Keep on dreaming
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Keep on dreaming: Art in a changing Beijing

As we will show in their open 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 encouragement 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.

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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 us, but also what can it do to us? 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 Staets, 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 Väijä.3 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.”4 From this list, Ma Lijiao’s work interrogates especially the increased social inequality that accompanies China’s economic rise. To probe into this link between art and social inequality, we are inspired by the visibility 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.”5 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 sensible 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, “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.”6 Thus, aesthetics can help to contest naturalness and obscurity.

According to Maurizio Montecchi, the artworks by Zhang Dai, Dai Guangyu and Jin Feng enact such a redistribution of the visible, the sayable, the audible, and also the tactile and the olfactory. These artists are enacting a total revolution of the senses.7 These three artists treat the urban objects – either the dilapidated walls in the hutongs of Beijing, or the petitioners who silently tell their stories via the artists’ compositions and interpretations. As such, “they are making ordinary people assume the importance of the extraordinary.”8

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In the village Ma discovered a walled compound with unfinished villas, called “Yuanmingsuyuan Villa” (“Yuanmingsu benevolence”). 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 frictions 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 cultivated 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 Xiting, and the lack of proper certification of development and construction, this project was suspended.”

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. Take for example a renaissance style development and construction, this project was suspended.”

Ma’s final manifestation during his visit to the village came in the form of a student, but only after he was confronted by security guards, and subsequently the police. A couple of contractors on the site found evidence with Ma’s filming of them and the buildings. “Do you think you can film me?” they asked, after which Ma replies, “everybody can film in public space.”

Significantly, at the end of the film, the camera movement loses control, shooting the floor and then sky randomly, and finally ends in the interior of a bag. By retreating to such a private space Ma questions the possibility of public space in China, an inquiry enhanced by the audible argument. To escape the confrontation Ma proclaims to be a student, rather than a journalist. Once the police are called in, Ma tells them he is an art student who finds the ruins interesting and beautiful. Ma told us, “He (the police captain) ordered me to delete the video so that I could go away. (...) so I did. But afterwards someone asked to recover the video.”

In his work, Ma renders visible the confrontations between the contractor’s versus 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 art student, he interrogates the legitimacy of the ‘right’ of land urbanization. The artist Ma questions, 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 enact different roles to allow migrant workers to articulate their conflicting ideas, if not possibility, of public space in urbanizing Beijing. Ma thus renders visible and audible the contradictions and tensions that come with these three parties. Second, the work is deeply embedded in its specific site, it is a case of what Minna Valjakka calls ‘site-responsive artwork’. The work unfolds itself in a complex interaction between the site, its social relations and the representations of both.

But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redenaturalization of the site allows Ma to study the critical question 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 to be an artist, ethical questions arise: who is using whom in this work? And what do the migrant workers gain in the end? Does not the artist benefit the most from their words?

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, remains unanswered. Let us be 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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References


5. See note 1.

6. See note 1, p.4-12.


10. See note 10, p.170.


13. Ibid.

14. 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 work in the field. Besides, the pursuit of an end product with high quality is rather rare in socially engaged art. Since these practices are more process-based and they do not aim at producing the refined artworks that one sees in commercial galleries.

15. See note 2.

