



# MOVING IN A BIGGER DIRECTION

*XU ZHEN & PHILIP TINARI*

**PHILIP TINARI:** You launched MadeIn Company in 2009, and four years later, the company (re-) released “Xu Zhen” as a brand. To use your own formulation, if the studio is a company and your works are various product lines, how do you judge the company’s returns?

**XU ZHEN:** An art company is not a regular company, but it’s also not an artist’s studio, so results are hard to measure. It’s like Apple, which announces its earnings every quarter but is not only interested in how much money it makes—Apple wants to have a cultural impact, for people to not only pay attention to its products but adopt its style. Our returns are still very small, and will probably remain so for some time. We have always sought to do things methodically, with a management system, a performance-assessment system, and a financial calculus that takes

into account how much cash we have and how many projects we hope to undertake. The biggest problem is that art constantly changes the models by which it operates. So even if you prepare everything systematically, it is possible that a creative idea might change, and then you need to alter the entire system. For this reason, it is still difficult to find metrics, financial or otherwise, for anything other than specific aspects of our work. Overall, we are still in an exploratory phase.

**PT:** In the past, you and MadeIn Company have opened a gallery, operated a website, organized exhibitions of other artists, and made publications. Is MadeIn now more focused on producing art?

**XZ:** Actually, we are in the process of moving in a bigger direction. In the next few years, we might establish a MadeIn Museum of Art. But that would first require there to be a MadeIn Foundation. For that, we need a strong financial footing. I think it is still a matter of time, as the conditions do not yet seem ripe.

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*PHILIP TINARI* is director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

**PT:** Many new, mostly private museums have recently opened in China, and in particular, in Shanghai—and still more are planned. You have worked with many of these new institutions. How do you see the development of art institutions here in Shanghai, and in China more generally?

**XZ:** In the process of working with them, you encounter all sorts of new money and new people, and these people bring their own new values. In the best scenario, people like us might be able to turn this novelty into something progressive. The contemporary art scene in China is in the midst of a transition from an extremely small, underground circle to a larger audience. Art is gradually becoming integrated into society. This is normal and even necessary; only in this way can art's market and viewership grow, and artists become strangely important.

Those who have been in the scene since the 1980s and '90s complain or struggle with the notion that everyone wasn't so pragmatic before, that these new players have created this situation, that society has changed fast and now people only care about their interests. But I have always believed that art should keep moving forward. If getting something done today requires drastic costs, perhaps that's just a characteristic of our moment. It's a simple matter of investment and returns, and if you think the outlays are too high, then go and do what Gu Dexin did a few years ago and stop making work—there's no other way.

I'm not overly nostalgic. In ten years' time, we will be sitting here discussing 2015. Yesterday I was reading an article about Beijing in the early '90s, when there was the artist village in Yuanmingyuan. It was quite moving. The writer said, "I don't envy the people of that time, but I envy that time." And from where we sit now, how relaxed that moment looks! A bunch of people getting together to make art, and nothing else—how wonderful! But this is just like how love is represented in pop songs, when the reality of marriage is altogether different. I think contemporary art today is more like a marriage.

**PT:** You caught the tail end of the underground era of contemporary Chinese art. At that time, there was definitely a sense that art could challenge, could rebel against the mainstream values of Chinese

society, against the official cultural system, and indeed against one-party rule. Do you feel that spirit still exists?

**XZ:** I do. Because when I ask myself why I do what I do, it's still about the same thing, some sort of romantic notion. It's just that the means of expression have changed, and most important, the costs. Today an artist needs to make huge outlays to have the same impact he could have twenty years ago with just a small office. Why? Because the circumstances of production have changed. So we look busier today, but in essence, we are the same as ever.

**PT:** What is that "romantic notion"?

**XZ:** The expression of individual values. The individual's demand to be heard and respected. The joy that accrues from seeking it.

**PT:** A theme that I note throughout your work is the unlikely juxtaposition of contradictory symbols or states, and the sense of displacement thus formed. For example, I'm thinking of the routine of calisthenics you launched under the title *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS* (2013), in which gestures of devotion and cultivation from a wide range of cultures and civilizations are put together into a single routine. It seems like a kind of creed, an ambiguous manifesto.

