Keep on dreaming
_Art in a changing Beijing_

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Publication date
2017

Published in
IIAS Newsletter

_Citation for published version (APA):_

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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 this dream, this can primarily be found within the fifth ring road, with its cultural heritage sites and fancy buildings designed by ‘architects’. 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 urban space and the phenomena and problems associated with it. Together with landmarks such as Tiananmen square, Beijing: they help us locate where we are in this immense city. The ring roads are part of the mental map people have of the city. They help us locate where we are in this immense city.

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 TV Tower 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 2013, 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,1 “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.

We will show how Ma Lijiao is doing something more: he does not render the people silent, nor does he attempt to translate their 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+6, 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, 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+6 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 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.”2 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-take 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 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 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. 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.
The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented unfinished villas were developed and built by the son of the former mayor, who was later jailed on charges of corruption. As Ma explained, “later, thanks to the 16-year sentence of Chen Xitong, 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 marble statue of a nude female model incongruously sitting next to a ‘villa’ basement that was inhabited by migrant workers (fig. 1). The statue connotes conspicuous luxury with a gloss of Europeanness, which has now faded into a ghost; her private parts covered with yellow paint. The statue serves as a marble reference to a dream vanished, overlooksing the marginalized lives of migrant workers living next to it. In another image that is part of the work, Ma shows the protruding steel bars of the unfinished villas (fig. 2). The steel bars have been bent by the wind after many years. 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 real estate boom of Beijing and China. As such, his 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 contractors on the site found offence 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. He told us, “He (the police captain) ordered me to delete the video so that I could go away. (...) I did it. But afterwards they 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 landowners to exploit 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, as we have shown already, but the work strikes us as significant in two aspects. First, in the ways the artist enact different roles so as to allow migrant workers to take control of the 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 unfolds itself in a complex intersection between the body, its social relations and the representations of both.

But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redemption of the village 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 answer 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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This project has been supported by a consolidator grant from the European Research Council (ERC-2013-CoG 616682-ChineCreative). We would like to thank Ma Lijian for sharing his work with us.

References
7. 65% waili renzhu shihua yishu jian, lishi juhuo shihua yishu jian, [Gu, M. 2015. “65% of non-local population of Beijing lives between the 4th and 6th Rings”, Jia Zhangke].