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Edited by Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang

# Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China

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## Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China



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*Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang*

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## Publications

### ASIAN CITIES 8

Cover illustration: Jin Feng, *Wordless Petitions*, 2006, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 223 9

E-ISBN 978 90 4853 213 1 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789462982239

NUR 630

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# Contents

List of Figures	6
-----------------	---

Engagement with the Urban	13
---------------------------	----

Visual Arts as a Form of Cultural Activism in Contemporary China

*Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang*

## Part I Representations

1 From Sidewalk Realism to Spectral Romance	35
---	----

Yang Lina's Beijing and Beyond

*Zhen Zhang*

2 Urban History from Below	61
----------------------------	----

The Artworks of Zhang Dali, Jin Feng and Dai Guangyu

*Maurizio Marinelli*

3 The Transient City	87
----------------------	----

Urban Transformation in Chinese Contemporary Photography

*Jiang Jiehong*

4 Shadow of the Spectacular	115
-----------------------------	-----

Photographing Social Control and Inequality in Urban China

*Meiqin Wang*

5 China Dreaming	147
------------------	-----

Representing the Perfect Present, Anticipating the Rosy Future

*Stefan Landsberger*

## Part II Urban Interventions

6 Urban Insertion as Artistic Strategy	181
--	-----

The Big Tail Elephant Working Group in 1990s Guangzhou

*Nancy P. Lin*

7	Cao Fei's 'Magical Metropolises' <i>Chris Berry</i>	209
8	Relocating Further or Standing Ground? Unofficial Artists and Independent Film-makers in the Beijing Periphery <i>Judith Pernin</i>	237
9	Out of Service Migrant Workers and Public Space in Beijing <i>Elizabeth Parke</i>	261
10	Translocal Site-Responsiveness of Urban Creativity in Mainland China <i>Minna Valjakka</i>	285
	Index	317

## List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Yang Lina, <i>Old Men</i> , 1999. Courtesy of the artist.	43
Figure 1.2	Yang Lina filming in the park, ca. 2007. Courtesy of the artist.	46
Figure 1.3	Yang Lina, <i>The Loves of Lao An</i> , 2008. Courtesy of the artist.	47
Figure 1.4	Yang Lina, <i>Longing for the Rain</i> , 2013. Courtesy of the artist.	51
Figure 1.5	Yang Lina, <i>Longing for the Rain</i> , 2013. Courtesy of the artist.	53
Figure 2.1	Jin Feng, <i>A History of China's Modernisation Volumes 1 and 2</i> , 2011, rubber, marble, rice paper installation. Courtesy of the artist.	64
Figure 2.2	Jin Feng, <i>Wordless Petitions</i> , 2006, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.	65
Figure 2.3	Zhang Dali, <i>Demolition, no. 65B</i> , 1999. Courtesy of the artist.	71

Figure 2.4	Dai Guangyu, <i>Geomancy: Ink, Ice</i> , 2004/05. Courtesy of the artist.	72
Figure 2.5	Dai Guangyu, <i>The Kidnapped</i> , 2011, ink acrylic on <i>xuan</i> paper. Courtesy of the artist.	74
Figure 2.6	Zhang Dali, <i>Demolition, no. 25</i> , 1998. Courtesy of the artist.	75
Figure 3.1	Rong Rong, <i>Liulituan, no. 8</i> , 2003. Courtesy of the artist.	96
Figure 3.2	Zhang Dali, <i>Demolition, no. 125a</i> , 1998. Courtesy of the artist.	98
Figure 3.3	Zhuang Hui and Dan'er, <i>Yumen: Laojun Temple Oilfield</i> , 2006-2009. Courtesy of the artists.	99
Figure 3.4	Wang Qingsong, <i>Skyscraper, no. 2</i> , 2008. Courtesy of the artist.	101
Figure 3.5	Miao Xiaochun, <i>Surplus</i> , 2009. Courtesy of the artist.	102
Figure 3.6	Jiang Pengyi, <i>All Back to Dust, no. 2</i> , 2006. Courtesy of the artist.	105
Figure 3.7	Chen Shaoxiong, <i>Streetscape I, 1997-1998</i> . Courtesy of the artist.	106
Figure 3.8	Zhang Peili, <i>The Entryway of Hangzhou Parterre One Year Apart</i> , 2000-2001. Courtesy of the artist.	109
Figure 4.1	Ni Weihua, <i>Keywords – Chinese Dream: Shanghai Jiangdong Road, June 7, 2015</i> , 2015. Courtesy of the artist.	119
Figure 4.2	Ni Weihua, <i>Keywords – Development: Shanghai Zhongshan Road East No. 1, December 15, 1998</i> , 1998. Courtesy of the artist.	121
Figure 4.3	Top: Ni Weihua, <i>Keywords – Development: Shanghai Xin Kezhan, May 23, 1999</i> , 1999; Bottom: Ni Weihua, <i>Keywords – Development: Qingdao Shangdong Road, Shangdong, October 15, 2003</i> , 2003. Courtesy of the artist.	122
Figure 4.4	Top: Ni Weihua, <i>Keywords – Harmony: Shanghai Zhouzhugong Road, April 10, 2008</i> , 2008; Bottom: Ni Weihua, <i>Keywords – Harmony: Hangzhou Jiefang Road</i> , 14 September 2008. Courtesy of the artist.	127
Figure 4.5	Selected pieces from Ni Weihua's <i>Keywords – Chinese Dream</i> series, 2013-2015. Courtesy of the artist.	129
Figure 4.6	Ni Weihua, <i>Landscape Wall – Shanghai Puming Road, 11:46, September 4, 2013</i> , 2013. Courtesy of the artist.	132
Figure 4.7	Ni Weihua, <i>Landscape Wall – Shanghai Hengfeng Road, 15:00-15:30, April 18, 2009</i> , 2009. Courtesy of the artist.	134



