

Schloss — Post

Studio Beijing

Sunburns and Sleeping Bags

with Xinjun Zhang by Meta Marina Beeck — Sep 13,
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»From Dali to Zhengzhou«, Installation with wood, rope
and paper ticket, 2012

»I was and I still am very close to Beijing and all of China in a period of transition, and that raised my strong awareness of surroundings. It is very important to me.«

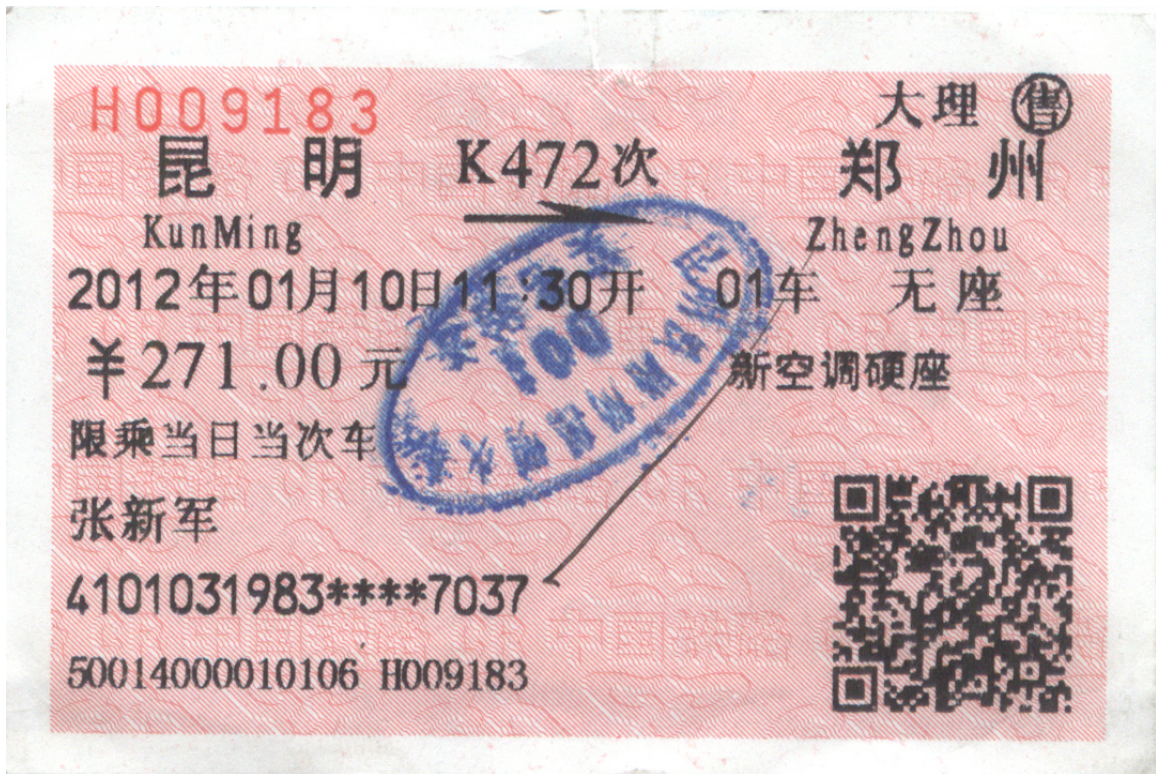
Xinjun Zhang

What do materials tell about the environment they come from? How can this be related to conceptual and performance art? And how did performance art emerge in China? A talk with Chinese artist Xinjun Zhang interviewed by curator Meta Marina Beeck tracing his way from being a student of oil painting to his strong interest in performance art and in the materiality of surroundings and bodies.

Meta Marina Beeck: I have followed your artistic practice for five years. In 2012, we met at a talk of documenta(13)'s artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, which took place at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, where you had graduated three years before. In 2011/12 you started to do your first performances and I was enrolled in the Chinese language studies program at Peking University. After graduating from the oil painting department, you were more interested in other media such as installation, performance, and video art. One of your earliest performances *From Dali to Zhengzhou* (2012) originated during the spring festival in China, when you traveled to Dali

in Yunnan Province. One has to know that every year, circa 750 millions of Chinese return home to their relatives to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Trains are notoriously overbooked at this time of year, and you were only able to get a standing ticket. You constructed a stool out of wood and mossy rope that you collected at the Er Lake – 洱海. Can you say something about the work at this early stage of your artistic practice?

