Art in America

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ART, INC. SHANGHAI

Xu Zhen: *8848 Minus 1.86* (detail), 2005, C-print, 33½ by 45½ inches overall. Courtesy Long March Space, Beijing.

China's Xu Zhen, known for courting bewilderment and outrage, now heads the "art creation company" MadeIn, producing controversy workshop-style.

by Travis Jeppesen

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Works by MadeIn in the Asian Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, through Apr. 14, and the group exhibition "Moving on Asia: Towards a New Art Network 2004-2013," City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand, through June 3.

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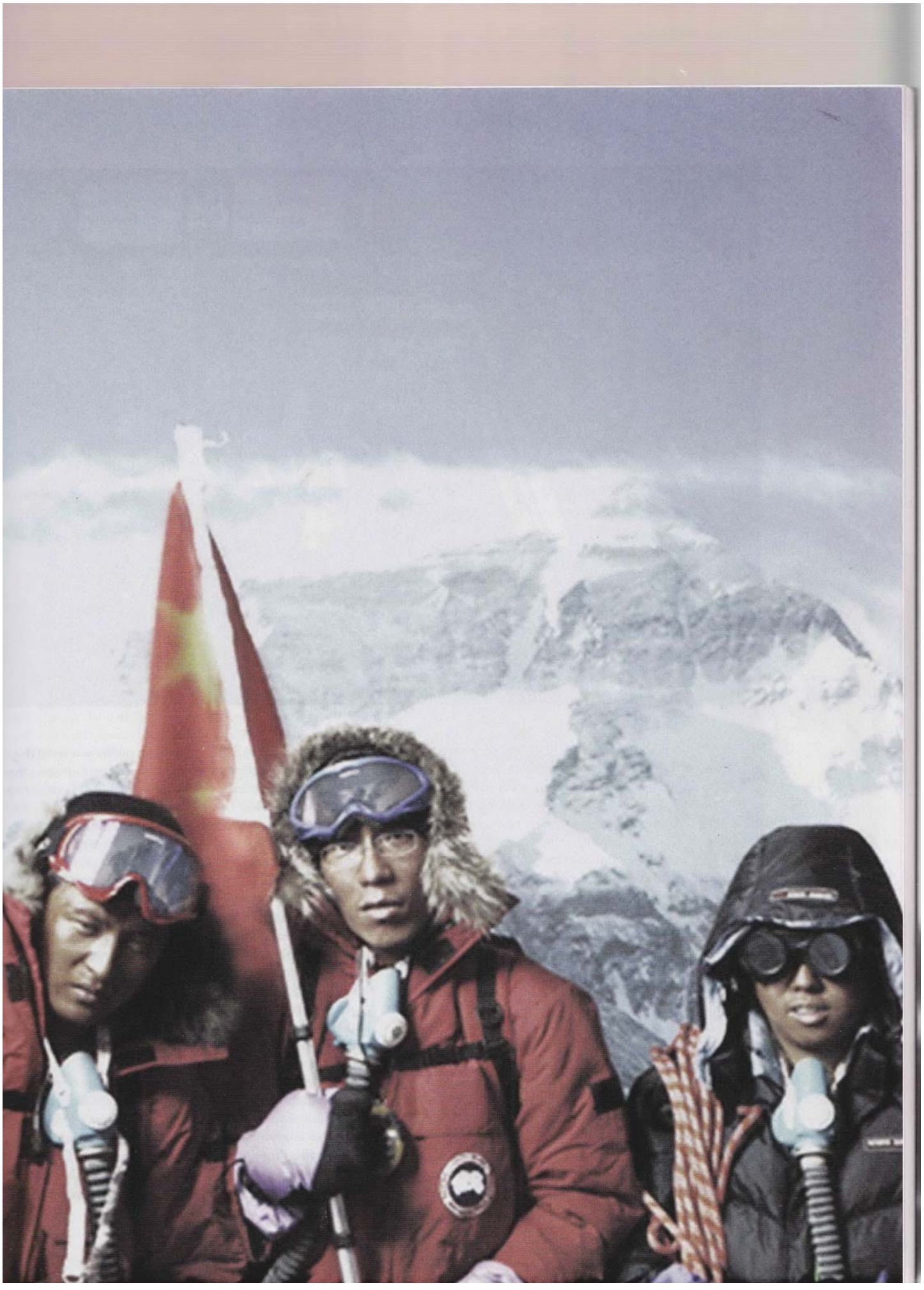
DOUBLE-MINDEDNESS is perhaps the most important quality that Western viewers of contemporary Chinese art tend to miss. Ai Weiwei's rising celebrity over the last few years—first and foremost as a political activist, secondly as an artist—has led to a basic misunderstanding of China and its art scene, with many casual observers supposing that Ai's signature blatancy is the sole form of esthetic dissent in a country where censorship and government crackdowns are commonplace, and where people who don't enjoy the protection of Ai's exalted status can be made to disappear with the snap of a finger.

