

ART AND THE CITY: Beijing seminar

Lorenzo Marsili

Transnational questions and transnational answers

The seminar organised by European Alternatives together with Abitare China and the China-Europa Forum last summer in Beijing is a further testament to our belief that the most pressing political and artistic questions of our time can only be tackled through the formulation of trans-cultural answers and the creation of transnational networks of activism and knowledge-production. The themes discussed were many; on the first day we looked at different strategies and examples of "engagement" in the European and Chinese artistic spheres, we then moved on to analyse the different relations to the nation and the "national" in the two contexts, and finally discussed the perception of "globalisation" and the meaning of "global artists"; the second day was devoted to the city, with discussions on different forms of artistic interventions in public space, the different conceptions of the "city" as a shared space of sociability in Chinese and European history, and finally a glance at the figure of the flâneur, attempting to overcome its untranslatability in

Chinese and identify a common way of living the city beyond productivist concerns. All the themes shared a common objective, and namely the attempt to go beyond mere comparative analyses, to surpass the simple exchange of perspectives behind entrenched national barriers, aiming instead to isolate a core set of themes equally crucial in both Europe and China, initiating a process leading to shared alternative positions and suggestions.

This process has only just begun, and we invite you to take part.

On this page are short reflections from some of those taking part in the workshops. The full list of participants includes Mi You, Baskar Mukhopadhyay, Stephen Wright, Huang Rui, Shu Yang, Sonya Dyer, Lu Jie, Wuwei Chen, Fei Qing, Gideon Boie, Liang Jingyu, Bert de Muynck, Miao Yu, Zhuma Yujiang, Ran Ping, and Shuyu Chen.

Niccolo Milanese

The ends of dialogue and the beginnings of being together

European Alternatives is essentially a transnational initiative which happens to find its starting point in Europe but which regards the world. China and the Chinese have since the beginning of the initiative been for us a point of comparison, of reflection and of fascination. Although this comparison of cultures is justified in its own terms, our own perspective cannot be disassociated from a certain number of anxieties and fears of widespread amongst people in Europe which are attached to the rise of China as a perceived threat to jobs, prosperity and "security". If China is felt to be a threat it is because the rules of global interaction are still thought of largely in terms of competition – be it between nations or between corporations – not in terms of cooperation.

In bringing together participants from several continents in Beijing this summer for several days of discussions surrounding the responsibilities of artists and intellectuals in society our goal was to bring together a group of people who see it as the responsibility of cultural actors to redefine the rules of global interaction between peoples, to invent new paradigms of communication and imaginative and real spaces for being together. This is a long-term engagement, and one that by definition extends irrespective of geographical or political boundaries.

TAKE PART ONLINE

In the belief that Europe cannot be defined by its borders, and attempting to forge alliances transnationally, we regularly hold events and projects in several countries in the world. Follow up on the development of our initiatives in China, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia by visiting www.euroalter.com and www.euroalter.com/china



Miao Yu

The Flâneur in China

One of the issues raised during the seminar was whether it is possible to recuperate the concept of the "flâneur" in contemporary China. Several Beijing residents in the audience immediately exchanged sad faces to one another. Indeed, with the exception of the old city center, Beijing's urban landscape is frequently interrupted by multiple highways, leaving only a hostile environment for the urban pedestrians. Beijing is no longer a city that provides walking pleasures. However, should we take the notion of the "flâneur" literally as an urban walking figure? Largely a conceptual creation of Walter Benjamin, the late 19th-century flâneur is more than a social type, rather an important epistemological figure situated in the declining dream world of the Parisian arcades. Benjamin makes this figure deliberately avoid Haussmann's new boulevards, loiter in the shopping arcades and spend time by gleaning archaeological fragments of the recent past. His slow temporal mode is out of synch with Haussmann's boulevard, a new landscape based on the logic of speed, circulation and social control. In my opinion, it is the flâneur's anachronism to the new Paris that, in part, defines him an epistemological figure. Benjamin's purpose is certainly not nostalgia for the "golden era" of flânerie, but the critical knowledge necessary for a revolutionary break from history's most recent configuration. The context of Benjamin's flâneur in the late 19th-century Paris has interesting parallels