Xinjun Zhang: I graduated from the oil painting department, but very soon I got bored with the training of painting naked models; after graduation I focused on different media. *From Dali to Zhengzhou* has its origins in the situation I had to face when being confronted with the circumstance of standing 30 hours on the train to get back home. I was thinking about a way to help myself out of this uncomfortable situation and how to endure the tiring journey. By accident I found some mossy sticks and then started to construct a seat out of ropes, nails, and the sticks. Somehow a stool is the proper object for the situation. When I took it to the train, I saw another chair that seemed to be more comfortable than my stool. Somebody else had a similar idea and made a chair that looked like a sofa. The other chair was definitely more comfortable than mine and it was good for playing poker, I guess. Our way of thinking how to endure the tiring journey is the same, but the idea of how a proper chair should be built is different. The transformation from a stick that was found at the lakeside into a tool that helps me to endure the journey without a seat ticket, is inherent in the final product: the stool.



»From Dali to Zhengzhou«, Installation with wood, rope and paper ticket,
2012

MMB: *From Dali to Zhengzhou* developed out of a method for solving everyday difficulties but at the same time comments on the issue of China's intranational migration.

XZ: I didn't address this issue directly. I am more interested in the stool made of wooden sticks that is moved through this transformation to another place.

MMB: Another very early work, and at the same time your first video work, is called *Heavy Rain* (2012). I see in the work a strong reference to the performance art of the 1960s.

XZ: I read a lot about performance art from the 1960s and 70s, and I would say that I am very much influenced not only by Body Art but also Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Video, and Land Art. The first important book about performance I read is by the German art historian Jürgen Schilling. He wrote this book in the 1980s, and it was my first introduction to the history of performance art. Beside other books on Land Art and Minimal Art, I heard lots of stories about this topic from James Elaine. Elaine is a Beijing-based artist and curator. His knowledge and experience has always inspired me and helped me to develop my own artistic expression. In 2012, we met in Caochangdi (an artist village in Beijing). From then on, we stayed in touch and so he told me a lot about art that happened in the 1970s and 80s in the United States. I see this period as a very intense and dynamic one. But I would not go so far to say that my work refers to the performance art of the 1960s and 70s that happened in Europe and the US. At that time, there was no art like that in China.

I remembered that the first impressive performance pieces I saw was Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance* in 2001. It opened a new world for me when I first heard and saw some Chinese performance videos during my first year in art school. Then I went to Beijing, where I got to know Chinese performance art pioneer Ma Liuming, and he introduced me to a lot of performance artists. He told me about Marina Abramovic and others. Most of the information I got through images and stories, not written words or theory.



»Heavy Rain«, Video, 49'49'', 2012



MMB: You are absolutely right. There are excellent performance artists you told me about. I did not know some of them until I saw exhibitions by, for example, RongRong and Inri, who worked on a photo series that shows the rapid change in Beijing's urban development in the mid-1990s. They documented the vanishing of the old courtyard houses in Beijing's city center. Until now about 90 percent of the historical hutongs have been destroyed and hundreds of people had to move, which caused an immense change in social life.

In the early 1990s RongRong collaborated with performance artists like Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan by documenting their performances. I was impressed when I saw photos of Zhang's performance *12 Square Meters* (1994). I see you in this tradition of performance art that developed during that time through artists that worked together in Dongcun, an artist village on the outskirts of Beijing.

Your work *Heavy Rain* reminds me of American artist

Dennis Oppenheim, who did a piece called *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* (1970). Oppenheim is lying in the sun with an open book on his chest and after five hours he got a terrible sunburn. A photo that was taken afterwards shows the sunburned skin. Only where the book was lying is the skin white and not burned. Have you ever heard about the work?

»There is no possibility to learn about one's body, as there is no possibility to steal one's body. The inspiring part may exist on how to understand the body, and get to know the body in natural, sexual, social, and political existence.«

Xinjun Zhang

XZ: Yes, I know the piece and I like Oppenheim's works a lot. He really inspired me while I was thinking about transformational processes and how to make them visible. In *Heavy Rain* I tried to do something very similar. For 50 minutes, I was sitting in the sun, holding a wet book page in my hands. After a while my body starts to sweat and weaken in the midday sun. The opposite happens to the page, which slowly starts to dry. What really struck me when I heard about *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* is the idea

to »print« an open book on human skin by sunlight. It is very simple, we can get the work even with a few words, but it is marvelous! It is an extreme way of using the body and to expose it to nature. I have to say that if I just read the images, but never know the book *Tactics*, which was put on his chest, I would never have gotten the information in this performance *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn*. Here, »body« exists with an identity including sexuality, sociality, politics. It is the opposite of the body in nature or natural body. If a body naturally belongs to someone, then I deny the inspiration from their body. I think performance is born from nature, because our body is born from nature. There is no possibility to learn about one's body, as there is no possibility to steal one's body. The inspiring part may exist on how to understand the body, and get to know the body in natural, sexual, social, and political existence.