Nonspecialists, especially parachute journalists, often fail to recognize the diverse abundance of Chinese artists, some of them very prominent, who pursue renegade visions that surpass Ai's in subversive content and social critique—if you know how to read them correctly. A work that appears to be one thing might contain a whole different layer of meaning—one readily legible to Chinese artists and intellectuals but invisible to outsiders, including not only foreigners but the country's famously obtuse bureaucrats. That way, even if you do get caught, you can always claim that you meant the other, innocent thing. Despite decades of sociopolitical analysis by scholars and critics, many Westerners, swept up in the market-driven China art craze of a few years back, all but ignored the complex semiotic framework of Chinese art and its critical discourse. This was particularly bewildering in the case of the conceptually cagey artist Xu Zhen, who was born in 1977, just one year after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

EMERGING AT THE END of the 1990s, Xu quickly established himself as one of China's most visible artists, even though he is essentially an anomaly. Educated at an arts and crafts technical college in Shanghai rather than one of the country's prestigious art academies, Xu adopted an energetic inclusiveness: besides making art and curating exhibitions, he cofounded the nonprofit gallery BizArt in 1998. His aggressive manner immediately set him apart, much as his work's often perverse sense of humor distinguished it from the market-friendly output of many of his peers. For



Xu Zhen: *Shouting*, 1998, video, 4 minutes. Courtesy ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai.

Shouting, a video he produced in 1998, Xu went to crowded public spaces (not hard to find in the world's most populous country) and suddenly screamed maniacally behind the camera in order to capture the crowd's stunned reaction. Mental illness and non-normative behavior are taboo topics in East Asia's highly Confucian cultures. So while *Shouting* can be admired for the comic gesture at its core, it also comes across as a scream against Chinese society—not only its physical overcrowding but its numbing conformist values.

Since then, Xu has routinely woven a performative web around his work. Anyone attempting to approach his art in the traditional role of passive observer meets with an immediate challenge. You find yourself, instead, ensnared in a game whose outcome is determined by the extent to which you buy into the work's mystique. The installation *8848 Minus 1.86* (2005), which debuted at the Yokohama Triennial, consists of two parts: a video "documenting" a climb by the artist and his crew to the summit of Mount Everest, whose peak they saw off, accompanied by a refrigerated vitrine allegedly containing the 1.86-meter frozen top. Most viewers doubt the veracity of the stunt (by some reports, the filming was done in Xu's studio), but Hans-Ulrich Obrist—who has curated a number of major shows in China and is now codirector of London's Serpentine Gallery—notes that a month after the exhibition opened "the People's Republic of China Everest Expedition Team publicly revised its official estimate of Everest's height, knocking four meters off the previous measurement of 8,848 meters."[1] This reduction (four meters, not 1.86) seems more likely the result of melting than proof that Xu, an inexperienced climber, actually managed the death-defying feat. Maybe the work itself is a comment on the process of global warming.

Certainly Xu has repeatedly called attention to the subtle losses that accompany "progress." In the 2006 video *An Animal*, shot from beneath a transparent glass table, he filmed handlers jerking off a panda—China's beloved mascot, quickly growing extinct due to an extremely low reproduction rate and the country's rapid, land-devouring urbanization over the past three decades. For *ShanghART Supermarket*, shown at the Art Basel Miami Beach fair in 2007, Xu produced a full-scale replica of a typical Chinese convenience store, with one small difference: all the product containers were empty.

