Waste has made a presence in contemporary Chinese art since the beginning of the 21st century, either incorporated into installation artworks, as the content of photographs or paintings, or featured in documentary films. This artistic trend simultaneously reflects and warns of the rapid accumulation of waste brought about by China’s embrace of global consumerism and urban-focused development. Analyzing different approaches adopted by a number of artists who deal with waste, this article explores the criticality embodied in their works that help raise awareness of the increasingly severe social and environmental consequences.

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Phoenixes rising from the waste

Xu Bing (b. 1955), a leading contemporary Chinese artist, completed a large installation piece entitled Phoenix Project in 2002. It consists of two gargantuan sculptures of the legendary phoenix, one 100 feet long and the other 90 feet long (see image on issue cover). The romantic connotations of this creature, hallowed in Chinese lore for its long lifespan and for the才干 (talents) it can contain within its body, was modeled upon Beijing’s urban redevelopment, won the lifestyle that the extravagant building symbolised. In response, Xu was invited to create a piece of public art for the atrium of the World Financial Center in Beijing, which was then under construction. Upon visiting the site he was shocked by the primitive working conditions in which migrant workers labored; they posed a striking contrast with the ultra-modern lifestyle that the extravagant building symbolized. In response, he constructed his public installation with recycled waste materials and collected from the construction site, which was to be installed, and he hired migrant workers to assist in his project. This was an unusual time, just a few months before the global financial crisis would take its toll, and also the time when the Beijing government implemented tighter controls over cultural production in the city to issue a “harmonious” image of Beijing and China for the international audience in anticipation of the upcoming summer Olympics. In accordance, the building’s developers withdrew their financial support for the work, due to financial constraints but probably also out of concern towards the potentially controversial meaning that the work might convey to the Chinese authorities. Xu continued on his own and completed the Phoenix Project in 2010. The grand scale, the raw appearance, and the process that was modeled upon Beijing’s urban redevelopment, won the Phoenix Project the reputation of “an artwork almost too vivid in its resemblance to contemporary China.”

In this work, Xu intends to draw attention to both the workers who built the two phoenixes, the demolition of old neighborhoods and the construction of new urban structures such as the World Financial Center that are regarded as more suitable for Beijing’s metropolitan image. Demolition and construction are major sources of the skyrocketing accumulation of waste in the country. This, added by waste produced by an increasingly affluent and rapidly growing urban population, led to China surpassing the U.S. in 2005, becoming the world’s largest municipal solid waste generator. Practically, waste has become an unavoidable sight in and outside of Chinese cities and has caught the attention of many critical-minded contemporaries of Chinese artists.

Xu Bing’s Phoenix Project exemplifies a growing trend among contemporary Chinese artists who seek to engage with various problematic byproducts of China’s GDP-driven and urban-focused consumerist urban development strategies. Their works open up various forms of ‘civic politics,’ a term adopted by Chinese art critic Wang Nanming in his discussion of Chinese socially engaged art, thus contributing to the growth of bottom-up civic public space.

Waste as an aesthetic object

Xi’an artist Xing Danwen (b. 1967) might have been one of the first contemporary Chinese artists to turn her attention to the increasing presence of waste in China. Her photographic series disCONNEXION, (fig. 1), completed in 2002-2003, takes as its subject matter industrial electronic waste, known as ‘electronic trash,’ that developed countries have dumped in China. Every year, thousands of tons of electronic trash are transported from America, Japan, Korea, and other developed countries, to southern coastal regions such as Guangdong and Fujian, where they are sorted and recycled. According to a recent United Nations report, China is currently the largest e-waste dumping site in the world. During her field research in Guangdong Province, one of the fastest developed regions in China, Xing discovered that thousands of local and migrant workers made a tough living by sorting out mounds of computer and electronic trash in primitive and unprotected working conditions. These waste pickers were exposed to various toxic substances as they tore apart discarded electronic appliances, and during the process they also seriously polluted water and soil in the surrounding areas and beyond, and indirectly contaminated local agricultural produce.