**XZ:** Yes, and it comes from personal experience. In my own house, we are Buddhist; other friends are Christian or Daoist. The more religions I come into contact with, the more I feel they are all correct. Yet I still feel empty, that life is ultimately meaningless. So I started thinking about whether there might be a way of putting all these things together, even if they would individually never want this to happen. That was the impetus for this work. The idea was to put things together on the level of physical activity. You could say this work is deeply religious, or deeply political, but you can also choose not to discuss those aspects and instead see it as an act of intellectual, anthropological classification. I am not the sort of artist who knows any one field intimately; I think mostly in terms of overall directions, and so I am well suited to make these sorts of comparative propositions. I am comfortable with innovating in terms of the larger structure, and not thinking too much about the finer details. That is my creative method. I feel that a work like this is a product of this contemporary moment,

Xu Zhen



*XU ZHEN, PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS MUSEUM, 2014, Sapelle wood, C-print, acrylic glass, glass, dimensions variable, produced by Madefn Company, exhibition view, "Xu Zhen - A Madefn Company Production," Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2014 / MUSEUM DER KONSTITUTION DES BEWUSSTSEINS, Sapelli-Holz, C-Print, Acrylglas, Glas, Masse variabel, Ausstellungsansicht.*

but it will not go out of fashion. And you will find that many of our works are moving in this same direction—contemporary creation, but hopefully of the sort that will not be filtered out by history, that can remain. Last year, I had a conversation with art historian Lu Mingjun about this shift from making particular works of art to something more akin to articulating a cultural sensibility.

**PT:** There is a lot of talk about “post-Internet art” right now. Do you feel the concept has any connection to what you do?

**XZ:** Everyone around me seems to have spent much of last year discussing two concepts—post-Internet and postproduction. Post-Internet finds easy acceptance among young artists because it looks so easy to replicate. Take something and break it down, spray

on it, paste something on the wall, draw a line—it's as if the term has given everyone the key to a new way of art-making. But as I said to my colleagues, we've been doing this stuff for years, even if we never codified it as a particular artistic movement. We are always working toward finished products, thinking little about the processes leading up to them. But if you look at our "TRUE IMAGE" (2010–) series, or the *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS MUSEUM* (2013–)—a set of images mounted on acrylic boards and displayed in museum cases—they all seem quite post-Internet. I'm sure that this year there will be many more post-Internet works. I know young Chinese artists who have pivoted completely in that direction.

**PT:** And what about postproduction?

**XZ:** The concept comes from a book by Nicolas Bourriaud, who writes about how artists today use readymades in their creations. He sees the postproduction notion of the readymade as different from Duchamp's more absolute understanding, instead looking at combinations of different objects. This

notion perhaps already seems dated—the book was written in 2002—but it was just translated into Chinese this year, so everyone read it, and perhaps we have all processed it already. Post-Internet still needs to be digested, because its most important element is that it becomes so difficult to distinguish who made which work, or for that matter, if a work was made by a Chinese or a foreign artist. And this is very important for a new generation of artists here, who don't see a huge difference between themselves and artists from outside China.

**PT:** That's interesting, if only because contemporary art from China has historically relied on symbols and narratives that have some sort of direct connection to Chinese reality, Chinese traditions, Chinese politics. And it seems that this becomes less and less relevant as artists in China become more knowledgeable about dynamics beyond China and more incorporated into global networks.

**XZ:** Yes, and this page will definitely be turned. The generation of Huang Yong Ping, which came of age

*XU ZHEN, PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS MUSEUM – EPISTOMIA, 2014, Sapeli wood, C-print, acrylic glass, glass, 67 x 39 1/2 x 67", produced by MadeIn Company / PHYSIK DES BEWUSSTSEINSMUSEUMS – EPISTOMIA, Sapelli-Holz, C-Print, Acrylglas, Glas, 170 x 100 x 170 cm.*



in the '80s and then moved to the West after 1989, firmly believes that we are Chinese, you are European, those others are American. But perhaps our generation is saying, sorry, we are all the same, and we're interested in completely different questions. This is a big shift.

You can see this in MadeIn's work. Previously, we made quite a number of works in different forms. You couldn't call them experimental, but they were less material. And perhaps now we are more interested in materiality, in rendering a logical verdict on the existence of the object. In obvious ways, we have upped our technical requirements for fabrication. Many people think this has to do with commercial pressures, but I consider it more a matter of requirements for the ontological presence of the artwork.

**PT:** That idea makes me think of Jeff Koons: The main argument advanced in his favor is that he turns material requirements into a kind of experimental practice, seeks perfection with a religious fervor, uses production as a way of refining and elaborating his concepts.

**XZ:** I feel like Koons's importance has not yet been truly felt. I have always believed that in a pragmatic art world, he is at the top. Others find him commercial, and their understanding stops on this level. The explanations you just mentioned are great, but many people don't bother to consider them. I think much of what he does is philosophical. If you polish something to that degree, if your requirements are that high, this is no longer a simple commercial question but an ontological one. I thought his retrospective

in New York last year, at the Whitney Museum, was an amazing exhibition. The Whitney looked a bit sad—it seems so gray inside—but this did not have any influence on the logic of the exhibition. The other day, the director of the Pompidou came by and asked me directly, "What is the difference between you and Koons?" I replied that Koons is an artist with a studio while we are a company; this is still different. And then he asked whether I thought Koons or Hirst was the greater artist. We spent much of last year researching these people, and I think Koons is the greater artist by far. Of course, Hirst made his shark, his cows, and with them brought up an entire generation of British art and that is amazing, but I still think more of Koons. His philosophy is incredibly consistent, and it's frightening the extent to which there are no superfluous works in his oeuvre. He's like a small child with a scarily high IQ. From those vacuum cleaners in his series "THE NEW" (1980–87) onward, everything is so complete. That's how I see it, but many people in China don't agree.