- Figure 4.8 Top: Ni Weihua, *Landscape Wall – Shanghai Songhu Road, 10:45, April 4, 2013*, 2013; Bottom: Ni Weihua, *Landscape Wall – Shanghai Langao Road, 16:00-16:30, November 26, 2009*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist. 136
- Figure 5.1 Designer unknown. Title: *Tong yige shijie tong yige mengxiang* (One world, one dream). Publisher: Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad. Date of publication: July 2008, ISBN: 978-7-80716-715-0. Nr. of copies printed: 200,000. Available online: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-07/18/content\\_8570590.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-07/18/content_8570590.htm) 156
- Figure 5.2 Designer unknown. Title: *Tong yige shijie tong yige mengxiang* (One world, one dream). Publisher: Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad. Date of publication: July 2008, ISBN: 978-7-80716-715-0. Nr. of copies printed: 300,000. Available online: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-07/18/content\\_8570590\\_1.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-07/18/content_8570590_1.htm). 157
- Figure 5.3 Designer unknown. Title: *Geng kuai geng gao geng qiang* (Citius – Altius – Fortius). Publisher: Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad. Date of publication: 2008. Print nr.: 780716.36. Available online: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-07/18/content\\_8570590\\_2.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-07/18/content_8570590_2.htm) 159
- Figure 5.4 Designer: Public Service Advertising Art Committee; figurine designed by Lin Gang. Title: *Zhongguo meng – wode meng* (The Chinese Dream – my dream). Publisher: China Internet Television Station. Date of publication: 2013. No print number. Available on website of the Civilization Office under the CCP Central Committee: [http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf\\_294/zggygg/pml/zgmxl/201309/t20130930\\_1501267.shtml](http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf_294/zggygg/pml/zgmxl/201309/t20130930_1501267.shtml) 167
- Figure 5.5 Designer: Public Service Advertising Art Committee; image designed by Liu Zhigui. Title: *Zhonghua meide – Xiao* (Chinese virtue – filial piety). Publisher: China Internet Television Station. Date of publication: 2013. No print number. Available online on website of the Civilization Office under the CCP Central Committee [http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf\\_294/zggygg/pml/ctmdxl/201309/t20130929\\_1500525.shtml](http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf_294/zggygg/pml/ctmdxl/201309/t20130929_1500525.shtml) 169

- Figure 5.6 Designer: Public Service Advertising Art Committee; image designed by Ren Mingzhao. Title: *Ren jing lao ji de fu* (The people honour the old for their own happiness). Publisher: China Internet Television Station. Date of publication: 2013. No print number. Available online on website of the Civilization Office under the CCP Central Committee [http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf\\_294/zggygg/pml/tmdxl/201309/t20130929\\_1500644.shtml](http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf_294/zggygg/pml/tmdxl/201309/t20130929_1500644.shtml) 172
- Figure 6.1 Lin Yilin, *Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road*, 1995, performance, 90 min, Guangzhou. Courtesy of the artist. 182
- Figure 6.2 A group meeting in 1993, Guangzhou. From left to right: Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, Xu Tan and Lin Yilin. Courtesy of Lin Yilin. 185
- Figure 6.3 Lin Yilin, *Standard Series of Ideal Residence*, 1991, installation, brick, iron, wood. Courtesy of the artist. 187
- Figure 6.4 Xu Tan, *The Alteration and Extension of Sanyu Road No. 14*, 1994, installation, photographs, floor plan, video, text, Guangzhou. Courtesy of the artist. 189
- Figure 6.5 Detail of Xu Tan, *The Alteration and Extension of Sanyu Road No. 14*, 1994. Courtesy of the artist. 189
- Figure 6.6 Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape I*, 1997-1998, photograph, photo collage, Guangzhou. Courtesy of the artist. 193
- Figure 6.7 Liang Juhui, *One Hour Game*, 1996, installation and performance, white cloth, chair, television, video game, Guangzhou. Courtesy of Liang Juhui Memorial of Libreria Borges Institut d'Art Contemporain. 197
- Figure 6.8 From left to right: detail of Figure 6.4 showing Xu Tan; detail of Figure 6.7 showing Liang Juhui; and photograph of Chen Shaoxiong holding *Streetscape II*, 1997-1998. Courtesy of Luo Qingmin, spouse of Chen Shaoxiong. 202
- Figure 7.1 Cao Fei, *Hip Hop Guangzhou*, 2003, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015. 215
- Figure 7.2 Moonwalking in Cao Fei's *Whose Utopia*, 2006, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015. 216
- Figure 7.3 Cao Fei, *RMB City*, 2007 onwards, moving image. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015. 219

