PRESSBOOK

XU Zhen

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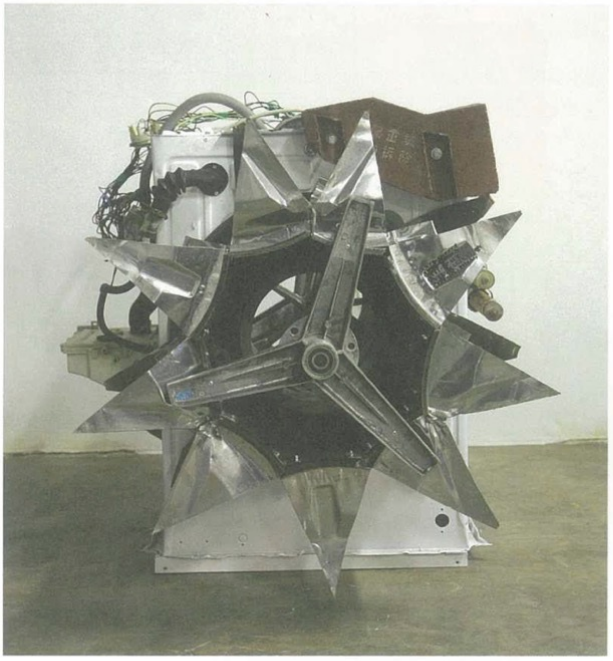
Made in China-Globalization: Art, Production, and Social Change



Liu Wei, *Antimatter*, 2006, washing machine, tape, 80 x 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy of Liu Wei Studio, Beijing.

I

Since joining the World Trade Organization at the beginning of the twenty-first century, China has achieved incredible economic growth. In its efforts to bridge the growing economic disparities between urban and rural areas, the government accelerated its drive towards urbanization and by the eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, this tumultuous program had swept away many of the existing social structures. It was during this period that the centre of the contemporary art scene began its gradual out-of-town migration, pushed by the expanding metropolis, first to the Yuanmingyuan Art Village in the 1990s, then the Songzhuang Art Village and 798 Art Zone, and, lastly, Caochangdi Art District and Heiqiao Art District.

The contemporary Chinese art scene has always flourished in the fertile ground of the urban periphery, in suburbs and the margins of the countryside. This is familiar territory for Liu Wei, for example, whose deeper understanding of the process towards urbanization stems from experiencing it first hand and incorporating it into his art. Living in Beijing's

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Third Ring while working in its Fifth Ring, Liu Wei's daily commute goes from downtown to the suburbs. Everything he hears and sees in these two different areas then becomes the material for his art and drives his creativity: discarded furniture, electrical appliances, and recycled garbage have marked out his work from the outset. When we look beyond the artwork's visual abstraction, whether in his physical installations or multimedia works, one can see a specific cityscape of image and concept.

Liu Wei, *Merely a Mistake II*, 2009–11, recycled door frames, found wood beams, acrylic board, stainless steel. Courtesy of Liu Wei Studio, Beijing.

It is hard at first to grasp the sense of Liu Wei's statement, "I always stand by the people" until we understand that this does not mean he is simply out to please the public.[1] Instead, this most contemporary artist offers up true visual perceptions of, and original reflections on, people's everyday living experiences. How this is done can best be seen in his creative method. For Liu Wei, the cheap materials he finds represent the relationship between classes, bear traces of people's memory, and reflect social change. Walking into his large workspace, a cross between a studio and a factory, we can see traditional handicrafts and modern, streamlined production methods working together under a rigorous regime based on the division of labour. Liu Wei has created a role for himself that is equal parts artist, general designer, general dispatcher, and manager, even enjoying the "title" of Administrative Director Artist. Of course, while this production method is commonplace in the Western world, we should note that his insistence on scale and speed are not driven simply by the rapid changes of the capitalist-led art system, but also stand as a clear representation of China's urbanization and social transitioning within a globalized context. From production to formal implementation, this is the clearest proof that Liu Wei's understanding and techniques bear witness to the seismic shifts within mainland China over the last decade.

Of course, studio output is only one link in the overall chain of production. Today, if a curator, critic, collector, or gallery manager starts to visit studios

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Inside Liu Wei Studio. Courtesy of Liu Wei Studio, Beijing.

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or production facilities to learn more about the artists' work, it is only to forge stronger links between the art and its audience. Nevertheless, the art system itself is rooted within China's economic, social, and cultural structures, and subject to the same stress and strain brought on by globalization. It must follow then, that the scale and speed of output is a truer reflection of a globalized art world than a Chinese one. MadeIn Company, established by Xu Zhen, shows this with even greater clarity.