**PT:** Another artist I thought it might be interesting to talk about with you is Sigmar Polke.

**XZ:** Polke started from the perspective of "I," wanting to express something through art, whereas for Koons, the self seems to become unimportant. That is the direction I hope to move in. If you look at Polke's styles, they changed a great deal over the years; I used to find that incredibly impressive, but from a perspective of cultural strength and absoluteness, that diversity becomes a kind of flatness. Many people love his work, but perhaps no one loves it abso-



*XU ZHEN, MADEIN CURVED VASE – BLUE AND JUN YAO GLAZED LOTUS SEEDPOD VASE, QIANLONG PERIOD, QING DYNASTY, 2014.*

*porcelain, 6 7/8 x 6 7/8 x 12 1/4", produced by MadeIn Company, exhibition view, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2014 / MADEIN GEBOGENE VASE – LOTOSSAMEN-HÜLSEN-VASE, BLAU UND JUN-YAO-GLASIERT, QIANLONG-PERIODE, QING-DYNASTIE, Porzellan, 17 x 17 x 31 cm, Ausstellungsansicht.*



*XU ZHEN, ETERNITY – NORTHERN QI STANDING BUDDHA, AMAZON AND BARBARIAN, 2014, glass fiber reinforced concrete, marble grains, metal, gold foil, each 119 1/2 x 39 1/2 x 133 1/2", produced by Madeln Company, exhibition view, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2014 / EWIGKEIT – STEHENDER BUDDHA, NÖRDLICHE QI, AMAZONE UND BARBAR, glasfaserverstärkter Beton, Marmorhörner, Metall, Goldfolie, je 304 x 100 x 340 cm, Ausstellungsansicht.*

lutely. Whereas with Koons, those who like the work, love it; and those who dislike it, hate it. So I consider him and Polke two different cultural forms.

**PT:** This desire to avoid self-expression seems like the impetus behind the "UNDER HEAVEN" (2012-) series, for which you apply pigment to the support with a cake decorator's bag and nozzle, to create paintings that look like gaudy birthday cakes.

**XZ:** Yes, and that's why I've become so interested in this idea of artworks as product lines. We are working on catalogues now to introduce our different series

of works, our product lines. They look and feel like automobile sales brochures.

**PT:** This drive toward outright corporatization is also a stylistic and aesthetic question. If you really want to achieve the look and texture of advertising, then the quality of the paper, the character of the layout, the feel of the texts all need to be considered.

**XZ:** We will gradually start to outsource this work to advertising companies. We just began a month ago, establishing an advertising division inside our own company, and changing our graphic design and

Xu Zhen

XU ZHEN, EUROPEAN THOUSAND-ARMS CLASSICAL SCULPTURE, 2014, glass fiber reinforced concrete, marble grains, mineral pigments, marble, metal, 53 7/8 x 14 3/4 x 5 1/2', produced by Modeln Company, exhibition view, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2014 / EUROPÄISCHE KLASSISCHE TAUSEND-HAND-SKULPTUR, glasfaserverstärkter Beton, Marmorkörner, Mineral-Pigmente, Marmor, Metall, 16,43 x 4,5 x 1,7 m, Ausstellungsansicht.



writing style accordingly. I find this a lot of fun. We tried to work with advertising companies from the beginning, but it has been difficult. They don't know what we want to do. Lately, we have been working on an advertisement for the "UNDER HEAVEN" paintings, but this also becomes a work of video art. And the posters we make might be photographic works in their own right. This is interesting—the many possibilities of so many different styles and ways of thinking.

PT: What does classical civilization, Western or Chinese, mean to you? It appears as a straw man in so many of your recent works, most recently the "ETERNITY" (2013-) series, where you juxtapose replicas of famous examples of Greek and Northern Wei sculptures—literally neck to neck—and yet I get the sense from our conversations that it's not something you feel particularly burdened by, or acutely compelled to overthrow. XZ: I don't think it needs to be overthrown. Like we were saying before, my overwhelming impression of





our current moment is that there are no clear national boundaries, and that perhaps my own values and those of my collaborators are not particularly Chinese. I don't really even think about these questions anymore, but when curators and museum people come to the studio, they often remark how what we are doing is unlike what they see elsewhere in China. I think that's great, because the way I work isn't very Chinese. People all over the world eat and drink and use more or less the same things, and many Chinese

traditions are long gone from our lives. Some people find this sad, but it's reality. And perhaps that's the biggest problem for our generation—we don't really even know what culture is. We are not infatuated with anything. I could never say that I love Chinese painting. I might like it, but not with any overwhelming passion. I believe that our generation is tasked with doing things, with making things, with creating. That is our special characteristic. As for what we specifically go about making—that seems less important.

