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FEATURING: LEE KIT, WOLFGANG TILLMANS, YANG FUDONG,
APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL, DANH VÕ,
KARL LAGERFELD, XU ZHEN (MADEIN), LIONEL WENDT,
RASHID RANA, XU BING & MUCH MORE

The Artist Xu Zhen

Interview by Aimee Lin

The person in possession of the identity card of 'Xu Zhen' is a man from Shanghai, born in 1977. But when this name is used to refer to the same person as an artist, it refers to the past tense. Originally he was simply Xu Zhen, an artist who first participated in the Venice Biennale at the tender age of twenty-four (in 2001) and who was a joint founder of the Shanghai nonprofit arts centre BizArt, where he was responsible for organising the first solo exhibitions and early group show appearances of many young artists. From 2009, however, he gave up his birth name and became 'MadeIn Company'. His works frequently appeared in galleries, museums and art fairs; and he collaborated with local artists, encouraging them to look beyond the modes of creation and exhibition set by the gallery system, producing events that often seemed incomprehensible to the public. In spring 2013 he started his plan of moving from Shanghai to Beijing and again changed his artist name, to 'Xu Zhen by MadeIn Company', marking a new phase in his life and career. We know that whatever Xu Zhen does next, it will certainly not be limited to the scale of an individual artist. In fact, he has already begun to speak about even grander artistic ambitions.



ARTREVIEW: ASIA

I just came by Long March Space (Beijing) to have a look at the construction of your exhibition Movement Field.

XU ZHEN

What you saw was the excavation project. When it's done, there'll be a garden with many different routes. We found routes from different

international campaigns and marches, and are compiling them into a map, or rather into a garden [in which the routes are turned into stone paths]. It's actually a monument to various 'movementist' activities of mankind. We felt it'd be a very powerful place, so we decided to call it *Movement Field*. At the same time it will exist as a context in which different works can emerge.

I'd like to revisit one of the earliest issues relating to you: why did you turn from Xu Zhen into MadeIn Company, and now why have you changed again?

XZ It's now the brand 'Xu Zhen by MadeIn Company'. The first phase was from 2009 until the end of last year, and the objective of that phase was to use the form of a company to make artworks. We are now in a second phase, where the company will begin to launch the brands of various artists.

So when you became 'Xu Zhen by MadeIn Company', does that mean 'Xu Zhen presented by MadeIn Company'?

XZ That's correct: not the individual Xu Zhen who existed before 2009. The MadeIn Company was started in 2009 in order to escape from individuality. During the past three or four years this issue has been digested. Today's Xu Zhen is a creative tool produced by MadeIn Company's own work practice. When collective creativity absorbs individualist creative practices, we feel its approach becomes different to that of an individual artist. It could relate to commerce, capital and cultural movements, as well as to the various areas of contemporary Chinese art.

I notice that you use "we" to issue these opinions, which also seem to comply with certain operational rules of the company. However, I have a feeling that these rules are entirely your doing: you set the rules, abide by them, then you change and explain the new ones.

XZ That is correct. Initially the gallery suggested that we issue a statement explaining everything, though as far as I'm concerned, art has no place explaining things; it is under no obligation to be understood. It could even be said that art to a great extent is about explaining things to oneself, understanding one's own inner cycle... playing it this way today, that way tomorrow, as far as I'm concerned, isn't much of an issue. Nor is it much of a problem if a lot of people don't understand what we're doing. We have no intention of issuing clear explanations to the media.

The media aside, does the outside world – and do collectors – understand what you're doing?

XZ In this game, you invent certain rules. When people become willing to play with you, the game is established. If no one wants to play with you, you should just play it with yourself, on and on. If you can't keep the game going, it will falter and die out. After three years, two galleries and over 40 collaborative projects, everyone is still playing our game quite earnestly.

The change from 'MadeIn Company' to 'Xu Zhen by MadeIn Company' has definitely been better received than when you changed from 'Xu Zhen' into 'MadeIn Company' in 2009.

XZ We only changed the name so we'd be better received.

OK, but I have a feeling this new name implies that MadeIn Company will soon be presenting another person.

XZ That's right. It's already in the planning. Right now we haven't reached an agreement with the artist, so I can't reveal who it is yet.

For a long time people have been saying that you're going to move from Shanghai to Beijing.

XZ That's correct. In fact, I've already found a studio in Beijing. I'm very busy at the moment, though, so the moving process is going a bit slowly. As we have some ongoing projects in Shanghai, only half the work unit is moving. In the future we will be active in both cities simultaneously.

Why have you decided to move?

XZ The resources and possibilities of Beijing are attractive to us. There are also a few people with whom we'd like to make contact, to see if there could be any further possibilities open to us. We're also involved in other things as well as art, such as curation and media production.

How will your move to Beijing affect your relationship with Shanghai?

XZ: Several Shanghai-based projects, such as 'Festival to Come' [a series of seminars, begun in 2011, initiated by artists Ding Li, Jin Feng, Shi Qing, Yang Zhenzhong, Xu Zhen and Zhou Xiaohu, among others, and

Lu Xinghua, a professor of philosophy at Shanghai's Tongji University), the Art-Ba-Ba Mobile Space [an art space without a fixed venue] and the Art-Ba-Ba website [which Xu Zhen founded in 2005], are permanently working with different artists; we are, as always, in constant communication. I don't think much will change in that respect.

What has the 'Festival to Come' actually produced up to this point?