Figure 7.4	'My Future Is Not a Dream,' Cao Fei, <i>Whose Utopia</i> , 2006, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015.	223
Figure 7.5	The zombies in Cao Fei's <i>Haze and Fog</i> , 2013, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015.	226
Figure 7.6	Dancing in the factory in Cao Fei's <i>Whose Utopia</i> , 2006, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015.	227
Figure 7.7	Bouncing watermelons in Cao Fei's <i>Haze and Fog</i> , 2013, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015.	230
Figure 7.8	Encountering the peacock in Cao Fei's <i>Haze and Fog</i> , 2013, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015.	230
Figure 7.9	Yoga in high heels in Cao Fei's <i>Haze and Fog</i> , 2013, video. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space, 2015.	231
Figure 8.1	Candlelight vigil staged by Songzhuang artists to demand the release of the BIFF organizers. Wang Wo, <i>A Filmless Festival</i> , 2015, screenshot. Courtesy of the artist.	253
Figure 8.2	Online performance-protest for the closing ceremony of the BIFF. Screenshots from WeChat edited for Wang Wo's <i>A Filmless Festival</i> . Courtesy of the artist.	255
Figure 9.1	The phone numbers function as ads for counterfeit documents like driver's licences, diplomas or safety certifications. Note the accompanying characters <i>banzheng</i> . Beijing, 2011. Photograph by the author.	263
Figure 9.2	Hoarding in Dongcheng district, note the slogan 'Be a civilized urbanite' with the two characters <i>wen</i> and <i>ming</i> in the calligraphic font. Beijing, 2012. Photograph by the author.	266
Figure 9.3	Billboard in Chaoyang District, near 798 Art District with phone number defacements. Beijing, 2012. Photograph by the author.	270
Figure 9.4	Defacements of the defacement. Beijing, 2011. Photograph by the author.	272
Figure 9.5	<i>Banzheng</i> , Beijing, 2011. Photograph by the author.	276
Figure 10.1	Three of the eight <i>Urban Carpets</i> , 2009. Courtesy of <i>Instant Hutong</i> .	287
Figure 10.2	Urban creativity as an umbrella concept to include artistic and creative practices in urban public space. Copyright by the author.	289

Figure 10.3	Urban creativity as an organic process of translocal site-responsiveness: the multilayered interactions between the three main variables, namely, forms of agency; manifestations; and site, place, and space (as multilevel physical and conceptual contexts); and their varying features. Copyright by the author.	291
Figure 10.4	A local person defending Kaid Ashton's right to put up a photograph in Guangzhou and the result of the negotiation. Courtesy of the artist.	301
Figure 10.5	Family choosing a photograph for their house in Beijing and the outcome. Courtesy of the artist.	302
Figure 10.6	Julien Malland's partially demolished painting, Shanghai, September 2015. Photograph by the author.	304
Figure 10.7	Julien Malland's painting in Xinyi village, September 2015. Photograph by the author.	307
Figure 10.8	Julien Malland and Cao Xiuwen, a sleeping girl in Xingta village, September 2015. Photograph by the author.	308



# Engagement with the Urban

## Visual Arts as a Form of Cultural Activism in Contemporary China

*Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang*

### Abstract

The dynamic interrelations between visual arts and urbanization in contemporary Mainland China bring forward unseen representations and urban interventions. We argue that innovative artistic and creative practices initiated by various stakeholders not only raise critical awareness on socio-political issues of Chinese urbanization but also actively reshape the urban living spaces through the formation of new collaborations, agencies, aesthetics and cultural production sites. All of these facilitate diverse forms of cultural activism as they challenge the dominant ways of interpreting social changes and encourage civic participation in the production of alternative meanings in and of the city. Their significance lies in their potential to question current values and power structures as well as to foster new subjectivities for disparate individuals and social groups.

**Keywords:** visual arts, urbanization, representations, urban interventions, cultural activism, artistic and creative practices

In 2008, a small retail shop on *Xiaojing chang* alley in Beijing was transformed into an open platform and artist residence entitled *HomeShop* (家作坊). The project was initiated by Elaine W. Ho (何穎雅, b. 1977) in collaboration with Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga (b. 1979) and Ouyang Xiao (欧阳潇, b. 1983). The small space was the front part of Ho's own home, which was converted into a semi-public place for the neighbourhood. Because of the growing interest in the activities and the need for more physical space, *HomeShop* relocated to *Jiaodaokou Beiertiao* alley two years later and gradually the number of core members expanded to eight. Until 2013 when the lease of the second space ended, *HomeShop* engaged with issues of urban space, the alternation between private and public domains, the

village-in-city dynamics, institutional ecology and the possibilities for autonomous living.<sup>1</sup>

The mutually resonating interests among members of *HomeShop* to bring together daily life, work and community, inspired diversified methods and projects such as performances, workshops, neighbourhood parties, installations, communal events, providing services, and facilitating interventions in public space. One of the most successful projects in terms of mass participation were the four *WaoBao!* exchange events, which explored the themes of waste, recycling, cyclicity, and alternative economies, through lectures, workshops and other activities. By broadening up the horizons for the neighbourhood residents, *HomeShop* investigated the interchangeability of private and public spaces, as well as the prevailing economic and artistic production models. In so doing, the artists (un)consciously unleashed the power of cultural activism by encouraging artistic and creative practices among various social groups who share the city as their home and wish to enhance its liveability. This edited volume examines the potential of innovative strategies in representations and urban interventions to engage with people, to form new relationships and subjectivities, and to provide new perceptions and imageries for envisioning one's life in the contemporary Chinese city. Although focusing on new practices, we want to emphasize that the main aim is to provide multifaceted perspectives on the sociocultural significance of innovative visual art practice rather than sheer novelty.

## Cultural Activism as a Possibility for Civil Society

*HomeShop* is a complex but illuminating example of the rise in cultural activism among artists, art communities and ordinary citizens. They conceive artistic and creative practices that not only raise critical awareness on social injustices, but also actively reshape urban living spaces and expand the civic sphere. Here, we are talking about the interface between visual arts and urbanization in Mainland China.<sup>2</sup> The process of urbanization and the consequent social transformation has provided a fertile ground for innovations

1 Elaine W. Ho, email communication to the authors, 16 March 2016; Michael Eddy and Twist Qu, video call interview with authors, 16 March 2016; see also the *HomeShop* website (2016), <http://www.homeshop.org.cn/>, accessed 20 February 2016.

