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?

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 such dreams. The invisibility of life beyond the fifth ring road inspired the ‘Second Floor Publishing Institute’ in Beijing 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, 48 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 are its limitations?

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 Tors Baerentzen, Robin Visser, Zhang Zhen, Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen, as well as a 2015 special issue in Chinese Information, edited by Moein Wang and Minna Väijakka. 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 insensible 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 Marinielli, the artworks by Zhang Dali, Dai Guanyou 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 dislocated 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.”

We will show how Ma Lijiao is doing something more; he does not render the people silent, nor does he attempt to transfer all concerns into art. 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+1, 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 in November 2014 for 10 days in the Xiaojiahe East Village (Xiaojiahe 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 hopeless mass 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 intern 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 mundaneness 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 workers emerge as individuals with feelings, and as people with critical voices and ambitions.

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In the village Ma discovered a walled compound with unfinished villas, called “Yuanmingyuan Villa” (“Yuanmingyuan bungalow”). These modern ruins are leftovers from the real estate bubble that still haunts China, and have now become the home of China’s alleged economic boom. The land renters knew that talking to a journalist could be an opportunity for them to become visible. What is happening in Ma’s work is not so much a “revelation of the senses” as Maurizio Marinelli calls it, but more so a making visible of themselves and the space between the elites and the 6th ring, not by subjugating their agency to the artist, but by taking initiative in front of a camera. This project not only sheds light on the people and the spaces they inhabit, but it also reveals how others capitalize on an apparent ghost town on the fringes of Beijing. The urbanization process is deeply enmeshed with rapid capitalization and even these fringe areas are no exception. This echoes Henri Lefebvre’s argument: the process of urbanization creates the conditions for capitalism rather than urbanization being the excessiveness of the circulation of capital.

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 offended with Ma’s filming of them and the buildings. “Do you think you can film me?” they ask, 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 artist 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. (-3 to 5-6). But afterwards asked someone to recover the video.”

In his work, Ma renders visible the confrontations between contractors 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 artist student, he interrogates the legitimacy of the ‘right’ of land renters and 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, but we show them as significant in two aspects. First, in the ways the artist enacts different roles as to allow migrant workers to be aware of their own autonomous 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 Valkajka 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 reification of these people 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 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?

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 approach it 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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7. See note 3.
10. See note 3, p.13.
15. Ibid.
16. 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 project for our own purposes. Besides, the pursuit of an end product with high quality’ is rather rare in socially engaged art, as since these practices are more process-based and they do not aim at producing the refined artworks that one sees in commercial galleries.
17. See note 2.