For Liu Wei, production itself carries certain ideas and meanings, even if he distances himself from other links in the art production system—distribution and consumption, for example. Although production is dependent on consumption to an extent, his lack of engagement with the consumer end of the process reveals a self-protective wariness. By way of contrast, these other elements that comprise the larger art system are included lock, stock, and barrel by Xu Zhen's MadeIn Company. Xu Zhen does not regard studio and factory production simply as a single link in the production chain, but, rather, as a key element of its consumption.

As early as 2009, just after MadeIn Company was established, it was widely considered to be commercial in its approach and capitalist in its strategy, in spite of Xu Zhen's tireless explanation of its artistic methodology.

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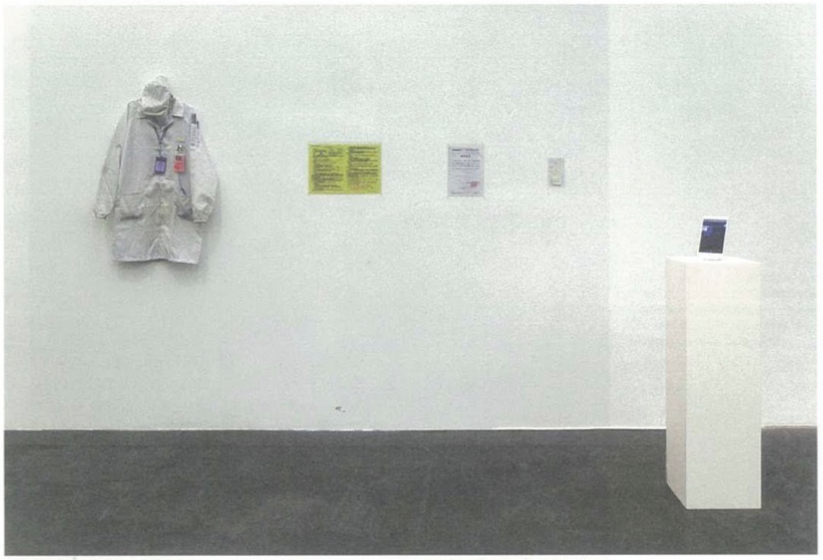
like them, it will nonetheless end up being absorbed and digested by the commercial system.

For now, at least, independent artists are not strong enough, culturally or socially, to influence the system. Pauline J. Yao was aware of this as early as 2008 when she wrote in her book *In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China* that, "in situ art in China seems to take more account of its location or exhibition spaces than society or a public capable of thinking. It is targeted at initiates."[3] As Liu Wei's practice and work suggests, the true cultural significance of contemporary art is neither urban (compared with other products, urban consumption of contemporary art is very limited) nor rural, but grows in the cracks between the city and the countryside. It is a space where artists can hardly expect to find people outside their universe.



Li Liao, *Consumption*, 2013, installation. Photo: Dora Tang. Courtesy of the artist and Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

II

Critics have claimed that Liu Wei and Xu Zhen are both representatives of Chinese neoliberalism and historical nihilism, criticizing them for conspiring with capitalism, bourgeois values, and reality.[4] However, such views overlook one point: that the real landscape is not a massive installation. Size alone prevents its commercial viability, leaving it uncompromised by capitalist and neoliberal concerns. On the contrary, it reminds us of class and social differentiation brought about by global neoliberalism and state capitalism, the disparity between economic and cultural structures, as well as the mental strain of widespread alienation from the modern world. Thus Liu Wei and Xu Zhen can be seen, in fact, to be commenting on and resisting the crisis of reality in a realistic way, in opposition to neoliberalism and historical nihilism. Moreover, in the current world, a new landscape of networks, project work, non-materialization, and mobility has emerged. Claire Bishop pointed out that, "Even though participatory artists invariably stand against neoliberal

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capitalism, the values they impute to their work are understood formally (in terms of opposing individualism and the commodity object), without recognizing that so many other aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms."[5]

Li Liao's *Consumption* (2013) exemplifies this apparent paradox. Li Liao was employed by Foxconn (Long Huayuan District in Shenzhen city), an assembler of electronics for global brands, as a production-line worker on October 9, 2012. He worked there for forty-five days then resigned after completing *Consumption* and making enough from his wages, once his daily living expenses had been paid, to buy one of the iPad minis produced by his own line. During this period, Li Liao immersed himself within the production chain in an attempt to draw back the veil on the prevailing unequal economic system and social structure. But grand concepts and gestures are not Li Liao's aim. When a producer (the object) turns into a consumer (the subject), he is demonstrating the extreme disparity between the two roles and how they crudely invade our daily life rather than narrow the gap between subject and object, or between production and consumption. This in turn hints at a hegemony deeply embedded in our daily life, and demonstrates the means of resisting it.