to contemporary China. Just like Haussmann's urban project was masterminded by the dictator Napoleon III, what enables China's radical demolition and full-throttle development is also an authoritarian regime obsessed with erecting architectural icons. The glittering icons have replaced the historical courtyard buildings, the collective dan-wei housing of the 60s and the 70s, and even some of the iconic buildings of the 1980s—these waste architectures, each registered with utopian imaginations of the past, are quickly turning into rubble by the bulldozers. How does the juxtaposition of demolition and the rising urban skyline speak about the fates of our past utopias? Are today's Olympic icons going to end up as tomorrow's graveyards? As an observer of Chinese contemporary art, I can't help noticing the proliferation of ruin and ruin-like images centered on the phenomenon of urban demolition. A notable attempt from the Chinese artists is that they have deliberately rendered both demolitions and future developments into dialectical "ruin" images. And the juxtaposed layers of time and space on the imaginaries of the "ruin images" in Chinese contemporary art can shed lights on the epistemological configuration of contemporary China.

Miao Yu is a Ph.D. candidate in Art History at McGill University and doctoral fellow at Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She is currently researching her dissertation on the images of urban destruction and urban waste in Chinese contemporary art since the 1990s. She has a love-hate relationship with her city of residence, Beijing.



Huang Rui

Urbanism as Art Practice

During the workshop we visited the "baitasi", the white pagoda in Beijing. The area is very interesting; effectively cornered by the second ring road to the South, and the so-called "Wallstreet of Beijing" to the West. But there we still see old Beijing houses, inhabited by traditional residents and migrant workers alike, all crammed into that area. And the white pagoda is one of the few remaining structures from the Yuan dynasty...it is a parallel time to when the city of Beijing was first built. Intellectuals, artists, and architects may feel the pressure of the coming transformations in the district. There are two ways to go: the area can be demolished and rebuilt with modern architecture like the "Wallstreet" zone, relocating the residents to other areas of the city; or the area can be rebuilt to its heyday of 7-800 years ago, when it boasted

riders and courtyards for Chinese officials. We see in this case two very different options to deal with history and its economic implications. And here I want to make a proposal. In attempting to reconstruct the district faithful to its past, we need to research this past, its ways of life, the events that have taken place along the way... otherwise we are left with a touristic reconstruction of old houses that is terribly shallow and merely commercial, as has happened south of the Tiananmen area. I call for an organised network for this project. Urban planners, architects, artists and intellectuals were all involved and collaborated in the realisation of 798 [Beijing's central artistic district, which arose out of an abandoned factory complex]. This spirit must be revived. And creative urban reconstruction, too, is to be considered an art form. *Huang Rui is an artist, the artistic director of Thinking Hands, and one of the founders of 798 district in Beijing*



Chen Wu Wei

The Invisible Galaxy of Public Space

When wandering around the street corners, ashes along the sidewalk, moss on the roof tile, scent of the jasmines, laughs of the kids... every sensation accumulated from daily life transcends into memories spontaneously. Static or dynamic, visible or invisible, everything around us participates in the moulding and multi-user capacity, we have the chance to re-explore and re-examine the functionality and understanding of the same space we have. Sights, touches, smells and other sensations come along in the journey. As one of millions, our existence at this moment might be mapped into someone else's memory, or being transmitted to another stage as a double. It is the moment that we realize - our thoughts float and intersect, like the particles inside a capsule. *Chen Wu Wei is a media art lecturer from Hong Kong Design Institute*

and document beyond the physical space. By means of social media, open source, mobile device, projection, etc., mixed information are able to map, navigate, expand and penetrate the existing space like another invisible galaxy. Time and space can be compressed and superimposed, memory and being are connected through tracking and positioning; we absorb and digest these data in blinks. Through this invisible galaxy which contains dynamic information and multi-user capacity, we have the chance to re-explore and re-examine the functionality and understanding of the same space we have. Sights, touches, smells and other sensations come along in the journey. As one of millions, our existence at this moment might be mapped into someone else's memory, or being transmitted to another stage as a double. It is the moment that we realize - our thoughts float and intersect, like the particles inside a capsule. *Chen Wu Wei is a media art lecturer from Hong Kong Design Institute*