Xu Zhen

# MadeIn Heaven

— *Corporations are people, my friend.*<sup>11</sup>

Is the creation of MadeIn Company, by the artist Xu Zhen, a rational expression of an era marked by the erasure of distinctions between corporations and people? To be sure, Xu Zhen is not the first artist to transform himself into a company, and countless others incorporate more quietly to maximize their income and maneuverability. But MadeIn may be special in at least one respect: The company's production could be understood increasingly to contemplate the notion of heaven—not offering up a clear picture the way religious authorities might, yet keeping this abstraction in focus as a question.

MONIKA SZEWCZYK

My first real glimpse of MadeIn dates back to 2009, the year of the company's formation, and the year I visited China for the first time. The group show "Seeing One's Own Eyes: Contemporary Art from the Middle East" was on view at Shanghai's ShangHART Gallery. (I had not traveled to Shanghai expecting to learn first about that proverbial "nearer" East, but confronting my own surprise at finding such a show in China did somehow make me reflect, or see in-

side my own eyes, as it were.) If the system of the exhibition neatly bypassed the centrality of the West, the strange recognition elicited by the ensemble of works could not be said to entirely reform the gaze that has been formulated there.<sup>12</sup> On display were various sculptures, collages, and reliefs that drew on an iconography as familiar to the visitor of Art Basel as it would be to the readers of the *New York Times* or *Artforum*. Everything looked, well, just like contemporary art for the global market should: generically evocative forms spiced with enough ethnic detail to make their consumption feel like a border crossing.

MONIKA SZEWCZYK currently lives in Athens, where she is a curator for Documenta 14 (2017).



XU ZHEN, *CALM*, 2009, water mattress, motor, brick, earth, dust, 275  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 197 x 8",  
 produced by MadeIn Company, installation view /  
*RUHE*, Wasserbett, Motor, Ziegelsteine, Erde, Staub, 700 x 500 x 20 cm.

albeit a very smooth one, producing minimal difference and minimal threat.

Still, long after getting the jokes, one work from the exhibition stood out: a pile of rubble covering a large waterbed, thereby undulating ever so slowly, almost imperceptibly, and simply entitled *CALM* (2009). Although, in the context of the Middle Eastern exhibition, this strangely moving form could be seen to evoke the aftermath of destruction one associates with the world's most telegenically troubled region, its name and actual behavior (i.e. its horizontality and serene animation) paradoxically promised

something that only seems possible in another life: namely, peace in the Middle East.

I took note and resolved to show *CALM* in "Nether Land," an exhibition I was planning with Nicolaus Schafhausen at the Dutch Culture Center (a temporary venue built for Shanghai's World Expo in 2010). "Nether Land" intersected several cross-cultural projections or artists' views onto cultures that were not their own,<sup>31</sup> in an attempt to strike a somewhat dissonant note among the kind of production of national essences for mass consumption that occur at world's fairs, including biennials and other perennial

and “global” exhibitions of contemporary art. In MadeIn’s first exhibition, and perhaps particularly in CALM, I recognized a wry wisdom about the traps of this kind of exposure. This year, reading the catalogue of MadeIn’s latest exhibition, I was intrigued to find Huang Zhuan, an eminent critic and curator who has helped to shape the terms that define Chinese contemporary art for close to thirty years, mention CALM as a standout work:

*I have a soft spot for the work that used bricks (CALM). It’s not like all the other works, it really is “good.” The ones with the boat or the trapeze, for instance, they still rely on symbols. You can see that it’s still a game, you can see how it’s played. But CALM would still be a “good” work no matter what context in which you place it.<sup>31</sup>*

What makes CALM special? Is it that in slipping outside popular symbolism one finds on Google, it achieves a kind of autonomy—a sense that the imagination at work in making it is free of clichés and thereby capable of producing a new image or better still of quieting down visual noise?

When MadeIn Company recently produced its maker—Xu Zhen—for the exhibition “Movement Field” (2014), the gesture somehow confirmed that the artist who founded the company in the first place was becoming a special kind of product. But was he or is he still human? Is the person born of the corporation somehow distinct from the mortal whose only mother is a woman, whose only father is a man? In “Movement Field” (as in other exhibitions produced by MadeIn), there was little to be gleaned in terms of Xu Zhen’s biography, personhood, or personality. As the artist works collaboratively with his studio employees and less formal advisors and producers (all of whom are very rarely profiled or named), this deflection from individual biography could somehow be seen as a new kind of autobiography. What we get is a counter-image of the psychological subject; a strange entity asserts itself whose complex, communal makeup mirrors that of the corporation. Is it not, after all, the uncertain subjectivity of the corpora-

