

# 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 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?

Deng Liwen (Zoënie) 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> "the fifth and sixth ring roads have become the hopeless 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.

## 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 inspired the 'Second Floor Publishing Institute' in Beijing to launch the project *5+1=6* in September 2014. In their open call for participation, the initiators invited cultural practitioners to "choose one of the villages/towns between the fifth ring road and sixth ring road to conduct an investigative project in an artistic way."<sup>4</sup> The participants were asked to live in their chosen villages or towns for at least 10 days, and to spend no less than 8 hours per day there to conduct their project, either individually or collaboratively.<sup>5</sup> Most of the participants were artists and art students; some were designers, architects and other creative practitioners. From September 2014 to August 2015, 40 such investigative projects were conducted in 40 villages and towns in this area. From these, we have selected

the project by artist Ma Lijiao (b.1985), to ponder the question: how does art intervene in the processes of urbanization in China, what does it try to do, but also, what are its limitations?

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 *China Information*, edited by Meiqin Wang and Minna Valjakka.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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*. 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."<sup>8</sup> 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"<sup>9</sup>. Thus, aesthetics can help to contest naturalness and obviousness.

According to Maurizio Marinelli, 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.<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>

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 their concerns into an 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 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."<sup>13</sup> 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-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 encouragement 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 bieshu*). These modern ruins are left-overs 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 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 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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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. The government is on the contractors' side. They all know each other." According to her, "when we built these two three years ago, we didn't know that the government planned to demolish here. (...) We are all victims." When asked what they were going to do when the contractors came to tear down their houses, the woman said: "We are not going to leave. Staying means we are going to revolt (*naoshi*)." They showed Ma the demolition notice. They wanted him to cover the forced demolition in the hope that some compensation might result from pressure exerted by the media.

Only by taking on the role of a journalist was Ma able to extract information from the land renters that revealed conflicts in the lives of these people having to deal with the

capitalization of land in the process of China's urbanization. The land renters knew that talking to a journalist could be an opportunity for them to become visible. What is happening in Ma's work is not so much a "revolution of the senses" as Maurizio Marinelli calls it,<sup>16</sup> but more so a making visible of themselves and the space between the 5th and the 6th ring, not by subjugating their agency to the artist, but by taking initiative in front of a camera. This project not only sheds light on the people and the spaces they inhabit, but it also reveals how others capitalize on an apparent ghost town on the fringes of Beijing. The urbanization process is deeply enmeshed with rapid capitalization and even these fringe areas are no exception. This echoes Henri Lefebvre's argument: the process of urbanization creates the conditions for capitalism rather than urbanization being the excrescence of the circulation of capital.<sup>17</sup>

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 offence with Ma's 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 bag. By retreating 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. (...) So I did. But afterwards I asked someone to recover the video."

In his work, Ma renders visible the confrontations 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 use and exposes 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 and inhabitants of the urban village 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 interplay between the specific site, its social relations and the representations of both.<sup>18</sup>

But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redistribution of the sensible 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 words?<sup>19</sup>

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+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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- 5 See note 3
- 6 See note 1; also Visser, R. 2010. *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Braester, Y. 2010. *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and Urban Contract*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Zhang, Z. 2007. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press; de Kloet, J. & Scheen, L. (eds.) 2013. *Spectacle and the City: Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- 7 See note 1, p.140.
- 8 Rancière, J. 2006. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Bloomsbury, p.12.
- 9 See note 3, p.13.
- 10 Marinelli, M. 2015. "Urban revolution and Chinese contemporary art: A total revolution of the senses", *China Information* 29(2):154-175.
- 11 See note 10, p.170.
- 12 See note 10, p.154.
- 13 Our interview with Ma Lijiao 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 these 'villas' ourselves. 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.
- 17 Lefebvre, H. 2003. *The Urban Revolution*. Translated by Robert Bononno. University of Minnesota Press, U.S.A.
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- 19 See for a critical analysis of participatory art: Kester, G. 2009. "Lessons in Futility: Francis Alys and the Legacy of May '68", *Third Text* 23(4):407-420.

Fig. 2 (below):  
Protruding  
steel bars of the  
unfinished villas.

Images courtesy  
of Ma Lijiao.

