RISKY BUSINESS

BY ***Barbara Pollack*** POSTED **03/29/12**

Spoofing capitalism, the art market, and China's image abroad, Xu Zhen has developed parallel careers as artist, entrepreneur, and activist

Xu Zhen is MadeIn and MadeIn is Xu Zhen," says Xu Zhen, 34, the Chinese artist who in 2009 claimed to end his art career and formed a company to produce all future artworks. Sitting in his corporate headquarters, a two-story warehouse in an industrial zone that is a new art district far from the center of Shanghai, Xu Zhen (pronounced Su Jen) seems highly amused by the confusion he has caused. With his long rectangular face punctuated by stylish rectangular eyeglasses, he looks too young to have already accumulated a decade of experience in the Chinese art world. Comparing himself to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, he says, "All prestigious companies are known by their founders, not the other way around."

A viewer contemplates *Democracy is our goal, but the country must remain stable*, installed at Beijing's Long March Space, 2010. The title is a famous quote from former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping.

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MadeIn—a spoof on the phrase "Made In China"—has only extended Xu Zhen's reach and his reputation. In just over two years, MadeIn has shown at ShanghART Gallery, the artist's longtime dealer; Long March Space in Beijing; and James Cohan Gallery in New York. Last spring, the company had a solo show at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland.

"MadeIn takes the factory idea of Andy Warhol a step further," says Kunsthalle director Philippe Pirotte. "Xu Zhen's formation of MadeIn as a company is very conscious and self-reflective about the potential power China now has as a world art-market leader. When the Western world criticizes the Chinese art world as more market than discourse, Xu Zhen answers by saying that the only form of creative collaboration possible in China is a company." Now, as the head of MadeIn, Xu Zhen directs dozens of employees working in such areas as research and development, artistic production, and archives.

In Bern, MadeIn presented "Physique of Consciousness," which included photographs, videos, and demonstrations of an exercise routine based on prayer positions from various religions combined with movements from tai chi and martial arts. Pirotte discovered that visitors didn't know that the exhibition came from China or that Xu Zhen was behind it. In fact, many didn't realize that this was art at all and assumed that the museum was sponsoring an exercise program.

"The fact that Xu Zhen stopped being Xu Zhen the artist and became the CEO of a company: this would be considered suicide by the art market's definition of a career," Pirotte says. "But he took that risk and this has allowed him a kind of freedom."

Xu Zhen has made a career of pushing boundaries. Born in 1977 in a Shanghai that had not yet developed into a high-rise international city, he attended Shanghai Arts & Crafts Institute as a teenager. When he graduated in 1996, he decided not to continue his education. Instead, he moved to Beijing to be at the center of the new art movements he had heard about.

"I couldn't see myself spending my life painting from a model in a school," Xu Zhen says. He got the idea of going to Beijing after his father, a factory worker and carpenter, read him a news story about the famous Yuanmingyuan artist colony on the outskirts of the city, where artists such as Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun were living. But Xu Zhen never met these already successful characters. Instead, he spent a year hanging out with musicians and poets, talking about art more than making it. By the end of 1997 he had had enough, and he moved back to Shanghai. For the next several years, he, like many of his peers in Shanghai, worked in design companies to earn a living.

Xu Zhen's first works were videos because they were inexpensive to make. This was a time in China when performance art emphasized nudity, violence, and cruelty, and Xu Zhen's works were among the most extreme. *In Rainbow* (1998), a man's bare back turns red, but viewers don't see the person beating him; they only hear the sounds of slapping. In *Shouting* (1998), pedestrians on crowded street corners stop in their tracks, startled by the loud cries of the artist behind the camera. Most violent of all was *Not Doing Anything* (1999), in which Xu Zhen flings a dead cat against a concrete floor repeatedly until it becomes a bloody mess. When this video was shown in Italy, it was pulled from the exhibition, an incident Xu Zhen remembers as one of his first encounters with censorship—ironically, in a foreign country.

In 1999 Xu Zhen came to the attention of the Shanghai police when he cocurated an exhibition, "Art for Sale," in a shopping mall. "In Beijing, a prestigious show would be held at the National Art Museum, so I thought a shopping mall would be perfect for Shanghai, where no art museums existed then," he says. The authorities labeled several works pornographic, including Xu Zhen's three-channel video *From Inside the Body* (1999), in which he appears on the left screen as an anonymous man, opposite a woman on the right screen, while the center video shows an empty couch. Both he and the woman begin sniffing themselves and then undress, seemingly in search of a noxious odor. Finally they meet on the couch, not doing anything explicit beyond sniffing each other's bodies.

The police shut down the exhibition, and the artist was called in for questioning. In 2000, he was included in the infamous "Fuck Off" exhibition, curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi to coincide with the Shanghai Biennale. This show, too, closed soon after it opened because the authorities deemed the works too controversial.

By then Xu Zhen had joined forces with a young Italian artist named Davide Quadrio to form BizArt, one of the very few nonprofit art centers in China. Its name was meant ironically, since neither artist intended to make a business of selling art. Instead, they offered their services—graphic design, art advising, tour organizing—and then funneled earnings back into a gallery, which staged some of the most experimental shows in China along with organizing panels and conferences.

"He was one of the driving forces at BizArt," says Quadrio. "Remember, he was only 24 years old, and we were always plotting and thinking what direction to take. At the same time, he was already an important artist and a natural leader in the community of artists in Shanghai."