2 In some chapters of this book, authors use China instead of Mainland China, but the two terms refer to the same geopolitical concept.

in visual arts and cultural production, contributing to the emergence of a new urban aesthetics. In turn, the novel forms of expression in these fields complicate and contest the mainstream representations of state-led urbanization and open up alternative readings and contingencies for participation in urban life. In Robin Visser's (2010: 4, 28, 174) words, the rise of the new urban aesthetics functions as a new realm to envision and experience the city in Mainland China, and contributes to the growth of new forms of civic agency. In addition, we believe that the new urban aesthetics manifested in visual arts, and especially in films, photography, installations and interventionist projects, brings forward multiple views of urban life through innovative representations of people, urban space and their interconnections.

Indeed, critical artistic and creative examinations of the interfaces between urbanization, society, culture, arts and people in Chinese cities have produced a great variety of new visual forms and agencies. The new artistic and creative practices addressed in this volume are not only timely responses to socio-political issues regarding Chinese urbanization, but they also actively reshape the urban environment through the formation of innovative collaborations, agencies, aesthetics and cultural production sites. All these facilitate various forms of cultural activism as they inevitably challenge the dominant ways of interpreting social changes and encourage civic participation in the production of alternative meanings in the city. Their significance lies in their potential to question established values and power structures as well as to foster new subjectivities for disparate individuals and social groups.

In their discussion on the politics of contemporary photography, Szeman and Whiteman (2009: 554) argue that photography renders the dominance of global capitalism visible and this visibility 'generates knowledge of a kind that only an image can manage to do.' They further relate the importance of contemporary photography to 'its ability to both use and refuse older aesthetic categories and determinations' and to 'provide conceptual maps we would not otherwise have' (ibid.). We argue that their conceptualization of the power of photography is equally meaningful when extended to the innovative visual art practices discussed in this volume. This understanding of the power of visual arts resonates with Yomi Braester's (2010: 13) insight that films not only take inspiration from the tangible and intangible preconditions of the city but, because they interact with political decisions and architectural plans, films also 'forge an urban contract and create the material city and its ideological constructs.' Similar awareness of such an interdependence is also relevant to other forms of visual art practice. We believe that the dynamic interrelations between the visual arts and the



(re)making of urban space driven by urbanization and the accompanying socio-political implications deserve continuous scholarly attention. Furthermore, the ever-changing circumstances and the new manifestations and agencies of visual arts require more multiple-perspective research. This is the challenge to which this edited volume aims to respond.

This anthology focuses on investigating visual arts of historical value and groundbreaking approaches in relation to urbanization. The full potential of these innovative forms to render visible humanistic concerns and to contribute to a more viable civil society in a habitually authoritative regime has not yet been fully acknowledged. Worldwide, new forms of artistic and creative practice have emerged to challenge the prevailing government-led policies that implement art and creativity in cities in the name of economic or ideological benefits. We believe that in-depth analysis of visual arts and especially their interconnectedness with urban transformations can provide deeper understanding on urbanization and its impact on social fabric, not only in Mainland China but also in other cities in Asia.

The significance of the interrelations between visual arts and the city is already recognized in previous studies and art exhibitions, but calls for continuous critical analysis. For example, understanding the urban consciousness emerging among film-makers in the face of urbanization (Zhang 2007) will allow us to gain essential insights in the 'urban contract' between films and the city (Braester 2010). The ability of visual arts to provide new imaginative perspectives and break through the notion of the spectacle (De Kloet and Scheen 2013) complements Visser's (2010) insights on new aspects of the city. A recent investigation of artists' provocative responses to issues of urbanization (Wang 2016) proposes a fundamental shift in the philosophical and aesthetic foundations of Chinese art. As Wu Hung (2014: 11) aptly maintains, in contemporary Chinese art a "pattern of rupture" caused by political intrusions' results in 'a series of gaps as a general historical and psychological condition for artistic and intellectual creativity.' The unseen levels of urbanization in the twenty-first century have evidently brought about even more ruptures that constitute new historical and psychological conditions shaping the directions of visual arts.

Given that urbanization has opened up new ways in the production, dissemination, evaluation, usage and marketing of visual arts (Braester 2010; Visser 2010; Wang 2016; Wang and Valjakka 2015), the focus on acknowledged forms of contemporary art is not sufficient to explain the variety of artistic and creative activities reshaping the perceptions of and participation with cities in Mainland China today. With this anthology, we therefore wish to extend scholarship into the realm of cultural activism in urban China to

the perspectives of representations and urban interventions, themes not yet touched upon or explored adequately in previous studies. Yet the cultural activism discussed here is not to be mistaken for the intellectual dissident movement with a strong sense of antagonism or an openly anti-authoritarian attitude. Instead, we designate cultural activism as different forms of artistic and creative practice that, through varied methods, such as specific aesthetics, social engagement, and intervention, aim to raise public awareness, foster alternative subjectivities, reclaim civil rights, and encourage collaboration at the grassroots level. It is therefore a kind of activism that functions to challenge the established perceptions of urban life and urban development (Ranci re 2009: 82; Buser et al. 2013: 607). Cultural activism is certainly not a new phenomenon in China. We can trace back its precedents in the *New Culture Movement* since the 1910s (Schwarcz 1986; Yeh 1994; Weston 1998; Fung 2010: 27-58; Pickowicz 2016), the *Modern Woodcut Movement* from the 1920s onwards (Tang 2008), and street theatre in the 1930s (Tang 2016), among others. Yet, it is the contemporary manifestations that is our focus in this study.