I’ll go a little further. I think the particular pleasure of CALM stems from its ability to “play the game,” and play it quite shrewdly but also to offer something extra. This element exceeds the rational calculation, the head-spinning, circular logic and the delirious volley of references that can be said to characterize most works by MadeIn. Perhaps, like MadeIn’s best products, it opens up to something that is missing in so much (art) production within what is now called the “new spirit of capitalism.” That something carries another kind of “spirit.” Somehow the subtle animation of CALM suggests an anima, and a peaceful one at that. And although it can be difficult to find a name for that part of existence, which tends to be drained by human functioning inside a capitalist system, one should not be embarrassed to try. For now, I will simply call it heaven. What makes MadeIn interesting is that—rather than resisting capitalism overtly—its questioning of the heavenly realm, which might just undo or otherwise transform capitalism’s soul-draining spirit, seems to come from *inside* the corporate frame.

tion—the fact that it is driven by people yet able to act as a kind of super-subjectivity, at times strategically depersonalized, at times all too human—that lends it so much power in today’s transforming environment, where market forces are often spoken about as if they had feelings of distrust or confidence?

“Movement Field” concentrated on abstractions, or the abstraction of human beings to be precise: lines describing the movements of multitudes in protests (often against the rise of corporate power) and marches across the world. The exhibition title echoed the name of an ongoing (one could even say living) work, which first manifested as a series of “horizontal monuments” inscribed in the landscape—paths matching the trajectories traveled by protesters and other mass movers in the streets of cities as diverse as Cairo, London, Santiago, and Ottawa. Again, the individual is nowhere to be seen or felt, but the viewer experiences MOVEMENT FIELD by walking along these paths, joining the protests in an abstract



XU ZHEN, MOVEMENT FIELD, 2013, grass, earth, stone, trees, dimensions variable,  
 produced by MadeIn Company, exhibition view, "The Garden of Diversion," Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, 2013 /  
 BEWEGUNGSFELD, Gras, Erde, Stein, Bäume, Masse variabel, Ausstellungsansicht.

way. And here a question arises: If the corporation is the corporeality (the incorporation) of the "spirit of capitalism," might the only way to transform, reform, or downright oppose this increasingly powerful entity lie precisely in a different kind of incorporation, understood as embodiment? The lack of corporeality—the dehumanizing abstraction of the human makeup of companies, which is the great threat of corporations to human value—is here asserted by the

ultra-abstraction of the work, and then (potentially) subverted by the mindful, embodied engagement by human individuals.

MadeIn Company's oeuvre can also be characterized as moves within a playing field. And the artist's work might attract scorn precisely for being "just a game"—as does so much art made in China. Yet MadeIn somehow takes this scorn—or what Xu Zhen associates with the "Western gaze" (something he has



XU ZHEN, *CURRENCY'S IDEAL*, 2014, limited edition toy, fabric, mixed media,  
 18 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 19 1/2", produced by MadeIn Company / WÄHRUNGSIDEAL, Spielzeug, limitierte Auflage,  
 Stoff, verschiedene Materialien, 46 x 17 x 50 cm.

felt since he entered the picture)<sup>65</sup>—and absorbs it into the DNA of its works. Now critics in both the East and the West agree that MadeIn is clever. Some will venture to say that, of all the artists in China trying to be clever, “it’s only MadeIn that’s really solved the system’s riddle.”<sup>66</sup>

Consider what another corporation, the publication giant Phaidon, had to say about the phenomenon, on the occasion of Xu Zhen’s invitation to be the featured artist at last year’s Armory Show in New York:<sup>67</sup>

*Finally, those after a \$10,000 souvenir of the 2014 fairs should register their interest in Xu’s special Benefit edition, produced exclusively for the fair, CURRENCY’S IDEAL, 2014. This soft sculpture of a ponderous figure atop of a wringer churning out bank notes reinterprets Rodin’s THE*

*THINKER in the style of Claes Oldenburg, with a touch of Cattelan perhaps. Proof that, when it comes to art fairs, East Asian artists are now thinking along the same lines as the rest of us.*<sup>68</sup>

Please reread that last sentence. Let the sense of relief sink in: *Finally, a Chinese artist who thinks just like “us”—let’s welcome him to the US!*

Is this heaven? Surely, the company is basking in a halo of praise, critical acclaim, and some financial success. But I think MadeIn matters not only because the enterprise is clever enough to match the expectations of its Western audience or because it confirms the image the West has of itself as exporter of culture. MadeIn does all this while, with its very name, it rubs in the indisputable reality of China’s extraordinary productivity and enormous trade surplus. The

company's name is like an empire that wants to go on, to extend—seemingly prophesying a whole world made in China. Still, if the project playfully nods toward China's imperial self-image—positioning itself on the productive side of 天下 (pronounced *tien-hsia*, meaning “under heaven”<sup>10</sup>)—it also complicates the very idea of a nation.