As discussed above, the artwork *Consumption* will eventually be taken up by galleries, art museums, and fairs, becoming a part of the capital-driven, international art market that the artist opposes. Artists, in turn, will be signed up by galleries to provide "products" for them. But not all artists take the production system, art system, and the corresponding social mechanisms such as art media, seeing them rather as links in the chain of production or unrealized concepts, and detaching production from practice. Although artworks themselves have to rely on the art system, artists do not necessarily have to attend to the system and its social operation during the act of creation. One could even say that artists have intentionally bypassed this link from the very beginning. Moreover, there is no rule that insists on their taking social reality as the starting point of the creative process. Though they keep a watchful eye on society, this doesn't need to have anything to do with art production, existing instead more as an experiment on artistic language and on the dissemination and communication of ideas.

Take Yang Fudong, who is more of a classical artist, as an example. He does not question the means of production, because it is a means of expression. Of course, he has requirements with regard to his studio and working conditions, but these are technical issues. In fact, the scant attention he gives the production process extends to the whole system. It makes no difference to him whether his works are widely disseminated; his sole concern is with new ways of narrating his own, self-generated, image-based languages. By filtering the naked truth through his image language, Yang Fudong presents us with objects to watch and perceive. It is through the aesthetic experience of watching the brutality and detachment of Yang Fudong's language that it is revealed to us. But even harsher than this is the way in which the senses themselves become subsumed and consumed by the global art market, another act of "Made in China-Globalization."

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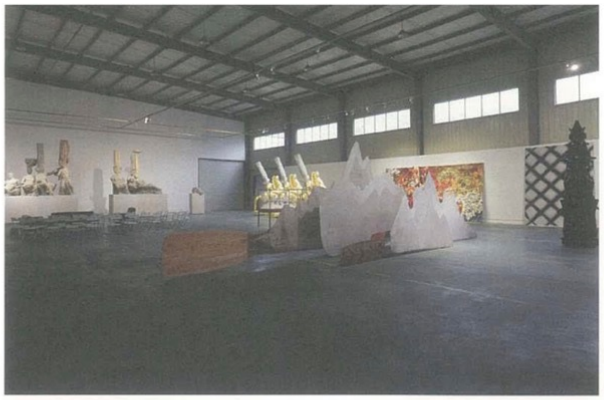

Xu Zhen Showroom, Shanghai. Courtesy of MadeIn Company, Shanghai.

Until he launched "Xu Zhen" as a brand in 2013, he seemed to place more emphasis on artistic method or linguistic experiment. Yet the re-release of the label of "Xu Zhen" reiterated his idea that on entering the marketplace, artworks were essentially commodities. In this way, he insisted that MadeIn Company was a commercial art institution with properly formulated long-term development aims and objectives, and while some charged him with dressing up art as a commercial enterprise, for Xu Zhen, business and art are not, in the first place, rivals. For him, nothing is more radical or more contemporary than acknowledging the legitimacy of business, especially when many so-called radical, anti-business practices become, in effect, the most marketable ones.

MadeIn Gallery, installation view of *Information Sculpture Highway*, September 8–October 23, 2016. Courtesy of MadeIn Gallery, Shanghai.

Business is not a factor independent of art; it is art, and that is exactly where the difference between MadeIn Company and ordinary commercial galleries lies. Thus his later ventures, such as MadeIn Gallery and the even more retail oriented PIMO Shop, are not just a means of expanding his business reach or public profile, but represent the development of possible, practical ways of operating within what he considers an integrated system. Xu Zhen has said, "In today's world, all objects on exhibition are commodities, and those on sale are art."[2] His is a capitalist mechanism—concerned not only with consumption but also with production—rooted in China but dependent on globalization. But we cannot overlook the sensory impact and cultural evocation his super-landscapes and aesthetics have on visitors. For years now, Xu Zhen has been challenging and defying knowledge and experiences we take for granted. Art is not a reflection of reality, it is a real social phenomenon and should create a sense of cultural

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chaos. This suggests an alternative reading of "Made in China," or, rather, "Made in China-Globalization." Shifting from "Made in China" to a "World Factory," his production system, including his works (or products), reflect and critique contemporary culture and politics, and hint at the mutually dependent but tense relationships between contemporary Chinese art and the world art system. This is where the fundamental difference between Western Pop Art and his work lies.