The work that perhaps most justifiably earned Xu the title of enfant terrible, garnering sheer rancor from both local and international critics, was *The Starving of Sudan* (2008)—a tableau vivant, mounted at Beijing's Long March Space, replicating the late photojournalist Kevin Carter's famous shot of a starving Sudanese child with a huge vulture leering in the background. Xu employed an actual African

toddler (supervised by his mother) to dawdle on scattered straw next to a mechanized buzzard, so that visitors could take their own photos re-creating the Carter image.

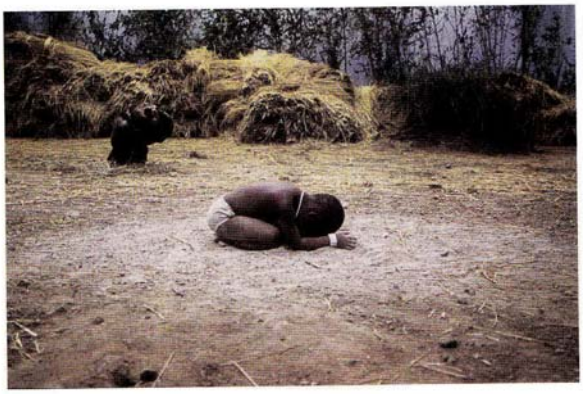
AS UNPALATABLE AS *The Starving of Sudan* was for many, no one could predict that the artist's next move would turn out to be his most radical to date. In 2009, Xu announced that he was giving up his artistic solo practice in order to serve as CEO of MadeIn Company the world's first "art corporation." Transforming the army-of-assistants model of stars like Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Zhang Huan, MadeIn issued an idealistic mission statement, describing the endeavor as "a contemporary art creation company, focused on the production of creativity, and devoted to the research of contemporary culture's infinite possibilities."[2] This seemed a response both to China's then surging tide in the art world and to foreigners worried about the authoritarian state's tendency to pirate Western technology. It also parodied the Chinese government's long-term economic goal: a shift from being the world's cheap manufacturing center ("made in China") to being a global design and intellectual property originator ("created in China").

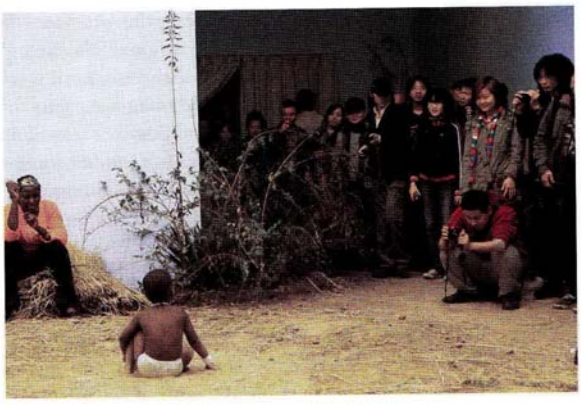
Facetiously taking on Steve Jobs rather than Andy Warhol as a role model, Xu launched MadeIn as more than just an enduring prank, and his reasons for doing so were complex—certainly more complex than the artist himself would admit. As an interviewee, Xu is notorious for giving frustratingly simple answers; so, according to him, he started MadeIn because he had too many things to do and couldn't handle doing them all by himself. This is, of course, true in part: in some sense, the formation of a company is the natural way to gather together the disparate roles Xu had long played—artist, designer, editor, blogger, curator—under a single aegis. MadeIn would be an effective way to bridge the gaps between Xu's various endeavors, while also expanding his capabilities as an artistic producer.

At the same time, by replacing his own name with that of the corporation, Xu alluded to submersion of the ego and individuality—in something more than the traditional "maiden" fashion. It was a sacrifice of the self in favor of the final product—the artwork—despite the fact that the corporate structure of MadeIn positions Xu at the top. Though artists are employed to help generate and execute ideas, Xu, as boss, gets the final say. Still, the works produced by the company cannot be said to be "by" Xu Zhen, as neither the genesis nor the actual creation of the art is his exclusive domain. While the factory model favored by certain well-known figures, effectively using their own name as a brand, operates in a similar manner, the hired craftsmen are seen as mere fabricators of the artist's ideas. (The actual process, however, is usually shrouded in mystery.) In short, MadeIn exists at a midpoint between the artist collective and the art-star workshop. According to whispers in the Chinese art world, founding MadeIn was a clever way for Xu to deflect attention from himself, as his solo work had begun to make him anathema to the authorities. Now he is no longer an artist but a corporate manager. And in China's hyper-capitalist climate, a corporation can do no wrong.