MadeIn Company points to the notion of the nation as a corporation and leaves the position of art or culture ambiguous. On the one hand, art might simply be a tool for the successful commodification of a national brand. As such, art is perhaps not entirely *under heaven* (within the nation, the world) but hovering in the heavens so that it can perceive and produce an image of what lies underneath. At these times, art must take up what, from my current domicile in Athens, I might call the “Olympic viewpoint”: a kind of removed, universal, even heavenly stance, which remains at a critical distance from the action. The elevated view of protest routes is perhaps only possible from this vantage point. But it is available to anyone who looks at Google Maps. And yet, art's heavenly dimension is not always and not entirely the production of critical distance—and this is crucial.

What lies beyond or deeper within (art in the service of) the corporation-nation? And how can this alterity be rendered corporeal? MadeIn's research into what it calls *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS* (2011–)—an exhaustive collection of data on and re-enactment of religious, political, and otherwise socially potent rituals, exercises, gestures, and forms aimed at the transformation of spirit or ideology—may be interpreted wryly as new age pabulum for the soul-starved, dehumanized masses.<sup>10</sup> But watching the video of the *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS EXERCISE 1* (which is available on YouTube as a kind of promotional tool, in good corporate fashion), it is also possible to follow the slow movement of the monk-like demonstrator (cast against a celestial background, submerged in synthetic massage-parlor sounds, and guided by soothing, English-accented female instruction) and come to other conclusions. For those inclined to understand contemporary art as false consciousness alone, this can prove an awkward image due to its unwinking aspirations toward holistic healing and cultural fitness through exercise.

The consciousness at stake here is not true or correct (the opposite of false). It is physical; thus, the old division between physical and mental processes dissolves slowly, and something that has not been part of art for centuries comes back from a repressed state.

I will conclude provisionally with a proposal that this is a kind of heaven in the making. Certainly, the mission is far from accomplished. As Guo Juan writes of the *MOVEMENT FIELD* project:

*The decision to undertake this work carries with it certain risks. It means the forced, rushed release of a road map that one has publicly acknowledged can never be successfully completed; it means making one's future suppositions the fixed prerequisites for further discussion. And yet the artist's goal remains: changing the world in which we live. This means more than mocking modern life, or offering a purely intellectual challenge. It goes beyond establishing a complete symbolic system—even if the system established is in balance with the real world, and can both generate and deconstruct itself. Symbols cannot ever really truly replace the world, and life is more than the rules of some game. Perception remains, for us, a basic ability worth cherishing.<sup>11</sup>*

Much practice, exercise, and repetition is needed to reshape perception. And perhaps exercise must come ahead of spiritual awakening.<sup>12</sup> The eureka impulse of the Enlightenment is there to confuse things. For centuries, art has tended to serve this impulse through the production of consumable symbols. As a result, we have too few tools for embodying, let alone persisting in any consciousness for longer than an “aha” moment. Some weird idea of pure spirit haunts us. Meanwhile, the body cannot be imagined. To add to the problem, many corporations want to render human bodies robotic, working away to produce even themselves as consumables that will be cannibalized and sometimes shared by other starving souls. The deceptively simple question of what happens when art incorporates needs to be asked again (and again). Does the artist, who has partly given up on the classical notion of an individual human subjectivity and begins to experiment with corporate personhood, have a special opportunity to imagine another kind of existence? It seems that MadeIn has begun to address these questions, but much work remains. To persevere in this quest, to preserve the necessary *chi*, one must relax and stay calm.

company's name is like an empire that wants to go on, to extend—seemingly prophesying a whole world made in China. Still, if the project playfully nods toward China's imperial self-image—positioning itself on the productive side of 天下 (pronounced *tien-hsia*, meaning “under heaven”<sup>10</sup>)—it also complicates the very idea of a nation.

MadeIn Company points to the notion of the nation as a corporation and leaves the position of art or culture ambiguous. On the one hand, art might simply be a tool for the successful commodification of a national brand. As such, art is perhaps not entirely *under heaven* (within the nation, the world) but hovering in the heavens so that it can perceive and produce an image of what lies underneath. At these times, art must take up what, from my current domicile in Athens, I might call the “Olympic viewpoint”: a kind of removed, universal, even heavenly stance, which remains at a critical distance from the action. The elevated view of protest routes is perhaps only possible from this vantage point. But it is available to anyone who looks at Google Maps. And yet, art's heavenly dimension is not always and not entirely the production of critical distance—and this is crucial.