Xu Zhen, *Eternity–Tianlongshan Grottoes Bodhisattva, Winged Victory of Samothrace*, 2013, mineral-based composite, marble, steel, mineral pigments, 460 x 230 x 626 cm (pedestal not included). Courtesy of Madeln Company.

Simple, full of quirky humour, and hollow: these are typical features of Xu Zhen's works. His works also reflect the reality of Chinese culture and society, and are symptomatic of contemporary art. In his *Eternity* series, heads from iconic Chinese and Western sculptures are swapped and juxtaposed, exposing the reality of today's globalized culture, in which such entirely disparate cultures collide under the cover of a super-landscape. Come what may, production or consumption create here another form of culture. In other words, as a culture, this "production-consumption" mechanism is not just for aesthetic observation; instead, it provides us with new perspectives on reality and redefines the identities of artists and their artworks. Even so, it still exists within the confines of an art world that mirrors not-for-profit organizations flying the anti-consumer banner, yet,

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From his curating the 1999 exhibition "Post-sense Sensibility" to his teaching of "Total Art" at the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, Qiu Zhijie has consistently resorted to the systematic construction of theories, and education, including some studies on the production system. For him, the studio is not the centre of production, nor is the gallery, the museum, the biennale, or the art fair. All that truly matters are the artist's perceptions and thoughts; physical conditions or the environment should not restrict the creative process. Far from hiding his interest in money, the latter impinges on his thoughts. Arguably, his output is in the typical "Made in China-Globalization" tradition, even if he pays little heed to it. Faced with the primacy of globalization, Qiu Zhijie's decomposition, reorganization, and construction, derived from his own knowledge and cognition, aim at a better understanding of China (especially Chinese artists and intellectuals) in a globalized world. Just as he chooses ink painting for his creation, his work also carries features of Western painting. Although he uses woven bamboo, a traditional folk craft, his model and structure are still based on the idea of installation. And while he deems calligraphy to be the true contemporary art form, in practice his calligraphy operates within different parameters, relationships, and recognition structures. Within the genealogy of his language, knowledge and ideas always navigate the space between the old and the new, the Chinese and the Western. What he calls "Total Art" is in fact a philosophical set within the vision of an ideal world—"the Great Unity"—as shown by his work where both liberalism and communism end up pointing in the same direction: utopia. Ever the optimistic anarchist, he is making plans for his art well into his 60s and 70s.

There remains the question long asked by Westerners: "Where is China in Chinese art?" Those whose curiosity in identity-politics is satisfied by an assortment of symbols, labels, and social practices certainly have the right to an opinion. On the other hand, they have surely fallen into the language trap set by this question. This has given rise to Hou Hanru's "Un-Unofficial Art" and Gao Minglu's "Yi Pai," as well as the recent trend for a return to the traditional, or reconstruction of the traditional, as in the passion for ink painting, for example. Here the aim is to build a new subject matter untainted by Western thought—in opposition to it even. In fact, this is a critical reaction to "Made in China-Globalization." Although artists are trying to work within the context of traditional media or tastes, their ways of thinking have already been Westernized and globalized, something that is especially obvious to young artists like Hao Liang. Although his ink paintings demonstrate his clear identification with tradition, his visual understanding (including his readings of traditional Chinese paintings) and framing are deeply marked by colonial presuppositions of the Sinologist, the China "expert." This is so far removed from traditional Chinese aesthetics that it could be said to be opposed to it—more evidence of "Made in China-Globalization."

III

The Internet, the engine of hyper-globalization, is permeating artistic production and expression, and since the turn of the new century, artists

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Lin Ke, *Untitled*, 2015, archival inkjet print, 90 x 85 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Space, Beijing.

Miao Ying, *Is it Me You're Looking For?*, 2014, HD single-channel video, 1 min., 14 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

have been exploiting the Internet as a means of expression. Initially used as an instrument, more recently the Internet has developed its own mode of thinking or cognition, embedding itself into the way artists work and into their language. This can be seen in the works of Guan Xiao, Yu Honglei, Miao Ying, Wang Xinyi, and Lin Ke. Some of these artists have studied abroad or lived in foreign countries for periods, and their familiarity with the Western art system and its operations have allowed them to enter the system without feeling they are compromising their identity. It is arguable, at least on the level of ideas, that they are free from the influence of the "Made in China-Globalization" concept, happy to take it or leave it. But far from preventing them from being active producers, they are in fact highly attentive to modes of production.

