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 Beijing, this dream 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 migrant workers, living beyond this significant demarcation? Are they allowed to partake in the China Dream too?

Dong Liwen (Zdzieki) and Jeron de Kloet

— Ah, 5th ring, you have one more ring than 4th Ring. (...) On the way to and from work, cars are always in a line. For my life, for dreams, for a holiday.

The 2011 Song of the Fifth Ring Road by MC Hotdog, together with comedy actor Yue Yunpeng, has become an unofficial anthem for Beijing. This is not only because of the song’s funny lyrics and MTV video, but also because the ring roads really do play a pivotal role in how people perceive and experience the city. Together with landmarks such as Tiananmen square, the CCTV Building and the Olympic Bird’s Nest, to name but a few, the ring roads are part of the mental map people have of Beijing: they help us locate where we are in this immense city. In his work Beijing 2003, maverick artist Ai Weiwei spent 16 days driving along every street inside Beijing’s fourth ring, driving a total of 2400 kilometers. Most of the city’s key landmarks are located within and around the fourth ring road, but 51% of its residents live beyond the fifth ring road.1 There, we find urban villages, mostly occupied by migrant workers, alongside luxurious villa parks for expats and the new rich. The fifth ring road forms a class boundary, in the words of journalist Jiang.2 “The fifth and sixth ring roads have become the hopeless choice of new immigrants in the city because of the house prices of the core region.” It is thus no wonder that MC Hotdog selected this road for his song. What is located beyond it is generally rendered invisible and unknown, despite the number of people living there.

How does art intervene?

Indeed, China’s global rise is epitomized by the changing central cityscape of Beijing. Xi Jinping’s China Dream finds its materialization 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 show in this article, art intervenes, challenges and interrupts this dream. The invisibility of life beyond the fifth ring road inspired the ‘Second Floor Publishing Institute’ in Beijing to show in this article, art intervenes, challenges and interrupts is quite firmly located within the fifth ring road. As we will show in this article, art intervenes, challenges and interrupts this dream. The invisibility of life beyond the fifth ring road inspired the ‘Second Floor Publishing Institute’ in Beijing to address in Chinese visual arts since the 1990s.3 From this viewpoint, in rendering parts of life and social inequality that accompanies China’s economic rise.

Here, it is worth mentioning MC Hotdog’s hit “Song of the Fifth Ring Road.” By attaining a higher education, and their mutual encouragement, 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© in November 2014 for 10 days in the Xiaojiang countryside (Xiaojiang dongcan), located in the 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-visit the college 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 conversation 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© 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 worker’s voice is rendered as audible to the audience, involving feelings, and as people with critical voices and ambitions.

1. According to Maurizio Marinelli, the artworks by Zhang Dali, Dai Guangyu and Jin Feng enact such a redistribution of the senses amidst the urban revolution in China, following Rancière’s philosophy.4 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 redistribution of the senses.”5 These three artists treat the urban objects – either the dilapidated walls in the hutongs of Beijing, or the petitioners from the ‘petitioners’ 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.”6
The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented development and construction, this project was suspended. "14 sentence of Chen Xitong, and the lack of proper certification of buildings are symbolic of the frictions of China’s alleged bieszhu). unfinished villas, called ‘Yuanmingyuan Villa’ The Newsletter to extract information from the land renters that revealed result from pressure exerted by the media. "They showed not be compensated for their loss. In the film, a female land their houses, the woman said: “We are not going to leave. We are all victims.” When asked what they government is on the contractors’ side. They all know 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 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 developers to seize the conflicting interests, 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 to allow migrant workers to express their voices, and their 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 unfolded itself in a complex interplay between itself, its social relations and the representations of both.16 But are the villagers really more than just props? While the demolition of the villas is symbolically charged 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 are raised: 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 work?17 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 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’. Deng Lwen (Zoïein) and Jeroen de Kloet, Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies, Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam (l.deng@uva.nl, B.J.dekloet@uva.nl) This project has been supported by a consolidator grant from the European Research Council (ERC-2013-CoG 618682-ChinaCreative). We would like to thank Ma Lijiao for sharing his work with us. References
7. See note 1, p.348.
14. Ibid.
15. 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 site from our vantage point. 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.