What lies beyond or deeper within (art in the service of) the corporation-nation? And how can this alterity be rendered corporeal? MadeIn's research into what it calls *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS* (2011–)—an exhaustive collection of data on and re-enactment of religious, political, and otherwise socially potent rituals, exercises, gestures, and forms aimed at the transformation of spirit or ideology—may be interpreted wryly as new age pabulum for the soul-starved, dehumanized masses.<sup>10</sup> But watching the video of the *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS EXERCISE 1* (which is available on YouTube as a kind of promotional tool, in good corporate fashion), it is also possible to follow the slow movement of the monk-like demonstrator (cast against a celestial background, submerged in synthetic massage-parlor sounds, and guided by soothing, English-accented female instruction) and come to other conclusions. For those inclined to understand contemporary art as false consciousness alone, this can prove an awkward image due to its unwinking aspirations toward holistic healing and cultural fitness through exercise.

The consciousness at stake here is not true or correct (the opposite of false). It is physical; thus, the old division between physical and mental processes dissolves slowly, and something that has not been part of art for centuries comes back from a repressed state.

I will conclude provisionally with a proposal that this is a kind of heaven in the making. Certainly, the mission is far from accomplished. As Guo Juan writes of the *MOVEMENT FIELD* project:

*The decision to undertake this work carries with it certain risks. It means the forced, rushed release of a road map that one has publicly acknowledged can never be successfully completed; it means making one's future suppositions the fixed prerequisites for further discussion. And yet the artist's goal remains: changing the world in which we live. This means more than mocking modern life, or offering a purely intellectual challenge. It goes beyond establishing a complete symbolic system—even if the system established is in balance with the real world, and can both generate and deconstruct itself. Symbols cannot ever really truly replace the world, and life is more than the rules of some game. Perception remains, for us, a basic ability worth cherishing.<sup>11</sup>*

Much practice, exercise, and repetition is needed to reshape perception. And perhaps exercise must come ahead of spiritual awakening.<sup>12</sup> The eureka impulse of the Enlightenment is there to confuse things. For centuries, art has tended to serve this impulse through the production of consumable symbols. As a result, we have too few tools for embodying, let alone persisting in any consciousness for longer than an “aha” moment. Some weird idea of pure spirit haunts us. Meanwhile, the body cannot be imagined. To add to the problem, many corporations want to render human bodies robotic, working away to produce even themselves as consumables that will be cannibalized and sometimes shared by other starving souls. The deceptively simple question of what happens when art incorporates needs to be asked again (and again). Does the artist, who has partly given up on the classical notion of an individual human subjectivity and begins to experiment with corporate personhood, have a special opportunity to imagine another kind of existence? It seems that MadeIn has begun to address these questions, but much work remains. To persevere in this quest, to preserve the necessary *chi*, one must relax and stay calm.



# Indecent

PHILIPPE PIROTTE

## Proposals

More than ever, images pretend to give us direct access to reality itself. The ever-expanding media act as our "eyes on the world," providing us with information about what happens across the globe. But there are too many events to capture, and too many images to digest, day in and day out. Critics have often argued that Xu Zhen's work questions the media and official narratives, revealing how we are too easily manipulated and fooled by our eyes. This comment is certainly not an incorrect description, but the artist pushes beyond this evident fact to a harder truth: our own complicity in what we choose to see and what we ignore.

Many visitors to Xu Zhen's exhibition "Impossible Is Nothing" (2008) at Long March Space, Beijing, were disturbed when they entered a hot, brightly lit room containing an artificial Sahel landscape. An African toddler crawled around in the dirt as a mechanical stuffed vulture fixed its gaze upon her.<sup>1)</sup> Some people immediately walked out of the installation and exited the gallery while others engaged in heated debate. *THE STARVING OF SUDAN* (2008), as this work is called, had such an impact on most viewers that they forgot it was only one of two installations in Xu Zhen's solo exhibition, which borrowed its title from an Adidas advertisement. In the first gallery space, visitors encountered *DECORATION* (2000), featuring a large spaceship and a video that appears to show astronauts working inside. This room was deliberately left unheated, in the middle of winter, to provide a palpable sense of the extreme cold of outer space. The contrast between the two works was enormous, and the slogany title of the exhibition amplified its uncertainty, ironic questioning, and cynicism as well as the queasy feeling it gave visitors.

The tableau of *THE STARVING OF SUDAN* was a faithful re-creation of a famous photograph by South African photographer Kevin Carter, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize in 1993. Carter's photograph shows a vulture eyeing a girl as she lies on the ground, exhausted and near starvation. The vulture appears menacing, and the photo provoked a flurry of

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XU ZHEN, *THE STARVING OF SUDAN*, 2008, performance, video, photographs, dimensions variable, exhibition view, "Impossible Is Nothing," Long March Space, Beijing, 2008 / *DAS HUNGERN DES SUDAN*, Performance, Video, Photographien, Masse variabel, Ausstellungsansicht.

commentary on the ethics of photojournalism.<sup>37</sup> Critics stated that Carter should have helped the child, instead of taking a picture. Even though the impression created by the photo was not entirely true to life,<sup>38</sup> Carter had violated a taboo by showing us something we did not wish to see. Shortly after the opening of his exhibition, I asked Xu Zhen what he hoped to achieve by staging this provocative scene; his contentious answer was “没有意思” (mèi yǒu yìsì), which roughly translates as: “It has no meaning.”

