Keep on dreaming
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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 Beijing, this dream can primarly 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?

Deng Liwen (Zoénie) and Jeroen de Kloet

— 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 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 for migrants in Beijing; they help us locate where we are in this immense city.”9

In his project Becoming a migrant worker, journalist and student Ma Lijiao (b.1985), to ponder the question: how does art intervene in the processes of urbanization in China, what does it do to, but also about, the social inequalities? 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 Yoons Baerste, Robin Visser, Zhang Zhen, Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen, as well as a 2015 special issue in Chinese Information, edited by Mieke Wang and Minna Valjakka.3 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.”4 From this list, Ma Lijiao’s work interrogates especially the increased social inequality that accompanies China’s economic rise. In probing into this linking of art and social inequality, we are inspired by the visibility 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 is not, is part of the distribution of the sensible. 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.”5 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 accessible is often what 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”6. Thus, aesthetics can help to contest naturalness and obviousness.

According to Maurizio Marino, the artworks by Zhang Dai, Dai Guangyu and Jin Feng enact such a redistribution of the senses amidst the urban revolution in China, following Rancière’s philosophy.7 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.”8 These three artists treat the urban objects – either the dilapidated walls in the hutongs of Beijing, or the petitioners from the “petitier’s 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.”9

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 migrant workers. 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 Xiaojiaha East Village (Xiaojiaha 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.

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 “Xiaojiaha 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 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.
The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented
of China’s urbanization. Take for example a renaissance style
of corruption. As Ma explained, “later, thanks to the 16-year
mer Beijing mayor Chen Xitong who was later jailed on charges
unfinished villas were developed and built by the son of the for-
in the creation of zombie buildings and zombie cities. These
urbanization progress. The unfinished buildings and real estate
and inhabited district; that is the Beijing that the authorities
in which the lives and struggles of migrant workers are
residential area with the unfinished villas, Ma confronts us

The government is on the contractors’ side. They all know
land use and exposes the conflicting ideas, if not possibility,
conflicting power relations embodied by these three parties.
In addition, he raises questions about urbanization – who can
the rapid growth and urbanization of Beijing. The work is a
struggle and inhabited district, which the Beijing that the authorities
contracts versus land renters versus journalists, and the
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, he interrogates the legitimacy of the ‘right’ of land
owners to control 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 enacts different roles as to allow migrant workers to
manifest themselves, and to question the elitist and alarmist
approach to 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
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+16 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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5. “How did the using of 5th ring become Beijing city song?” (teng.com)
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[Second Floor Publishing Institute, Wuchuan (platform].
[See note 3, p.149.]
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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. However, we continued with the project. 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.

In the village Ma discovered a walled compound with unfinished
villas, called “Yuanmingsuan Villa” (“Yuanmingsuan Backyard”). These modern ruins are left-overs from the real estate
bubbel that still haunts China, and have now become the home
and work place of some migrant workers. These unfinished
buildings are symbolic of the frictions 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 for-
mer 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
development and construction, this project was suspended.”

The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented
the site 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
masterpiece of a nude female statue incongruously situated next
to a ‘villa’ basement that was inhabited by migrant workers
(fig. 1). The statue connotes conspicuous luxury with a gloss
of Euroanness, 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,
its specific site, it is a case of what Minna Vajlacka calls
‘site-responsive artwork’. The work unfolds itself in a complex
intersection between the private, its social relations and the
representations of both. But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redocumentation of the site 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?

Fig. 2 (below): Steel bars of the unfinished villa. Images courtesy of Ma Lijuan.

Ma Lijuan (Yiwen)