The cultural activism we attribute to the artistic and creative practices does not necessarily manifest itself in a manner similar to open political and reformist agendas. Meanwhile, it also assumes different forms from those developed and taking place today in Euro-American contexts since it responds to specific circumstances and given restrictions under a powerful and authoritative regime. Cultural activism in contemporary China might appear to have more subtle methods and strategies instead of directly confrontational tactics, such as occupying the public space, cultural jamming, and flash mobs that are popular in many other countries (see e.g. Fox and Starn 1997; Firat and Kuryel 2010; Buser et al. 2013). However, given China's long intellectual tradition of inventing new artistic styles and themes to voice social protest and political discontent (see e.g. Murck 2000), subtlety should be understood as a meaningful and viable choice for contemporary artists to resist state-sanctioned urban ideology and images. Our perception of cultural activism in Mainland China today echoes with the idea of the 'cultivation of shared aesthetics of protest' (Buser et al. 2013: 606), but extends beyond on-site activism and shared perceptions of exclusion to also address more nuanced reflections in visual arts. A broader understanding of 'a mutual enthusiasm for creative practice as a form of resistance' (Buser et al. 2013: 607) allows us to explore the activist potential of various new forms of representation and urban intervention initiated by artists and social groups outside of the official system.

In their study of China's independent documentary culture, Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel (2010: 148) argue that independent film-makers' contribution

should be examined not in their 'direct critiques of political or economic power but rather [as] deeper critiques of the ideologies and values that subtend this power.' This approach is of particular significance in Mainland China, where urban space is mainly dominated by the powerful state and wealthy corporations, or by what some refer to as 'state capitalism' (Wen 2004; Schweinberger 2014; Keith et al. 2014). Nonetheless, despite fluctuating levels of censorship and the official monitoring of art spaces, uneven urbanization has resulted in plenty of new methods, strategies, aesthetic forms, sites and agencies in the twenty-first century that lead to the gradual expansion of civil society in the country. The example of *HomeShop* that opened this introduction is a representative of these new possibilities, born at the nexus of urbanization, globalization and the cultural activism of artists, citizens, film-makers, designers and other creative workers in Mainland China. The artistic and creative practices discussed in this anthology in the contributions of the ten scholars reflect their various academic backgrounds, such as art history, cinema, literature, visual culture and Sinology. They will further illuminate how the unrivalled scale and speed of urbanization has actually propelled active responses in all spheres of visual arts, including the contribution of city officials responsible for authorizing visuality in the cities.

### **Global Urban Millennium and Visual Arts in Chinese Cities**

As predicted, the world has entered into the Urban Millennium (United Nations 2001) and by 2014, 53.4 per cent of the world's total population was living in the cities (WDB 2016). Undoubtedly, Chinese urbanization has contributed significantly to this global tendency. The country has been urbanizing its rural population at a speed unparalleled in human history, with an annual increase of 18.2 million in the 1990s and 23 million since the 2000s (Zhang 2011: 592; Li 2012: 43). As a result, in 2011, China's urban population (690.79 million) surpassed its rural counterpart (656.56 million) for the first time in history, and China announced its official entry into the urban era (Pan and Wei 2012: 2-3). Yet importantly, urbanization is not just about the increase of urban population. As argued by McGee and others (McGee et al. 2007: 4-5), Chinese urbanization is 'an integral part of the general processes of development, political, social and economic change' and as such it is actually the production of urban space and the process of reorganizing the nation. Indeed, urban development is identified as the major force of revolutionary social transformations in contemporary China (Hsing 2010; Wu 2007; Campanella 2008).

The 'urban' has assumed a paramount role in the socioeconomic and cultural developments in China since the 1990s because urbanization has been a conscious strategy and a method for nation-building and modernization. Chinese urbanization is characterized by the rise of the city and megacities as the paragons of social development. In the shadow of the rapidly growing cities, many critical visual artists have understandably adopted the city and the urban space as a major focus of their attention – whether as a physical location with tangible structures and forms as or a lived experience that involves all kinds of processes and interactions between people and their living environment. Their interest in examining how urban space is managed by officials but also modified, experienced, and reclaimed by its residents attests to the significant role the city has in determining the life quality and aspirations for the majority of citizens.

The growth of Chinese cities and the rising importance of urban space in contemporary Chinese cultural production have unfolded in conjunction with globalization. Evidently, the forces of globalization have become a major drive for the production of urban space in China since the 1990s (McGee et al. 2007: 3). Globalization, however, does not simply result in 'homogenization' but rather in 'global production of locality' (Appadurai 1996: 188-199). Localized processes are taking place in city planning, cultural and creative industries (CCI), architecture, visual arts, and other related fields. As Fulong Wu (2007: 8) advocates, attention should be paid to 'how globalization can be imagined, pursued and exploited' in city-making practices in China. Drawing upon Lefebvre's (1991) concept of urban revolution, Wu maintains that the urban space has become a critical element for the reconceptualization of the city in a global context. We believe that visual arts, either as visual representations or in creating new forms of interventions in urban space, accentuate the growing interdependence between the arts and the city, which has become a defining characteristic of contemporary cities in the age of global urbanism.

Another trend that has further connected visual arts to Chinese cities is the global rise of cultural and creative industries (CCI), identified by Richard Florida (2002) to be instrumental for improving the competitive edge of the cities. Although Florida's perceptions have attracted criticism and the simple import of CCI policies from one context to another can be problematic (Pratt 2009: 19), the Chinese central government has enthusiastically embraced CCI and various local governments have invested generously in establishing 'cultural creative clusters' in their cities during the past decade (O'Connor and Gu 2006; Keane 2007, 2009; De Kloet 2013). The position and use of visual arts has been more or less instrumentalized by municipal governments,

often in collaboration with the private sector, establishing varied art spaces, events and institutions for artists to produce and distribute their works within CCI projects (Wang 2010). This has led to 'artistic urbanization' as a spatial strategy for local governments to control cultural production and benefit from redevelopment also in urban peripheries (Ren and Sun 2012).