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag writes that “the frustration of not being able to do anything about what the images show may be translated into an accusation of the indecency of regarding such images.”<sup>39</sup> We reject the image as if in self-defense when someone attempts to insinuate such horror into our “reality.” The effect, however, is to isolate the object of horror, to quarantine it outside “reality,” and to neutralize it, at the risk of completely and irreversibly depriving it of meaning.

Viewers of *THE STARVING OF SUDAN* could only enter the space from the one corner that placed them at the same point from which the photograph was taken. At first, many of them unwittingly re-enacted the shooting of the photograph with their own digital cameras and cell phones.<sup>40</sup> These amateur photographers were manipulated into capturing a staged situation exactly as Carter himself had framed his own tableau.



XU ZHEN, *DECORATION*, 2008, mixed media, exhibition view,  
*"Impossible is Nothing," Long March Space, Beijing, 2008 /*  
*DECORATION, verschiedene Materialien, Ausstellungsansicht.*

We have all become inured to the inflationary, and often spectacular, production and consumption of images of human suffering in the media. Nevertheless, many gallery visitors felt uncomfortable with this emotionally charged scene, which raised questions of exploitation; Western viewers in particular were troubled by the racial dimensions of the work. Chinese viewers, however, saw another possible meaning: Was Xu Zhen pointing out the link between China's global—and even cosmic—ambitions and its dependence on oil from Darfur?<sup>60</sup>

Xu Zhen had previously explored the optics of photography in the performance installation *IN JUST A BLINK OF AN EYE* (2005). In this work, a performer seems to defy gravity as he or she tilts backward, as if ready to topple—and yet remains frozen in place. Of course, this is an illusion, achieved via a metal armature on which the performer lies. But as in *THE STARVING OF SUDAN*, the viewers' freedom to frame reality in time and space to their choosing with their cameras is reversed as they are faced by a kind of three-dimensional photograph. Although first shown in Beijing, *IN JUST A BLINK OF AN EYE* was later presented in New York and Europe, each time performed by a local Chinese migrant laborer: In place of the usual image of China as superpower, we encounter the fragile image of a citizen who has left home to enter the global workforce. The proximity of performer to viewer only accentuates the differences between their positions. We might be awestruck by the virtuosity of the performer, upset by the global economic structures and racism the performance references, or, again, indignant at the work's obscene exploitation of the performer, but this spectacle is only a snapshot of a reality that we usually avoid confronting.



XU ZHEN, *DECORATION*, 2008, exhibition view, "Impossible is Nothing," Long March Space, Beijing, 2008 / *DECORATION*, Ausstellungsaussicht.

In 2009, Xu Zhen rebranded himself as MadeIn Company, but his provocation persists. Take, for example, the series "PLAY" (2011–12), in which silicone sculptures of naked women with beaded necklaces, feathered headdresses, and some even with lip plates are suspended from the ceiling and tied in hemp rope, in a manner reminiscent of *Kinbaku*, a Japanese form of sexual bondage. The women depicted in the sculptures were widely perceived to be African tribeswomen, which the artist denies; rather, he hints at the eagerness of audiences to read artworks as problematic. Yet the underlying message is no less polemical, as the tight bindings around the artwork in the gallery space point to the hierarchies and power dynamics present throughout the art world. On a more "playful" level, however, Xu Zhen has created a reflection of the captivated viewer, both troubled and excited. The art of *Kinbaku* lies in the rigger's skill at constraining his partner while providing pleasure, turning immobilization into liberation. For Xu Zhen, this is a metaphor for spectatorship.

- 1) The three-year-old child, born to Guinean immigrants, performed for five hours a day for three weeks, under the supervision of her mother, who was paid by the artist for the project.
- 2) In fact, the moral reproach heaped on Carter was so overwhelming that the photographer took his own life some months later.
- 3) Vultures often waited in that area because food was delivered there.
- 4) Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), 105.
- 5) Colin Chinnery, "MadeIn by MadeIn" in *MadeIn Company*, no. 6 in the series "Inside the White Cube" (London: White Cube, 2012).
- 6) Katherine Don, "Xu Zhen at Long March Space," *Art in America* (May 2009), 167.





EDITION FOR PARKETT 96

XU ZHEN

**THE TRIBAL CHIEF'S NEW CLOTHES, 2015**

Various fabrics, 14 1/8 x 7 7/8 x 7 1/8",  
produced by MadeIn Company.  
Ed. 35/XX, signed and numbered certificate.

Verschiedene Textilien, 36 x 20 x 19 cm,  
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PARKETT