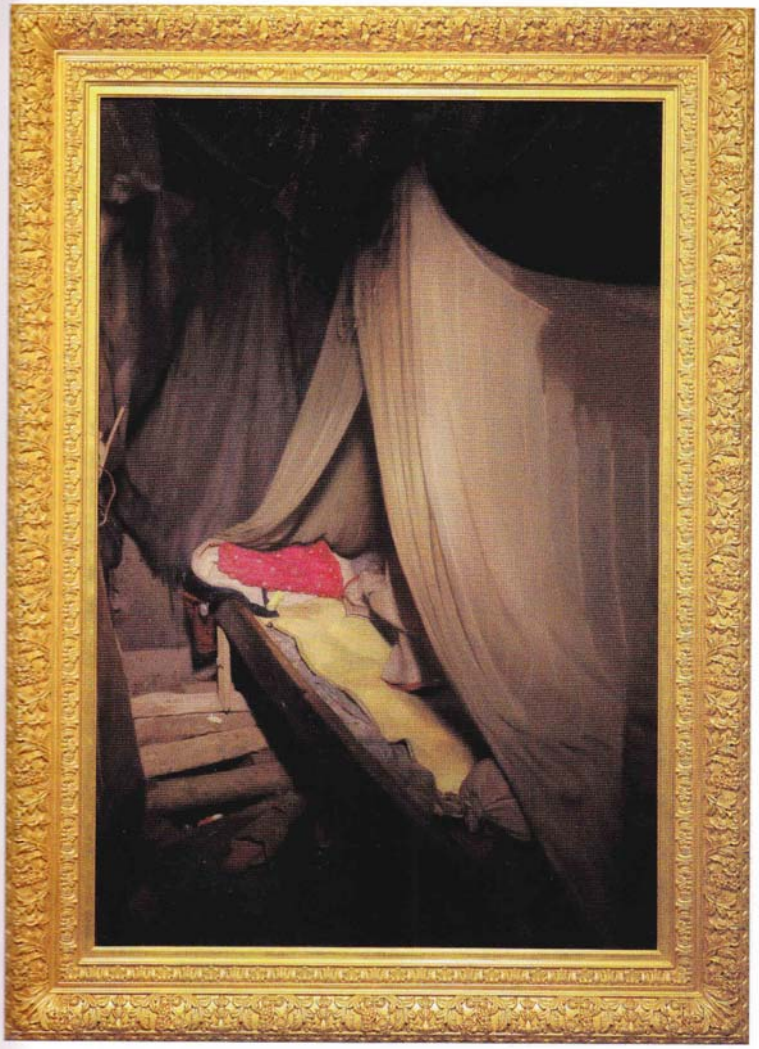
Things aren't really so simple, of course. For MadeIn, which is both a real company and a parody of a company, is not necessarily playing it safe or enjoying full protection by virtue of its status. Case in point was one of MadeIn's first exhibitions, "Seeing One's Own Eyes" (2009) at ShanghART Gallery, which purported to be a group show by contemporary Middle Eastern artists. In fact, all of the works were produced by the MadeIn Company. As Alexia Dehaene, the only non-Chinese member of the firm, puts it: "It was Middle Eastern art *made in China*, Middle Eastern art as seen by Chinese people."[3] "Seeing" caused a storm of controversy among consular and diplomatic types in Shanghai, who took it to be a genuine exhibition of Middle Eastern art. After the authenticity bubble burst, many were unable to see the show—full of culturally stereotypical visual references—as anything other than a crudely offensive joke on Muslim culture. Local authorities became involved, and several pieces had to be removed from the original venue (though they were later restored when the show traveled to SMAK in Ghent and Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, UK).

Overlooked was the show's subtle commentary on major issues affecting China. This was, after all, shortly after British mega-collector Charles Saatchi sold off his collection of Chinese art in order to start displaying work from





Two views of Xu Zhen's installation *The Starving of Sudan*, 2008, African toddler, mechanical vulture and mixed mediums. Courtesy Long March Space.