Xing’s approach to this distressing reality, which had apparently been going on without much public attention in the shadow of spectacular economic success in this part of China, was aesthetic abstraction. Rather than exposing the abhorred working conditions, she photographed the products of strenuous and long hours of labor: mounds of circuit boards, plastic cords, silicon chips, and other electronic components. She gave each mound a close-up shot, capturing disparate shapes and colors of fragmented mechanical products. Her aestheticizing of the cold and lifeless scrap turned them into provocative and enticing images. Their semi-abstract and aesthetically intriguing appearance simultaneously draws audiences in and surprises them once they realise what has been photographed. In a twisted way, these images constitute a distinctive portrait of the downside of China’s rapid development that, in Xing’s words, “conveys the immensity of the problem as well as the unbearable details I witnessed in these e-wastelands.” Titled disCONNEXION, ironically relating to electronic products’ purpose of facilitating connection, the work reflects the social-cultural disconnection between different social groups such as producers of electronic goods, consumers of them, and the trash pickers who also deal with them, in an increasingly atomized contemporary society. The aestheticization and abstraction of the otherwise formidable reality becomes Xing’s unique way of revealing a dark side of globalizing and exposing an ugly truth behind China’s rapid development.

Jiangsu-born multimedia artist Han Bing (b. 1974) also used waste as his object of aesthetic contemplation when he made rubbish-ridden rivers, a byproduct of China’s consumerist urbanization, the topic of his art. He was drawn to the appallingly visible contamination of above-ground water throughout China as a result of the mindless and irresponsible disposal of everyday trash, and began his multiple-year photographic series Urban Amber in 2005. The photo Urban Amber Red Flows Flying on Skyrones Cranes (2006), taken in Beijing, presents a bluish green body of water where one sees water lifes and fallen leaf-like objects floating above a forest of construction cranes with red flags flying overhead, a prevailing sight in China’s accelerated urban expansion. At first glance, the image looks exquisite, giving the illusion of an attractive water surface covered by foliage and animated by swimming fish beneath. Looking closely, however, one realises that it is waste such as garbage bags, plastic bottles, and human sewage that make up the water’s surface. The bluish-green color itself is the result of the water being heavily polluted by putrid rubbish and masses of algae. In other pieces from the series (fig. 2) we see reflections of various man-made structures, such as glamorous skyscrapers and new residential complexes for the rich, shanty dwellings for the urban poor, migrants and peasants, and commercial establishments and advertising billboards, all indistinguishably shrouded under a body of water infested with filthy rubbish.

In this conceptual work, Han took photos of many heavily polluted bodies of water in Beijing and produced single-exposure images without any modifications other than simply turning them upside down. However, it is with such a witty and perceptive reversal that the rubbish thoughtlessly thrown...
away by people has returned, taking up position in the sky of Han’s landscape. In this series, Han brings to the forefront the disheartening visual content, which show both the love between human beings and the neglect from both the municipal government and urban residents seem to have pushed China’s capital city to the brink of self-suffocation with the hundreds of landfills forming a thick belt encircling the city proper.

Civic politics

The increasing presence of waste in art speaks to the omnipresence of waste in contemporary urban society. Accompanying apparent prosperity, brought about by China’s spectacular economic development and nationwide urbanization in the past two decades, is the astonishing accumulation of garbage. Artists such as those discussed above are keenly aware of this problem and in their art they examine waste in its various forms and conditions; they have developed new concepts, methodologies, and aesthetics surrounding waste. Their creative interpretations and realistic representations of waste endow this local material a unique role of creativity and make visible its invasive presence, exposing waste as a phenomenon largely ignored in the state-controlled mainstream media and cultural production until recently. As such, their efforts contribute to the growth of ‘green public sphere’, a term coined by environmental scholars in their discussions about China’s rising environmental activism.

Moreover, the works produced by these individual artists could be seen as ‘parallel structures’, a concept advanced by Angela Havel in her call for individuals to engage in small-scale work and politics from below to challenge the totalitarian dictatorial state and create a better society.16 Resonating Havel’s political ideas is Chinese artist WANG Nanning’s adoption of ‘civic politics’ as a useful concept for discussing the work of contemporary Chinese artists who engage with social problems and accentuate the power of artworks to stimulate civic action and the creation of new practices.17 He thus recognizes the importance of various individual-based and different approaches adopted by artists who assume a critical attitude towards China’s urban reality. In a post-totalitarian but still authoritative regime of China, these ‘parallel structures’ of artworks challenge the official portrayal of China’s economic development and urbanization, which centers on magnificent cities, glittering skyscrapers, and lavish shopping malls. They constitute various forms of ‘civic politics’ that help to uncover a hidden truth concerning the byproducts of mainstream socioeconomic transform-