Stephen Wright

On extradisciplinary collaboration

Collaboration, if it is to be fruitful, must be founded on an initial diversity. Though it may feel more natural to collaborate with groups and individuals with whom we have much in common, collaboration itself has little to gain from that commonality – for neither party really has much to offer the other and collaborating soon appears unnecessary. Today, when "interdisciplinary" collaboration has become a fact of life in the self-reflective world of research in academia and beyond, this has become more than a theoretical issue: it may even make such initiatives a smithy for testing larger-scale modes of community building. Needless to say, developing a collaborative community on the basis of difference rather than sameness poses some significant challenges. Yet it is relatively straightforward for open-minded members of one discipline to engage in inter- or transdisciplinary collaboration with similarly unbiased colleagues from another: biologists, like sociologists, mathematicians, philosophers and historians work within disciplines with an established canon of texts and references acknowledged by their scientific community. One may certainly contest the paradigms and even the canon as a whole (indeed to some extent, one is expected to) but if one is to be taken seriously, one must engage with them critically. Art, on the other hand, while not exactly undisciplined – as it is sometimes suggested by those

who are apt to dismiss it as a form of knowledge production – is not a discipline. Indeed art almost constitutionally resists attempts to discipline it. While it has its internal rigour, and a history, in fact many histories, this does not make art a discipline the way art history is. All of which makes collaboration between art and academic disciplines or activist practices, indeed between art and anything, both particularly interesting and singularly ticklish. For though there has been a commendable tendency to promote collaboration between, say, art and economics, the fact that art stands outside any constituted discipline means that this mode of collaboration can only be explicitly extradisciplinary, that is, beyond the confines of any discipline. Extradisciplinary collaboration is inherently experimental, because each initiative must generate its own methodology. But above all, it is premised on a unique dynamic of skill-crossing and sharing, that is, on the *fundamental equality between competence and incompetence*. Only in an extradisciplinary framework could one make such a claim – whose conditions of possibility lie in the radical desking that has characterised art of the past century. It is only when challenged by an incompetence (what is a question if not an often calculated incompetence?) that a competence is called upon to question itself, raising the exchange up a notch. In this respect, extradisciplinary collaboration is a deliberative form of community building and knowledge production – and a genuine alternative to expert culture. *Stephen Wright is a philosopher and art critic*



Bert de Muynck

The burden of building too many squares

Two weeks after a short exploration of the tensions between the European and Chinese perceptions of public and private space, the China Daily newspaper published an article entitled "City Squares Miss Urban Life." In it the Xinghai Square in Dalian illustrates the urban space-race China's cities are involved in. The Xinghai Square is three times bigger than Beijing's Tiananmen Square and is the largest city square in Asia. The article identifies the following set of problems emerging from this example: *"Inspired by Dalian, other cities have sped up city square projects to improve their images. (...) Local officials often seek the largest, not the best squares, which simply copy Western models without any creativity or consideration of local conditions. (...) Some underdeveloped cities like Jixi in Heilongjiang province have faced huge financial burdens by building too many squares."* While it is common to discuss the perception that Chinese cities miss urban squares – and connecting to that a whole set of political, cultural and civic values, problems and sensitivities – it seems that actually the opposite is happening. In that regard the fascination for Beijings' Tiananmen Square is understandable. To many it appears to be China's only Square as it is easy to read in its history and outlook the blueprint for all private

and public activities happening on any square in any Chinese city. In "Remaking Beijing" (Reaktion Books, 2005) renowned Chinese art critic Wu Hung scans the artistic, political and architectural history of Tiananmen and explains his agenda as following: "I use the term 'political space' in both senses, as an architectonic embodiment of political ideology and as an architectural site activating political action and expression. Defined as such, an official political space such as Tiananmen Square inevitably lies within the dominant political system and helps to construct this system; but it also stimulates public debate and facilitates opposition." Have we been looking at the wrong Square in order to understand the new relations between private and public life that are unfolding in many Chinese cities? The article in China Daily concludes that in Jixi, to collect enough money for the construction of the square, the city embezzled the road construction fund as well as reduced the wages of construction workers. It is the ongoing construction of new city squares in China that should stimulate debate about the direction China's public and urban life is taking. Beijing may be exemplary to understand political space, but it is clear that Dalian has subtly altered the strategy; size matters.

Bert de Muynck is an architect, writer and co-director of MovingCities. He lives and works in Beijing, China, since 2006. For more info: <http://movingcities.org>



Gideon Boie

AND THE BAVO COLLECTIVE

Do you really want to join us? It is up to you!