XZ It's being going for two and a half years now, and I feel that it's been effective on all levels. Due to its highbrow nature, the project has generally only had about ten participants each year. Of the majority of people who show dislike for this project, a large proportion positively hate it, while others simply ignore it, somewhat contemptuously. But as time passes, some are starting to be able to see how the value system of this project, represented by its leader, Lu Xinghua, is actually reflected in many different things. His very clear, radical and uncompromising approach has led many people to confront various difficult issues. Also, in terms of the relation between art and theory, he has led everyone steadily through trial and error, which is especially valuable. I personally like this way of working, one that doesn't concern itself overly with results.

This makes me think about Taopu Art District. I remember when it first sprung up, land was planned as real estate, by the developer, a gallerist [Lorenz Helbling of ShanghaiART Gallery] and some artists in joint leadership.

XZ Actually the formation of Taopu Arts District was very simple. Artists rented new studios; they wanted more freedom, away from the pressures of the more populated and touristic M50 [50 Moganshan Lu, an art district with artist studios, galleries and other tourist attractions] area. Also, there weren't many galleries established there already, so the area was more malleable. We just held our own things there, had some fun.

The atmosphere of exhibitions and events held at Taopu reminds me of Shanghai several years ago, when artists (including yourself) organised their own shows. But art today is very

different to then – it has developed into something else. Before, if artists didn't organise their own shows, then quite simply nothing would happen. But nowadays there are constantly different things going on; many different organisations and institutions can get hold of resources to realise projects, and attract the interest of people both domestically and abroad. So, I'd like to know if you think that nowadays it's necessary for artists to continue organising their own shows?

XZ I think this confirms what I was talking about just now: you can go about things without aiming to succeed, or without expecting some definite outcome, or, if you do happen to have a definite outcome in mind, then that's fine too. These aren't necessarily two different attitudes. In fact they're the same, both led by initiative: doing something you want to do regardless of the circumstances.

Independent attitudes might not be swayed by the environment, but what about actual plans?

XZ That's more complex. For example, at the beginning, say in 1999, when we did the *Supermarket* exhibition [a three-day group show cocurated, in 1999, by artists Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong and Alexander Brandt (Germany) in Shanghai Plaza, a local shopping mall in Shanghai, and considered one of the most important art projects within the development of the Shanghainese experimental art scene] nothing existed at all. We had to do everything ourselves. From 2000 onwards, after I started BizArt, everyone had a specific place, and somewhere they could go to ask for funding for projects. In 2005 galleries suddenly began to spring up everywhere, and so the artists all went and allied with them, to get their work made; the function of the nonprofit art centre was somewhat lost. By 2008 everyone had woken up to reality: there was no money left. The artists still wanted attention, though, so their attitudes shifted back to independence – of course, I think most were acting like spoilt kids.

Gradually we arrived at the current situation: the gallery and art fair systems are now pretty much established and the new battle for Chinese artists is against the gallery

system: they are throttled by it, as there are no nonprofit spaces left. Art museums look specifically to certain colleges and galleries. Right now I can't tell someone definitively that independence is important in this or that way. But I do think, at least in the case of the artists I've observed, that an independent attitude brings certain benefits, including greater experience, coping with struggle, strength of influence, self-promotion. When first going into it, you are of course unaware of these benefits. Maybe at the time you're just relying on intuition and interest, and you're not thinking about the benefits. I purposefully haven't mentioned the difficulties, because if you're involved, working, it means you're already strong enough to overcome them.

You were previously involved in organising many exhibitions and events, then later became the director of MadeIn Company. Have you ever thought of directly absorbing these activities in your own practice?

XZ Nearly all activities develop out of discussions, and it's often difficult to tell who has affected or inspired whom. We don't really care who first suggested something, or who first made the plan. Over the past few years I've been involved in numerous events of various sizes, sometimes organising, sometimes searching for funding, sometimes helping out at the event itself... everything is done just so that the event, or the idea, can happen, so that it can meet expectations. This is how we function.

So what's your next objective?

XZ After the company has launched Xu Zhen, the next step is to invest our energies in some projects that connect economic capital with cultural production. After having spent a few years developing the company, we hope that greater investment will allow us to expand our productivity. We certainly aren't the kind of company to use conventional sales methods; we're more likely to attract new kinds of investment, or funding, completely new models. It's always about getting different approaches, and different models to work together.

So the most pressing work now is to unite culture and economic capital.

XZ Basically, yes. How to understand our own industry, its biggest issues, and how to go about solving them. My current impression is that we lack the support of domestic funding, the direct result of which is that artists have no real way to survive. They're either forced to give up and go abroad to show their work, or they show within the Chinese gallery system. There is also a big gap in the supply chain due to this lack of funding. One culture has to be supported by the economic structure of another culture; we frequently ignore the practice of cultural production that lies behind it. Previously, all work done by companies revolved around established modes of cultural production. Today, though, for anything to work, a lot of money is needed. The development of suitable modes of production in China is, in my opinion, the most interesting and challenging work to be done this year.

It does sound like quite an urgent matter.

XZ But it's also very vapid. It's possible that... simply put, when you go the supermarket, lots of the things you buy will be imported, not domestically produced. This is because we've lost confidence in ourselves. So as well as constructing a rationale, we must also construct a sensibility. For me personally this is all very good, as I've discovered a huge field of work.

I feel as though this is a task that can't be completed by an artist, or an art collective-turned-company, alone.

XZ Actually we've always been in touch with these issues. This is why I am today able to speculate in such a way. Some people might ask, "What's your work about?" As far as I'm concerned, my work isn't about anything, it has no definite content. My practice itself is the content. •

Translated from the Chinese by Dominick Dvorak

Xu Zhen by MadeIn Company: Movement Space is on view at Long March Space, Beijing, through 23 June