Keep on dreaming

Art in a changing Beijing

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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.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’ promises prosperity and progress, is by and large mapped onto the city. In the case of this dream, this 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?

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The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented the land to extract information from the land renters that revealed conflicts in the lives of these people having to deal with the rapid growth and urbanization of Beijing. The work is a reflection of ‘public space’ in urbanizing Beijing. Ma thus 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 the ‘right’ 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 other communities 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 unfolds itself in a complex intersection between the public sphere, its social relations and the representations of both.

But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redistribution of the film can only 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 take a step further than the fifth ring road, drive outside, take a detour, walk around, and experience a Beijing that matters the China Dream, but that may also allow for other dreams, other futures”.}

Fig. 2 (below): steel bars of the unfinished villas.

Images courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

References


7. See note 13.


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 the villas and interview the villagers. 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.

16. See note 12.

