Keep on dreaming
Art in a changing Beijing
Deng, L.; de Kloet, J.

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Keep on dreaming: Art in a changing Beijing

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 ‘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?

— 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.

The 2011 Song of the Fifth Ring Road by MC Hotdog, together with comedy actor Yue Yumeng, 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 2013, maestro artist Ai Weiwei spent 16 days driving along every street inside Beijing’s fourth ring, driving a total of 2450 kilometers.1 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 — 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.”

This question is not new. By now, quite a significant body of work explores the links between art and urbanization in China; for example, the work of Yomi Braester, Robin Visser, Zhang Zhen, Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen, as well as a 2015 special issue in Chinese Information, edited by Meein Wang and Minna Väänäkko.4 As the latter two scholars observe, “[t]ransformations of urban space and the phenomena and problems associated with urbanization – such as the construction boom, high mobility, technological innovation, dislocation, social inequality, and environmental deterioration – have been repeatedly addressed in Chinese visual arts since the 1990s.”5 From this list, Ma Lijiao’s work interrogates especially the increased social inequality that accompanies China’s economic rise.

In probing into this link between art and social inequality, we are inspired by the invisibility of life beyond the fifth ring road. What are the implications of this invisibility? Following French philosopher Jacques Rancière, what is rendered visible and what not, is part of the distribution of the sensible.6 This is “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.”7 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 Martenelli, the artworks by Zhang Dai, Dai Guanying and Jin Feng enact such a redistribution of the senses amidst the urban revolution in China, following Rancière’s philosophy.8 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.”9 These three artists treat the urban objects – either the dilapidated walls in the hutongs of Beijing, or the petitioners from the ‘petitioners’ village’ in Beijing, as passive objects who silently tell their stories via the artists’ compositions and interpretations. As such, “they are making ordinary people assume the importance of the extraordinary.”

We will show how Ma Lijiao is doing something more: he does not render the people silent, nor does he attempt to translate the concerns of his 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 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.”10 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-visit 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 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 bestow’). These modern ruins are left-over from the real estate bubble that still haunts China, and have now become the home of migrant workers. These unfinished villas are symbolic of the frictions of China’s alleged bubble that still haunts China, and have now become the home of migrant workers. The land was taken for example a renaissance style development and construction, this project was suspended. “14

Ma’s final manifestation during his visit to the village came in the form of a student, but only after he was confronted by security guards, and subsequently the police. A couple of contractors on the site found out with Ma 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 bao. By relocating 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 art student who finds the ruins interesting and beautiful. Ma told us, “He (the police captain) ordered me to delete the video so that I could go away. (. . .) I did. But afterwards asked someone to recover the video.”

In his work, Ma renders visible the contradictions 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 art student, he interrogates the legitimacy of the ‘right’ of land ownership. In 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 to allow migrant workers to present 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 unfold itself in a complex intersect between the everyday life, its social relations and the representations of both.19

But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redaction 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 as 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 words?20

While the work challenges an uncritical celebration of urban progress in Beijing, 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 play as a way of a more hopeful closure return to NC 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 offer for other dreams, other futures”.

Deng Liwen (Zoine) and Jerone de Kloet, Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies, Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam (deng@wva.nl, B.J.dekloet@wva.nl)

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Fig. 2 (below): Steel bars of the unfinished villas. Images courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

References
7. See note 1, p.16.
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 these photos are of a relatively low resolution. We encountered the same problem when we tried to document the ruins during 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 providing the refined artworks that one sees in commercial galleries.

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