This "Art Post-Internet" trend reveals, according to Robin Peckham, how contemporary life is influenced by messages and vocabularies in a state of constant flux in a globalized world dominated by the Internet. In particular, artists are interested in how the traditional "career path" of studio/gallery/wider world will change, and the impact this will have on their work.[6] With the Internet disrupting old certainties, social reality seems less of a factor to be considered by the artists. Of course, their practices are not totally unrelated to social change. On the contrary, they are simply the product of social turmoil, for the Internet itself is a social reality. If we have to define their production mode, "Made in e-China" might be a more accurate term than "Made in China-Globalization."

Another reason why we still use the word "make" is because since 2007 international festivals have overwhelmingly replaced the predominance of biennials and galleries. The combination of the Western financial crisis of 2008 and the continuous growth of China's economy generated massive growth in the Chinese art market and festival scene, and this in turn has influenced the way artists work. Moreover, the Internet and other media have transformed their working practices and rhythm, bringing new features to the artistic landscape for commercial players and consumers alike. Finally, as China has risen to become the second biggest economy in the world, it will no longer be a "world factory"—passively accepting globalization—but an active force, promoting global rebalancing through "The Belt and the Road" (the short name for "the Silk Road Economic Belt" and "the Maritime Silk Road"), and hinting at a new geopolitical, economic, and cultural world order. If "Made in China" or "Made in

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China-Globalization" derived from China's dependency on the globalized system under the post-Cold War pattern since 1990s, the Internet will bring changes to a current system dominated by the WTO. The concept of "Made in e-China" speaks of a rebalancing process, and new online forces such as Alibaba and Tencent are reversing the old disparities that dominated China's relationships, while also reducing identification anxieties. In this sense, "Made in E-China" is a kind of comprehensive dis-localization (or de-bentuization—see the Bentu definitions of Pierre Haski and Philip Tinari) and dis-identification, which promise an unstressed, non-alienated relationship with globalization. Thus, the true substitute for "Made in China-Globalization" may not be "Made in e-China" but "Made in Globalization (-China)": China restructured as a new protagonist.

During this process, the pressure exerted by the TPP (the US dominated Trans-Pacific Partnership) cannot be ignored, nor the possible dilemmas for China posed by "the Belt and Road." Boris Groys alerts us to another point: "Big communication and information technology corporations control the material basis of the Internet and the means of producing virtual reality: its hardware. In this way, the Internet provides us with an interesting combination of capitalist hardware and communist software. Hundreds of millions of so-called 'content producers' place their content on the Internet without receiving any compensation, with the content produced not so much by the intellectual work of generating ideas as by the manual labour of operating the keyboard. And the profits are appropriated by the corporations controlling the material means of virtual production. As such, it is not 'immaterial', but thoroughly material."[7]

This reminds us once again that we cannot neglect the operative mechanisms of the Internet, nor the logic and structure of capitalist societies. In this context, "capitalism" no longer refers to the old model, but to a trans-ideological matrix incorporating capitalism and China's socio-political society. Unable to restrain the development of capitalism, and gaining new energy from the Internet's vital force, it is lifting art production to a new "exciting point" even as it traps itself in a crisis: the so-called crisis of contemporary art?

Notes

1. Discussion between Lu Mingjun and Liu Wei, Liu Wei's studio, Beijing, January 20, 2016, unpublished.
2. Discussion between Lu Mingjun and Xu Zhen, Xu Zhen's Studio, Shanghai, July 24, 2013, unpublished.
3. Pauline J. Yao, *Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 138.
4. Su Wei, "Liu Wei and Xu Zhen's Visual Maze: The Nihilism of History?," *TANC*（艺术新闻·中文版), July 3, 2015.
5. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, trans. Lin Hongtao (Taibei: Diancang Press, 2012), 457.
6. Robin Peckham, "Post-Internet Art in Asia: A Global Internet of Art and Its Path?," trans. Liu Xi and Dai Weiping, *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art Studies* (Beijing: China Youth Press, 2014), 163–64.
7. Boris Groys, *Going Public*, trans. Su Wei et al. (Beijing: Gold Wall Press, 2012), 163–64.