The many exchange projects these days between Europe and China tend to 'orientalise' the specific framework in which Chinese people operate. Stress is then laid upon the still almighty, invisible power the Communist Party entertains over the back of ordinary citizens – something that supposedly counter speaks the new freedoms people enjoy in the new China. As such the new openness in China today – exemplified for instance in the willingness to listen to the demands and desires of the people – seems to paradoxically strengthen the firm grip of power rather than weakening it. We claim however that this paradoxical logic is not reserved for Chinese subjects alone, but should be analysed as a local characteristic of a contemporary and global shift – a distortion, if you want – in the execution of power.

A key scene in the documentary 'The Corporation' allows us to understand this logic in its Western manifestation. In this scene, we follow a group of otherglobalist activists as they organize a sit-in in the backyard of former chairman of Royal Dutch Shell, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart in order to protest against the malpractices of multinational oil companies. To their utmost surprise, the chairman revealed himself as a passionate critic of the oil industry, displaying a clear insight into the many inconvenient truths behind this notoriously dirty industry. Moreover, he claimed that they were not

telling him anything he had not already thought of himself and that he therefore did not need activists for that. The real question, he retorted, is what they were going to do about it. In this way, Sir Moody-Stuart put the ball back in the activists' court while at the same time making himself an indispensable link in the chain by making them aware of the fact that although they might not have the power to change anything, he did! So, what we encounter here is a new way in which the ruling order mobilizes society. The shrewd tactics of the former chairman of Shell consists in not only being more critical than the activists but also in accusing them of shrugging away in the face of the enormous challenges ahead: 'if you really think things are so bad, then stop complaining and put your money where your mouth is!' In short, every criticism is interpreted as an unconscious wish for constructive cooperation and, consequently, every critic is treated as a possible ally in finding solutions to remedy the cracks in the system. In other words, it creates an atmosphere of horizontality, the feeling that both ruler and ruled are on an equal footing, engaged in a dialogue, and eager to complement each other's capabilities. Consequently, critical actors are seduced into collaborating amicably with their usual enemies about possible solutions to the many problems at hand.

Gideon Boie is co-founder of the collective for radical architecture BAVO



Sonya Dyer

Thoughts on a Summer Seminar

My personal experience of the China Europa Forum can be described by contradictory adjectives such as exciting, frustrating, intense, enriching, confusing and moving. That is to say, it did what a brief exchange of ideas is supposed to do in many ways – confuse and enlighten in equal measure. Although I never quite shook the feeling that the 'Western' contingent didn't quite share as much of ourselves – or at least our own situations in our own countries – as our Chinese counterparts were expected to. For me, the most interesting exchange was on the second day, during a discussion on the notion of public space. The conversation came about when one of our Chinese colleagues explained a particular project he had developed involving a group of artists engaging in 'micro-performances' in Tiananmen Square. The artists mainly interacted with random people in the square through these one-to-one performances, experiencing a mixed reaction from the individuals they were trying to interact with. For Westerners, Tiananmen Square is mainly associated with the protests in 1989 (known as the June Fourth Incident in China), as exemplified by the infamous 'Tank Man' photograph of an unknown man standing before a group of tanks. Tiananmen seems to have a particular hold on the Western liberal / neoliberal imagination as an example of the Chinese systems brutality and

inflexibility. What was interesting to me was the exchange that followed. Responses covered the spectrum, from the person who repeated the Governmental line that 'the Government are the parents and the People are the children', to another who questioned the value of Tiananmen's perceived value as the symbolic public space in Beijing. In the light of all the new, often Olympic-related architecture in Beijing, this argument suggested, wasn't it a bit old fashioned to focus on Tiananmen? Why not engage with people in one of the new spaces? What is the value of these intimate exchanges – what's the point of only affecting one person in a sea of people? This was the most passionate exchange of the entire weekend, and it was an exchange largely – if not entirely – between the Chinese participants. Conversely, it resonated with me more than anything else. In particular, it made me think about Brian Haw and his anti-war protest (originally an anti Iraqi sanctions project) in Parliament Square. Of how often I had seen him engaged in conversation with an individual or two, of all the cars that honked their approval of him as they drove past. And of course, how the British government went as far as to change the law to prevent anyone from protesting within a mile of the Houses of Parliament as a result of his presence. I see Brian Haw as an example of the power of protest, and how an individual can affect the politics of an entire country/culture. *Sonya Dyer is an artist and the coordinator of the art and politics programme at Chelsea College, University of the Arts, London*