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?

Deng Liwen (Zoénie) and Jeroen de Kloet

How does art intervene?

Indeed, China’s global rise is epitomized by the changing circumstances of new immigrants in the city because of the house prices of “the fifth and sixth ring roads have become the hopeless choice 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,3 “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.

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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.2 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,3 “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.

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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 corruption. As Ma explained, ‘later, thanks to the 16-year unfinished villas were developed and built by the son of the for-projects in China are mainly due to economic and financial buildings are symbolic of the frictions of China’s alleged bubble that still haunts China, and have now become the home mieshu). The Newsletter | No. 76 | Spring 2017 of Europeanness, which has now faded into a ghost; her private parts covered with yellow paint. The statue serves as a marble female stood incongruously next to a ‘villa’ basement that was inhabited by migrant workers (fig. 2). The steel bars have been bent by the wind many years after. 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 rural boom of Beijing and China. As such, the work resonates with the cinematic oeuvre of Jia 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’ who filmed interviews with the residents. He encountered land renters who complained about a planned demolition, which was scheduled to happen soon. This demolition would tear down the illegal houses on the site, and the occupants, like us, are not denied their agency, they are more than just props in roles as to allow migrant workers and inhabitants of the urban fringe of Beijing. The urbanization process is deeply enmeshed 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 present, its social relations and the representations of both.18 But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redaction of the villas, the 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?20 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 ask 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 ‘yes, let’s follow 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 Liwen (Zoénie) and Jeroen de Kloet, Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies, Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam (l.deng@uva.nl, B.dekloet@uva.nl)

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Fig. 2 (below): Two steel bars of the unfinished villa. Images courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

References

Fig. 3: See note 3.


Note 3
1. Deng Liwen (Zoénie) and Jeroen de Kloet, Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies, Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam (l.deng@uva.nl, B.dekloet@uva.nl)

Note 1
In the village Ma discovered a walled compound with unfinished villas, called “yuenningsuan Villa” (“yuenningsuan becpuy”). 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 fortunes 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 for-Ma Lijiao was able to extract information from the land renters that revealed conflicts in the lives of these people having to deal with the