The keen interest of visual artists to explore the intricate interrelations between urbanization and living environments can be traced back to the 1990s when some pioneering artists explored a variety of themes and methods in order to renegotiate, interact with, and reclaim the urban space. Some adopted documentary as a new method in visual arts and addressed the poignant issue of (in)visibility of the socially underprivileged urbanites and their living environment amid the chaos of urban demolition and reconstruction. From the perspectives of different groups and individual urbanites, these artists illuminated dislocation and alienation in and from the city, caused by both physical and sociocultural fragmentations related to the process of endless urban renewal.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, many more artists turned to investigate issues such as history, memory, and identity, fractured by rampant Chinese urbanization. Their artistic examination tended to oscillate between documenting and directly engaging with the physical site through photography, painting, cleaning, chiselling, rubbing, writing, performance and creating installations.<sup>3</sup> Besides demolition sites, cities provide a multitude of spaces to work with: from nationally important sites such as Tiananmen Square to newly expanded boulevards, shopping malls, skyscrapers and the whole city itself with its unfathomed growth. How individual urbanites can survive and maintain their humanity in the midst of cities' ever-intensive competition is a question that many of these artists are asking. Indeed, in the age of global urbanism, many forms of visual art have come to represent the voices of urbanites wanting to renegotiate the struggles of everyday life and to formulate a more viable living environment. Various artistic and creative practices serve as a testimony of social discontent towards the new urbanized circumstances, while the manner in which visual art is produced also engages with broader cultural conditions and values beyond the internal logic of art making as a profession in itself.

Urban development in China has been carried out in an authoritative fashion that prioritizes the GDP growth over the improvement of human living conditions, and benefits the political and economic elites at the expense of the majority of the people. Hence, it is no coincidence that

3 For more detailed analysis on ruins in Chinese visual culture, see Wu (2012).

many visual artists and other practitioners have adopted a critical attitude towards urbanization and seek creative ways to challenge its disruptive by-products. They aim to expose major defects of China's urban and economic development, which breed corruption, injustice and obsession with material success. Although artists, practitioners and urbanites are not trained urban planners, able to design urban development, their intuitive responses to and critique of the (re)formation of urban landscapes says much about the living circumstances of these spaces. Accordingly, their critical representations and creative interventions in various urban situations are valuable forms of cultural activism and demand continuous study.

## **Representations and Urban Interventions**

The above-mentioned dynamic interrelation between visual arts and urbanization makes art historical research, analysis and documentation of the changes in visual arts essential, if we wish to understand the speed, scale and consequences of urban transformation in Mainland China. This understanding in turn enables us to acknowledge the active role of visual arts in urban life. The following chapters not only address their most recent manifestations, but also provide in-depth historical research on artistic and creative practices, such as the Big Tail Elephant Working Group (大尾象工作组) of the 1990s, so that we can better evaluate the innovative nature of the new possibilities opening up in the twenty-first century. More importantly, we aim to build up and accumulate knowledge of the new visual forms and their ephemerality through critical and contextual analyses.

The various forms of representation and urban intervention discussed in the following chapters not only examine how the processes of globalization and urbanization are interrelated, but also participate in the reconstruction of socio-spatial relationships and the reconceptualization of urban space at local and national levels. They have acquired agency and power to reconstruct our understanding of Chinese cities, which have become loci of intensive negotiations and conflicts. The spectacular rise of world-class Chinese cities, the striking presence of underprivileged social groups, such as the urban poor and migrant workers, and the alarming social and spatial stratifications, are prominent themes in visual arts in China. More importantly, these phenomena have also propelled a variety of people, including artists, film-makers, art students, graffiti writers, street artists and citizens, among others, to invent new artistic and creative practices to initiate social transformations.

Proceeding from these premises the following chapters provide in-depth analyses of a wide range of artworks, documentary films, and other related projects and activities from recent years that represent a range of innovative approaches, critical reflections, and creative interventions with urban spaces. Many topics discussed in this anthology have remained underexplored, such as the DV turn in documentary films and female agency of Yang Lina (杨荔纳, b. 1972), the early practices of the Big Tail Elephant Working Group, photography by Jin Feng (金锋, b. 1962) and by Ni Weihua (倪卫华, b. 1962), documentary films and film festivals as a form of resilience, migrant presence through *banzheng*, and the agency of foreign artists and practitioners. By bringing forward the forms of aesthetics, agencies, collaborations, and sites that have emerged only in recent years, it is our intention to stimulate wider scholarly interest in the significance of these artistic and creative investigations of the urban space.

As mentioned earlier, instead of focusing only on what is new in visual arts, we endeavour to provide new perspectives on the importance of visual art practices and to emphasize the sociocultural significance of meaningful innovations in the field. Thus, although the emergence of independent documentary films already became a wider phenomenon in the 1990s, we still include two chapters exploring this topic from very different angles and cases, indicating the long-lasting value of this movement. Although some artists, such as Zhang Dali (张大力, b. 1963) and Cao Fei (曹斐, b. 1978), have been studied extensively, authors identify the continuous relevance of their artistic efforts for understanding the urban transformation of China from the perspectives of representations and urban interventions, respectively.

Despite the distinctive approaches in different case studies, most contributors share the strong belief in empirical research and contextual visual analysis as an effective method for understanding the characteristics of visual arts production and its interactions with the socio-political context in the Chinese urban setting. Even though ethnographic methods have not yet gained prominent recognition in visual art studies, site observations and interviews with artists, participants and audience members provide novel and invaluable information, especially in the case of socially engaged (art) projects. For theoretical convenience, the anthology consists of two parts, although many of the questions and analyses in the chapters resonate with each other in multiple ways within and between the two sections.

