Keep on dreaming
Art in a changing Beijing
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Launch the project inspired the ‘Second Floor Publishing Institute’ in Beijing to such dreams. The invisibility of life beyond the fifth ring road forms a class boundary; in the words of journalist Jiang,3 “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 Mariotti, 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 revolution of the senses.” These three artists treat the urban objects – either the dilapidated walls in the hutongs of Beijing, or the petitioners’ village – as passive objects which silently tell their stories via the artists’ compositions and interpretations. As such, “they are making ordinary people assume the importance of the extraordinary.”5

Fig. 1 (above): Renaissance style marble statue of a nude female stood incongruously next to a ‘villa’ basement that was inhabited by migrant workers.

We will show how Ma Lijiao is doing something more: he does not render the people silent, nor does he attempt to translate concerns into art at all. 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, 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=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 several 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.”6 For example, he joined WeChat groups of the village such as the Xiaojiahe Community Youth Group7 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-join 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 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=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 of China’s urbanization. Take for example a renaissance style 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 urbanization progress. The unfinished buildings and real estate of capital.17

In his work, Ma renders visible the confrontations between contractor’s 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 art student, he interrogates the legitimacy of the ‘right’ of land renters to occupy the contested land, ‘of 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 as to allow migrant workers to use their bodies, and their agency, to appropriate Beijing urban space 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 its site, its social relations and the representations of both.18 But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redaction of this text 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 arise: 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 works?

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 do a way as 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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References
6 See note 3.
7 See note 1, p.34.
9 See note 3, p.13.
11 See note 10, p.170.
12 See note 10, p.171.
13 Our interview with Ma Liqiao in Beijing, 5 January 2016.
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 site using our smartphones. 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 7.