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 is maintained. What is rendered insensible is often that which is audible or inaudible, through which the status quo in society is maintained. Is this (way of expression) more real.” For example, in his project of Beijing 2003, "Peking University has formed a ‘petitioners’ village’ in Beijing, as passive objects that were inhabited incongruously next to a ‘villa’ basement that was inhabited by migrant workers.

The 2011 Song of the Fifth Ring Road by MC Hotdog, together with comedy actor Yao Humin, 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, maerever 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. If 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 Jiăng, “the fifth and sixth ring roads have become the hopelessly 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.

On the way to and from work, cars are always in a line. For my life, for dreams, for a holiday.

— Ah, 5th ring, you have one more ring than 4th Ring. (...) On the way to and from work, cars are always in a line. For my life, for dreams, for a holiday.

We will show how the art of Ma Lijiao is doing something more: he does not render the people silent, nor does he attempt to translate their concerns into art work. 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 Xijiao Da Village (Xijiao da 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 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.”

For example, he joined WeChat groups of the village such as the “Xiaojiha 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=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.
In the village Ma discovered a walled compound with unfinished villas, called “Yuanmingyuan Villa” (Yuanmingyuan Beizui). These modern ruins are leftovers 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 fictions 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 former Beijing mayor Chen Xitong 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.1 Take for example a renaissance style marble statue of a nude female stood incongruously 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, overlooking 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 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, lacking any proper legal land use documentation, would not be compensated for their loss. In the film, a female land renter says: “it’s useless to seek help from the government. We are all victims.” When asked what they plan to do, the renter says: “They showed Ma the demolition notice. They wanted him to cover the forced demolition in the hope that some compensation might result from pressure to seek help from the government. The government is on the contractors’ side. They all know that if you talk to a journalist you can’t get anything.”

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When 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 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 616832-ChinaCreative). We would like to thank Ma Lijiao for sharing his work with us.

References
4. See note 3.
6. See note 1, p.140.
10. See note 10, p.170.
13. See our interview with Ma Lijiao in Beijing, 5 January 2016.
14. Ibid.
15. In order to avoid attracting attention from patrolting 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 other sites in our research. 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.