Part 1, *Representations*, mainly sheds light on questions addressing the ways in which visual arts have been inspired to respond to urban changes with new methods, strategies, styles, forms and subject matters. The five chapters included in this section explore how the transformations of the

urban spaces, the powerful presence of the state ideologies, and the (in)visibility of the socially underprivileged contribute to the discourse of visual representation and become the content of art making. They examine how individual artists contemplate and contest these phenomena through films, installation works, performance, photographs, and multimedia projects. These chapters also make clear that visual arts, or aesthetic products, have the power to make the invisible visible and to make previously silenced voices heard, either through the exercise of political power or the marginalization of certain social groups (Agamben 2000; Ten Bos 2005; Rancière 2009). In other words, visual representations created in response to China's massive and more often than not uneven urban transformations provide a space for people to pause and reflect on the hectic speed of urbanization and the impact it has on the social fabric, nature and urban infrastructure, and human lives.

Chapter 1 by Zhen Zhang delineates how the independent film-maker Yang Lina has employed DV to document the rapidly changing urban landscape and social fabric in Beijing, while developing distinctive artistic languages as she attends to her subjects with compassionate camera and gendered persona. Zhang argues that Yang's work has contributed to the sudden DV turn in the New Documentary Movement in China. Analysing several film works, the author traces Yang's career and examines how she re-embeds the sidewalk *xianchang* documentary aesthetic within a 'spectral realism' that anatomizes contemporary Chinese urban life through filming the daily routines of a group of old men, the social dance performed by retirees, and the spiritual loss and 'paranormal' erotic longing of the new middle class.

In Chapter 2, Maurizio Marinelli continues the quest of exploring how artistic representations bring visibility to the marginalized by closely reading the works of Zhang Dali, Jin Feng and Dai Guangyu (戴光郁, b. 1955) that he believes to be producing 'history from below' and contrasting the official mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Following Jacques Rancière's insights, Marinelli shows how the artists are enacting a total revolution of the senses by making 'heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals' (Rancière 2009: 25). In particular, he argues that Zhang Dali's artwork both aestheticizes the 'non-urban subjects' and politicizes them, helping to construct and offer to the spectators a counter-narrative vis-à-vis a hegemonic discourse of exclusivity and invisibility.

With Chapter 3, Jiang Jiehong leads us to the broad picture of new aesthetic strategies invented by artists with their photographic works in response to an increasingly transitory urban living environment. Jiang argues that the incessant changes have shaped a moving reality beyond the normal and tangible environment of daily life. In this context, photography becomes a unique



instrument for capturing, interpreting and imagining the overwhelming pace and extent of change in contemporary China. Analysing the works by eleven artists from different age groups and geographical origins, the author associates artistic reflections on China's urban development with the distinctive role photography has played in this unprecedented era of social, ideological and cultural transformation.

The possibilities of photography to call into question the spectacular urban transformation are further explored in Chapter 4, where Meiqin Wang focuses on Ni Weihua's critical response to the saturation of officially sanctioned visual presentations for both political and commercial purposes in urban public spaces. Wang argues that advertisements have assumed a commanding role in urban China, a phenomenon captured in Ni's conceptual photographic series of street billboards in Shanghai and other cities. Analysing Ni's work in relation to the promulgation of official slogans, the penetration of the spectacle of consumerism in Chinese cities, and the rising social inequality, Wang contends that Ni advances a critical visualization that simultaneously documents and deconstructs China's official portrayal of economic development and urbanism.

Providing an essential counter-perspective to the bottom-up aesthetics discussed in the other chapters, Stefan Landsberger explores the official utilization of visual arts for moral education purposes in Chapter 5. Landsberger argues that as China has developed into a relatively well-off and increasingly urbanized nation, with a growing number of middle-class consumers, educating the people has become an increasingly urgent task for the state as well as to concerned intellectuals who see the moral education of the people as a major task of the society. Focusing on official posters, he illuminates that visual exhortations in public spaces are dominated by imagery of dreaming about a perfect present and the rosy future of China, and tend to follow commercial advertising campaign formula against the background of a society that has become increasingly urbanized and media literate.

Part 2, *Urban Interventions*, explores the ways of which artistic and creative practices are reshaping the city and redefining the everyday experience of urban living. Especially since the 1990s, artistic engagement with everyday life and urban issues has become a prominent phenomenon worldwide. 'Interventions' as a broad concept of activities created mainly by artists to disrupt the physical public space and/or discourses of it in the public sphere has gained growing attention both in academic and in popular literature on art (Chavoya 2000; Pinder 2008; Klanten and Hübner 2010). Aspiring to bridge art research and urban studies, we focus on the transformative power that 'urban interventions' as individual or collective activities have in and

for the city. We understand ‘urban interventions’ as artistic and creative practices emerging in urban public or semi-public space, with or without authorization, by varied forms of agencies, including artists, graffiti writers, urbanites, designers, film-makers, organizations, and other institutions. Despite their multifaceted approaches in tangible and intangible forms, what they have in common is the keen interest to investigate the current understanding of ‘urban’ and the aim of inverting representations, power relations and value structures underlying the urban space itself.