This spread, three images from MadeIn's ongoing "Prey" series. All courtesy ShanghART Gallery.

Above, *Prey-3E, Miao Residence, Malin Village, Xishui District, Guizhou Province, China*, 2011, oil on canvas with gold leaf frame, 74¾ by 49½ inches.

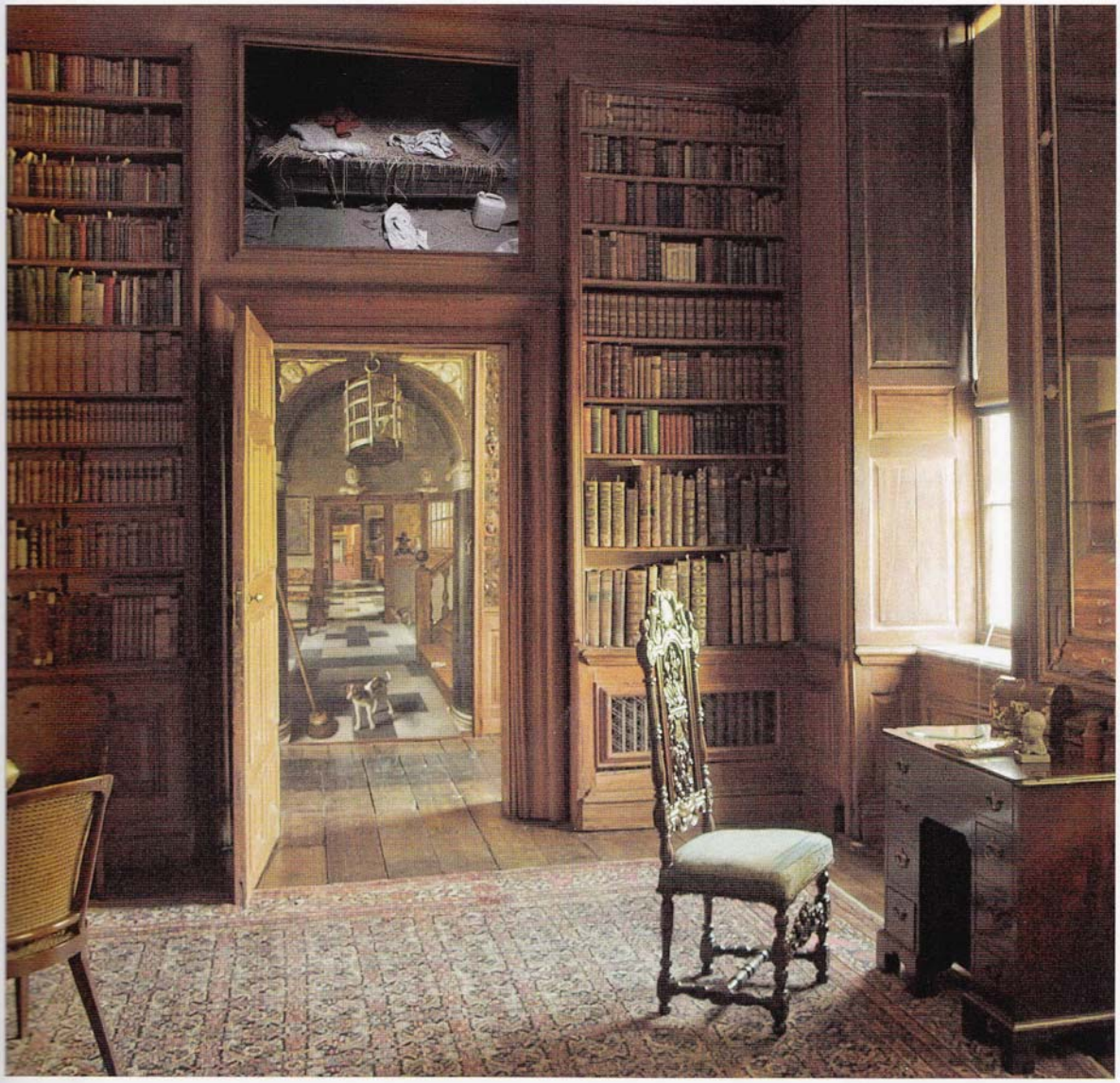
Right, a Google map image locating the impoverished Miao residence.