»I Am Close to Your Husband«, rope, sleeping bags, 2012

MMB: With *I Am Close to Your Husband* (2012) you work for the first time in bigger dimensions and use sleeping bags. In a deserted villa on the outskirts of Beijing, you installed a big trumpet flower made of sleeping bags. From then on, you have quite often worked with sleeping bags. Why?

XZ: The things I am concerned about are questions that are related to the body, space, and object. Sleeping bags are very close to human skin, because they cover the entire body. It is the extension of my body. In *I am Close to Your Husband*, the body's temperature can be seen in contrast to the cold deserted building. The works made with sleeping bags are not a closed space or object, but a conical shape from the roof of that building. The work *Woodssleepingbagswoods* is

also made with sleeping bags. After that, I started to use canvas as a material used to cover things, like a tent. Canvas is somehow more the material I would like us to cover up or to mark space.



MMB: *I am Close to Your Husband* is a site-specific artwork. What kind of space are you looking for when you develop a work like that?

XZ: Actually, I knew this site since I moved to Heiqiao. It is a very particular building. You can say that it is another »ghost city« in the rural area, where the real estate is overdeveloped, but no one lives in the building besides a few homeless people. But I was thinking about the place a lot and then one day I met an artist who had an idea for a project and so we started to collaborate and planned an exhibition in that abandoned building. Sites like that are perfect to work or to do exhibitions in, because nobody will control them. So, the location, the »site«, is a very important topic for me and part of my work. The work is born in a specific site, can even be the site itself or I use it as a setting for my work. For example, works I made with sleeping bags can be removed quite easily, and they are temporarily installed in a building or space.

MMB: What kind of material do you use for your art and where do you find it?

XZ: Normally I use wood, canvas or fabric and sometimes earth. I collect materials rather than buying them. It is an interesting experience to find proper materials; it is always an unknown explorational journey.

Another piece, called *Primary School Tables*, goes back to

my childhood when I was a student in Zhengzhou, Henan province. The work developed when I went back to my primary school. My hometown and the school have changed a lot, but these old tables and chairs are still the same and still in use. I think these tables and chairs brought me back to the day when I was a child thinking about the future. For my first three-dimensional work, I wanted to use and work with these old classroom furniture, so I changed the old tables and chairs against new ones. The work is a very personal one. The colorful thread connects me with my childhood days. It goes through the table and chair.



»Primary school tables«, wood, thread, various dimensions, 2010

MMB: When you are working on a new concept for a work,

with what do you start? Do you start with an abstract idea or do you begin with a concrete selection of materials or a space?

XZ: For me, a concept for a new work comes up with an abstract object, which can be an illusion in space, can be a shape, and can be an abstract texture – an abstract idea appears before I find the right materials. Afterward the material tells me what to do with it, what to build, and so on. Space gives me the possibility of representing the abstract ideas and in the end, I place the objects in the space.

MMB: For one of your latest works you are somehow going back to your roots as a painter. You did a giant blue ink wall painting. How did you come up with that idea?



»Blue Ink Wall Painting«, india ink on canvas, 580 x 630 cm, 2017



»Mine«, earth, wheat straw, screw, wood, india ink, various dimensions, 2017

XZ: Actually, I try to get away from painting and canvas, because it is a very strong form, and I couldn't accept it. The blue ink wall painting is a trace of blue ink flowing from top to bottom of the wall, and it is the same color and material I painted onto the wood which I sculpted according to the shape of coal.

I put coal-like wood leaning against or lying in front of the blue ink painting wall. The piece only works with natural light for me, because natural light makes the coal-like wood shiny so it appears like real coal. The blue ink wall painting for me is not painting, but water in blue itself.

MMB: Last year you left your big studio loft in Heiqiao for six months and worked in a calm, clean, and bright studio

apartment at Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. I visited you at Solitude and you told me that it is not easy for you to get inspired in such a peaceful environment. How much does your art relate to your homeland and the buzzing, noisy neighborhood of Heiqiao?



Heiqiao 黑桥 is an artist village outside Beijing's 5th Ring Road.