From alternative art spaces to one-time, ephemeral experiments, the examples discussed in the five chapters reveal how varied practices provide innovative platforms and discursive sites for citizens from different social backgrounds to engage, exchange and share. In tandem with discursive sites, some alternative artistic and creative practices support the emergence of new subjectivities and new forms of civic participation. In a sense, they remind us of sociologist Manuel Castells’ (2008: 78) call that the growth of the global civil society depends on spaces ‘where people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society.’ Cases examined in this section demonstrate the rising awareness and multifaceted use of the civic sphere in China, however small at the moment, through various methods of urban intervention. We therefore posit that visual arts and especially the innovative practices engaging with the public in Chinese urban space are also reshaping the country’s social fabric and opening up possibilities for new subjectivities to emerge. In so doing, they contribute to cultural activism that potentially enables new forms of civic engagement to be cultivated despite the watchful eyes of the state.

Chapter 6 by Nancy P. Lin brings forward the groundbreaking practices of the Big Tail Elephant Working Group, and its core members, Lin Yilin (林一林, b. 1964), Chen Shaoxiong (陈劭雄, 1962-2016), Liang Juhui (梁钜辉, 1959-2006), and Xu Tan (徐坦, b. 1957), in relation to the changing social, economic, and physical terrain. Lin posits that by choosing the city’s urban spaces as the subject, site, and raw material for their artwork, these artists operated through methods of ‘urban insertion.’ Rather than antagonism or confrontation, ‘urban insertion’ seeks to locate small gaps of opportunity within the existing order of the city. This method allows them to both blend into and add something new to the existing matrix. As a result, the artistic engagement with the city opened up new possibilities and sites for contemporary art, transforming the city into an important centre of experimental art activity.

In Chapter 7, Chris Berry extends the analysis of new possibilities of art to the work of Cao Fei and to how her moving image works invite collaboration

and participation from urbanites. Through novel practices Cao Fei provides innovative envisionings of the city. By investigating urbanites' everyday lives and dreams, she renders their voices to be heard in urban spaces that are no longer shaped by socialism but by globalization and neo-liberal capitalism. Berry examines the interactive negotiation processes of Cao Fei's art in relation to urbanization through four hermeneutic frameworks, including heterotopic imagination, participatory and collaborative art, re-enchantment, and gestuality. He posits that through her works, Cao Fei has created 'magical metropolises' and given the audience opportunities to rehearse alternative urban possibilities.

Chapter 8 by Judith Pernin deepens the examination of the interrelations between moving images and urbanization to an investigation of independent documentary films. She analyses how unofficial artists and independent film-makers create a symbiosis of performance and documentary expression in resisting relocation and claiming rights to spaces for themselves and arts. The specific and peripheral place within the Beijing cityscape that they occupy partly defines their identity, art, and work method. Through four independent documentaries, Pernin argues for a transformation in attitudes: while in the mid-1990s artists were likely to leave their studios, in the beginning of the twenty-first century they were seeking redress and using art as a form of protest to keep their chosen work place.

The margins of the cities and their (in)visible habitants are elaborated further in Chapter 9 by Elizabeth Parke. Although contemporary artists have made visible the figure of the migrant worker in a various artworks, their art represents only one facet of the complex visual field of Beijing. The presence of migrant workers in urban environment is indicated by the scrawled advertisements to obtain fake certificates. Parke explores how this practice of advertising is derided by the city officials transforming it into a visual battlefield of the rights to urban space. To provide a more multifaceted reading of the advertisements, she argues that they can be interpreted as an act of defacement, as a public calligraphy performance, and as an inscription tracing the networks of migrant workers at play in the capital.

The significance of urban space as a discursive site for new forms, agencies, needs and aims of visual self-expression is investigated further in terms of urban creativity by Minna Valjakka in the final chapter. Drawing from studies on interrelations between art and street art sites, and translocal flows of people, images and ideas, Valjakka suggests a new conceptual framework of 'translocal site-responsiveness' for examining the continuously transforming urban aesthetics and spatial politics. She proposes a more comprehensive analysis of inherent interdependences between agencies, manifestations

and the contextual levels of site, place and space to deconstruct local/global dichotomies. She argues that urban creativity, with its varying levels of translocality, can formulate relevant methods to engage with the urban environment.

The research presented in this anthology continues to provide alternative readings on the relationship between visual arts and urbanization by focusing on the core elements of their mutual interdependence. Earlier versions of the chapters by Maurizio Marinelli, Meiqin Wang, Chris Berry, Elizabeth Parke, and Minna Valjakka were previously published in *China Information* in a special issue on 'Visual Arts and Urbanization' (2015) but were revised for this volume in order to enhance the dialogue with the new chapters commissioned for this publication. The case studies demonstrate that neither cities nor urban spaces are fixed entities in China. Instead, we understand them as sites of continuing artistic and creative experimentation, where multiple agencies and manifestations emerge and inspire new ways of negotiating the impacts of urbanization. While doing so, they inevitable open up novel discourses and terrains of problematization. We therefore wish to encourage a greater interest in investigating how visual arts in China could contribute, challenge, or redirect the ongoing urbanization processes. How are visual arts allowed to affirm or challenge the existing spatializations of power relations in urban public space? Will city officials, NPOs or art institutions engage with collaborative art projects that enable artistic and creative practices as a form of dialogue facilitating more profound social change? What novel agencies are emerging among and *along with* Chinese contemporary artists? Although these questions are already addressed to some extent in this anthology, they are worth further study. Similarly, more detailed research on the specificity of visual arts in different cities in Mainland China, besides Beijing and Shanghai, is needed. Ultimately, we call for future research that explores *if* and *how* visual arts – and also other forms of artistic and creative activities – could play a role in the development of a new public sphere despite the continuously oscillating levels of censorship at the time of writing. After all, it is the belief in the possibility of bottom-up, small-scale, and individual-based cultural activism that could contribute to a growing civil society, even in an authoritative regime like China, that motivates the compilation of this anthology.

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