the Middle East. No one knows the "regional art exhibition" syndrome better than artists in China. The story is the same every time: jet-setting curator flies into town for a week, does a few studio visits, makes an "interesting selection"—some political work here, some abstraction there, some painting, some video, an installation or two—and voilà: Chinese Art Today! MadeIn's satire of this process is perhaps just a little bit cruder than the original. The fact that the company's primary inspiration for the fabrication of these "Middle Eastern" works was Google Images—partly out of necessity, as Xu never travels abroad due to a fear of flying—mimics the way most people in China (most people around the world) actually attain their "image" of foreign cultures today.

THE MODUS OPERANDI of MadeIn is to further complicate the series of games Xu enacted as a solo artist, entangling the viewer in a prolonged reflection on how meaning is constructed. The game is usually based on a binary opposition: truth versus fiction, good taste versus bad taste. In one ongoing series, "Prey," company members travel to extremely impoverished, mainly rural parts of China to photograph the destitute interiors of people's homes. Back in Shanghai, the images are then rendered on canvas, in photo-realistic style, by one of the company artists adept at classic oil techniques. The resulting paintings are subsequently installed in the palatial homes of wealthy collectors and photographed (or are they?—many of the installations look clearly Photoshopped). These photos—of paintings of photographs, depicting interiors within interiors—serve as the final work of art. The "original," whatever that may be, is trashed. (But who is the real prey here: the poor people exploited by the rich or the rich people exploited by the artists?)

The destruction of and subsequent substitution for the original—in short, the probing of its nature—is one of MadeIn's enduring formal gags. Given the formal organization of the enterprise, this makes sense. Through its corporatized structure—with departments of creation, curation and production, to name only three—MadeIn (which currently lists 24 members but, as a recent visit to the studio revealed, actually employs several dozen more workers at any given time) has already gotten rid of the author. As in corporate America, with its vast array of products, there are no real makers—only mass-produced brands. So why not go ahead and complete the process by axing concerns about origination altogether, thereby presenting a model of a model ad infinitum and ad nauseam? Such an approach deliberately screws with the way the art market traditionally assigns value to objects, positing another system of meaning.

While the authenticity of the works in "Prey" may be called into question, the source buried in the image is very much real, as the documentation process makes clear.[4] The extreme poverty that much of China suffers, despite its vaunted "rising" economy, is a side of the Middle Kingdom that few visitors ever see. Lingering in the concrete jungles of Shanghai and Beijing, where the art world is centered, one can easily miss—or ignore—the ugliness of this Other China. Those living in China, though, are well aware that its abject rural poverty results from a longstanding policy of neglect by the Chinese Communist Party. The countryside is



A "Prey" painting Photoshopped into a collector's home, from a MadeIn catalogue.

the primary place where people come together to engage in anti-government demonstrations, which sometimes flare into riots. In *Revolution Castings* (2012), recently displayed at the Hayward Gallery in London, the company takes stones purportedly thrown in protests all over the world and casts them in plaster. Viewers are invited to bring in their own stones, which will subsequently be molded in a similar manner to become part of the ongoing artwork.

As an embodiment of the myriad contradictions that China finds itself mired in today, MadeIn effectively explodes the double-mindedness that Chinese artists have had to internalize in the post-Tiananmen era. The million little shards that result, when put together, probably wouldn't form a cohesive whole. If anything, they'll yield a cohesive hole. Xu Zhen, in his public statements, goes to great lengths to deny that he has any opinion at all, saying that he is interested only in the ideas that go into the process of making art, never the final result. You can base an interpretation on what you actually see or what you think you see. No matter. By the time you have formed *your* opinion, Xu and his crew will no doubt have moved on, forging a new work as troubling as the world it situates itself in. ○

1. "First Take: Hans-Ulrich Obrist on Xu Zhen," *Artforum*, January 2007, p. 202.
2. www.madeincompany.com/en/produce.asp
3. From an interview with the author in June 2012.
4. See the monograph *Action of Consciousness*, MadeIn Company, Shanghai, ShanghART Gallery, 2011.