XZ: Schloss Solitude is quiet, with peaceful natural surroundings. For me it is THE OTHER world. Heiqiao is a vibrating, disarrayed area located in a rural-urban fringe. On one side of the village you find artists' studios and on the other there are narrow and cramped houses, where migrants from all over China are living. The close neighborhood of artists and ordinary workers with a very different

background is quite unique and makes it a special place for me. But suburbs like Heiqiao are some kind of a sample in today's hypercapitalistic China.

»It's very difficult to achieve the illusion without becoming frustrated.«

Xinjun Zhang

The city spreads, houses are being demolished, land occupied and the residents are told to move. This happened to Heiqiao recently. Most of the works I did between 2011 and 2016 are made in the neighborhood of Heiqiao and somehow connected to the village. I found many hidden and unidentified areas, where I can make art works and exhibitions. I was and I still am very close to Beijing and all of China in a period of transition, and that raised my strong awareness of surroundings. It is very important to me, and I recognized myself as a citizen of Heiqiao until the area was destroyed at the beginning of 2017. Artists and workers were told to leave and moved into a new village further outside the city ring.

MMB: You did *A smuggling exhibition in Akademie Schloss Solitude*, which you developed in 2016 in Stuttgart. What was it about?

XJ: The work *Green Hole 2* was shown during my residency at Akademie Schloss Solitude, where I made a secret exhibition, hidden in an attic full of stuff, during the opening

of the public exhibitions. There was no public information on my show and I had to tell the visitors personally about it. It was like illegally trading or smuggling.

Green Hole 2 is the second part of *Green Hole*, a work that originated from a worm-eaten tree trunk. It is the space of the worm-eaten hole, enlarged proportionally to my height. It is a heterogeneous space with a biological form, which connects to the wall and space of the architecture. The material of *Green Hole* is used, textured canvas, which I found at some temporary markets.



»Green Hole 2«, Installation with thread, textured canvas, 2016

Green Hole is one of the works that reacts to different spaces, conducted through the connection of ropes. It has an immediate spatial existence in its varying surroundings. The exhibition thus presented itself in a narrative way; on one hand, through being hidden in the attic, on the other hand, through the spectators building their own narrative by receiving personal information and a specific path to the site. It is the circumstances consisting of chance, path, and site, which work in accordance with the exhibition's character.

MMB: What are you working on now? Is there another project you are doing research for?

XJ: I am still working with earth, body, and the materials for houses or buildings. These sculptures are made from earth and wheat straw through pressing my body, which creates the negative space between my body parts, such as the hollow of my armpit, the mouth, and my hand. Earth and wheat straw are materials used for building walls and structures before concrete and steel. Besides the thing I am working on, I am still trying to figure out a way to build a cold and hot wind with air conditioning to set up a storm, but I left it for a while. Sometimes it comes to my mind and I get anxious that I will never build it. It's very difficult to achieve the illusion without becoming frustrated.



»Mine«, earth, wheat straw, screw, wood, india ink, various dimensions, 2017

Xinjun Zhang, Beijing/China – Visual Arts, Solitude fellow 2016

Xinjun Zhang was born in 1983 in Zhengzhou, China. He received his master's degree from the Central Academy of Fine Arts Beijing, China. In his works, he focuses on object and performance art, often using multimedia devices. Since 2012, Xinjun Zhang has hosted exhibitions and performances utilizing »unstable spaces« near his residence, including I am Close with Your Husband, boat. In 2016 he was awarded a fellowship at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany.

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Meta Marina Beeck, Berlin/Germany – art historian & curator

Meta Marina Beeck (b. 1984, lives in Berlin) is an art historian and curator. She studied art history and German literature at Humboldt University, Berlin and graduated with a master thesis titled "Notation as a visual form of thought – John Cage, Allan Kaprow and Trisha Brown". From 2011 to 2013 she was enrolled for Chinese language studies at Peking University, China.

During the last two years Meta Marina Beeck worked at Kunsthalle Bielefeld as assistant curator. Among the latest exhibition projects are: »Anohni – My Truth. James Elaine. Peter Hujar. Kazuo Ohno.« (2016); »Martin Disler – Bilder vom Maler« (2016); »Whatness. Esther Kläs. Johannes Wald« (2015), all of them at Kunsthalle Bielefeld; »CC(TV)« (2014) at Galerie Herold, Bremen and »Aufwachen! Besser machen!« (2013) at Kleine Humboldt Galerie, Berlin.

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