Even with his full-time involvement with BizArt, Xu Zhen was amazingly productive. In 2003, he created a series of digital prints on canvas, "Some Are Heavy," in which images taken from Internet porn sites are recomposed using

lines of tiny Chinese characters taken from Internet sex ads. He set up a mechanical device in the Duolun Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai that made the second floor of the building shake as if an earthquake were in progress. In 2004, for the Shanghai Biennale, he reconfigured the clock on the tower of the Shanghai Art Museum to spin out of control for the course of the exhibition. In 2005, he placed a synthetic-foam-and-resin replica of a tank with handprints covering its surface in a public park in Nanjing. And his video *Shouting* was featured in the first Chinese pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale.

That same year, Xu Zhen completed what is probably his most famous work, titled *8848-1.86*, referring to the height of the summit of Mount Everest minus his own height, in meters. The installation, shown a year later at ShanghART Gallery, which had been supporting the artist since 2000, was a faux documentary account of scaling the world's highest mountain and hacking off the peak to bring it back to China. There in the gallery, in a refrigerated oversize vitrine, was what purported to be the top of the mountain, a snowy peak surrounded by glass. Other items in the gallery included a video of the expedition, oxygen tanks and equipment allegedly used to make the trek, and photographs and logs. It was all so convincing that many reviewers writing about the show accepted that the climb had been made and that Everest was now a bit shorter.

"It is conceptually witty, it is provocative, it deals with all kinds of things in a lighthearted way," says Simon Groom, director of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, who included the work in the exhibition "The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China," at Tate Liverpool in 2007. "I thought this work really played into foreign perceptions of China's insensitivity to surrounding countries. It is about what's authentic in a culture where you have selective truth, and yet the country is changing so fast that the concept of truth itself becomes a slightly misleading term."

In addition to participating as an artist, Xu Zhen, along with art critic Karen Smith, cocurated the exhibition under Groom's direction. Groom was struck by Xu Zhen's vast knowledge of younger artists and new art trends in China.

"Some people call Xu Zhen the Maurizio Cattelan of China," says Defne Ayas, the Performa curator who invited Long March Space to bring Xu Zhen's performance piece *In Just a Blink of an Eye* to the James Cohan Gallery in New York in 2007 (where the artist's works now sell for between $30,000, for photos, videos, and smaller works, and $175,000, for large-scale sculptures and installations).

For *In Just a Blink of an Eye*, Xu Zhen positioned two illegal immigrants he encountered in New York's Chinatown on steel armatures that made them look as if they were caught mid-fall. "It achieves a sense of anxiety and precariousness," comments Ayas. "Immobilizing migrants in such compromised positions imbued the work with its monumental power."

Xu Zhen's last show as an artist was perhaps his most provocative. For his installation *The Starving of Sudan*, in 2008, he turned the white box of Long March Space into the scene from the 1993 Pulitzer Prize–winning photograph by Kevin Carter of an emaciated African child being eyed by a vulture waiting for him to die. In the gallery, Xu Zhen stationed a real child near an animatronic stuffed vulture, turning gallery visitors into voyeurs and impromptu photographers whipping out their cell phones to take pictures of the disturbing scene.

Likewise, MadeIn has courted controversy, especially when it chose to make fake Middle Eastern art for several exhibitions. Acting as if they were Middle Eastern artists themselves, MadeIn staffers created artworks—Styrofoam mosques and tapestries appropriating headlines and political cartoons—that weave together stereotypes and conceptual-art strategies. Many visitors to these exhibitions didn't realize that the works had been created by Chinese artists. The shows were intended as a critique of art-world trends—Chinese artists one year, Middle Easterners the next—and they humorously teased Westerners for their tendency to look for cultural stereotypes when considering artists from other parts of the world.

"Identity can be faked," says Xu Zhen. "When people from abroad see China, they think it is pretty exotic. So we decided to be foreigners and do exotic art that is totally from a different locale."

Does Xu Zhen think some Chinese artists fake Chinese-ness to appeal to foreigners? "Of course. Even a Western artist can be Zhang Xiaogang," he answers, referring to one of China's most famous contemporary art stars.

"Xu Zhen's work is political to the extent that he is always pushing boundaries," says Groom. "He knows he is operating in that context where those boundaries are strictly policed and is always on the edge of them." Meanwhile, MadeIn continues to expand its operations. It has taken over for BizArt, which closed in 2009, and now curates shows as well as running an Internet art chat room, Art-Ba-Ba.com, which has become the source of much of the news, gossip, and critical debate about art in China.

When asked to compare himself to Ai Weiwei, another artist who has made great use of the Internet, Xu Zhen expresses admiration but deflects any comparison. "Artists like Ai Weiwei have a desire to not just create art but to do things in Chinese contemporary society," he says. Xu Zhen would seem to have a similar impulse. But, he adds, "I can only express my ideas through my artworks." When asked directly if he wants to make a political statement with his art, he answers, "No, I cannot. I would disappear."

But Ayas, who has watched the Shanghai art scene develop over the past decade, as Xu Zhen's reputation has risen, sees him as much more than an artist. "Not only does Xu Zhen work as an artist, as an artistic director, and curator, but also as a collaborator, as an accomplice, a broker of all sorts, an entrepreneur, an activist, a philosopher, and definitely as a tastemaker," she says. "He is a great artist but also a great mentor."

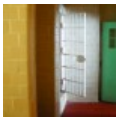
Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

ARTICLE TAGS

"8848-1.86"
"MADEIN"
"PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS"
BARBARA POLLACK
BIZART
XU ZHEN

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES


YOUNG AND WORLDLY: CHINA'S NEWEST COLLECTORS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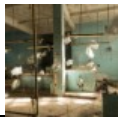
'FEITO POR BRASILEIROS/MADE BY BRAZILIANS' AT MATARAZZO HOSPITAL


WHEN DOES SURVEILLANCE ART CROSS THE LINE?