brings to light the aspirations of the migrant workers, their hopes of moving upwards in the social hierarchy by attaining a higher education, and their mutual encourage- ment within an online community – it creates a convivial online space. For the 5+1=6 Project exhibition in summer 2015, Ma printed out all the screenshots of chats for the audience to read. In this part of the work, the artist, acting as a migrant worker, saw things and heard voices that would otherwise not be visible or audible to him. Migrant workers emerge as individuals with feelings, and as people with critical voices and ambitions.
In the village Ma discovered a walled compound with unfinished villas, called “Yuanmingyuan Villa” (Yuanmingyuan bieshu). These modern ruins are left-overs from the real estate bubble that still haunts China, and have now become the home and work place of some migrant workers. These unfinished buildings are symbolic of the fiction of China’s alleged urbanization progress. The unfinished buildings and real estate projects in China are mainly due to economic and financial problems, or the overheated real estate industry, which result in the creation of zombie buildings and zombie cities. These unfinished villas were developed and built by the son of the former Beijing mayor Chen Xitong who was later jailed on charges of corruption. As Ma explained, “later, thanks to the 16-year sentence of Chen Xitong, and the lack of proper certification of unfinished villas, called ‘Yuanmingyuan Villa’ (naoshi).” The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented out the spaces to the migrant workers.

In images of the area Ma confronts us with the flip side of China’s urbanization.1 Take for example a renaissance style marble statue of a nude female stood incongruously next to a ‘villa’ basement that was inhabited by migrant workers (fig. 1). The statue connotes conspicuous luxury with a gloss of Europeanness, which has now faded into a ghost; her private parts covered with yellow paint. The statue serves as a marble reference to a dream vanished, overlooking the marginalized lives of migrant workers living next to it. In another image that is part of the work, Ma shows the protruding steel bars of the unfinished villas (fig. 2). The steel bars have been bent by the wind after many years. On the background we see a finished and inhabited district, that is the Beijing that the authorities would like us to see and experience. But in juxtaposing that residential area with the unfinished villas, Ma confronts us with the contradictions, tensions and class inequalities that underpin the real estate boom of Beijing and China. As such, his work resonates with the cinematic oeuvre of Ja Zhangke, in which the lives and struggles of migrant workers are presented as to confront the audience with the flip side of China’s alleged economic boom.

After his initial visit in November 2014, Ma returned to the village in the early summer of 2015, this time as ‘a journalist’ of China’s alleged economic boom.16 But more so a making visible of capital.17 In his work, Ma renders visible the confrontations between contractors and land renters versus journalists, and the conflicting power relations embodied by these three parties. In addition, he raises questions about urbanization – who can use the land illegally with impunity and who cannot, what is public space and who has the right to govern the public space, who profits most from construction and demolition?

No more dreams?

Through his acting as a migrant worker, migrant workers emerge not as an anonymous horde of people, but as individuals with voices, thoughts and feelings. In his acting as a journalist and an artist, he interrogates the legitimacy of the ‘right’ of land developers to use the conflicting ideas, if not possibility, of ‘public space’ in urbanizing Beijing. Ma thus renders visible and audible the contradictions and tensions that come with the rapid growth and urbanization of Beijing. The work is a critical intervention in the narrative of urban growth in Beijing, given that it foregrounds how the top-down, capital driven urban development does not bring the China Dream to those who are rootless in the city. It is not the first work to do so, as we have shown already, but the work strikes us as significant in two aspects. First, in the ways the artist enacts different roles as to allow migrant workers and inhabitants of the urban village to perform their own aspirations and frustrations. They are not denied their agency; they are more than just props in the work of an artist. Second, the work is deeply embedded in its specific site; it is a case of what Minna Valjakka calls ‘site-responsive artwork’. The work unfulfills itself in a complex intersection between the life, its social relations and the representations of both.18

But are the villagers really more than just props? While the Red Brigades of the 1960s may stimulate critical questions about urban progress in China, there are also questions left unanswered. The work is primarily exhibited in art spaces, which are usually sanitized spaces in Beijing, quite removed from the everyday lives of most people. What impact can such a work have? Also, by acting in different roles, and not revealing himself as an artist, ethical questions arise: who is using whom in this work? And what do the migrant workers gain in the end? Doesn’t the artist benefit the most from their work?19

While the work challenges an uncritical celebration of urban progress in China, a position that is shared with many artworks in China, these ethical questions about the involvement of migrant workers and other communities in works of participatory art, remain unanswered. Let us consider as a way of a more hopeful closure return to MC Hotdog. He sings “Regardless of anything, I just want to drive on the 5th ring”. The artists of the 5+1=6 project may respond with “please, look further than the fifth ring road, drive outside, take a detour, walk around, and experience a Beijing that may shatter the China Dream, but that may also allow for other dreams, other futures”.

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Fig. 2 (below) Steel bars of the unfinished villas. Images courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

References

5. See note 3.

1. See note 1, p.4.
5. See note 10, p.154.
7. See note 10, p.171.
8. See note 10.
10. Ibid.
11. In order to avoid attracting attention from patrolling guards in this ‘villa’ site, Ma could only take photos with his smartphone, and thus the photos are of a relatively low resolution. We encountered the same problem when we tried to document this art project in person. Besides, the pursuit of an end product with high quality is rather rare in socially engaged art, as these practices are more process-based and they do not aim at producing the refined artworks that one sees in commercial galleries.
12. See note 2.

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