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(Re)imagining Chinese Spaces in Urban Africa.

VALJAKKA, Minna, and Meiqin WANG (eds). 2018. *Urbanized interface: Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

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- 1 Over the past three decades, Chinese cities have undergone transformations on a scale inviting attention from international experts in architecture and urban planning. In a context of constant overhaul, it is crucial to grasp the complexity of urban challenges to understand China's social and spatial transformations. Studying the city through artists' works helps take in the fast-paced phenomena – which this book does, analysing the way artistic creation captures urban change in China. Urban spaces are envisaged as inspiration sources, production material, intervention and mediation underpinnings, and even as generators of innovation positionings. The book's collaborators say: "(...) neither cities nor urban spaces are fixed in China. Instead, we understand them as sites of continuing artistic and creative experimentation, where multiple agencies and manifestations emerge and inspire new ways of negotiating the impacts of urbanization. While doing so, they inevitably open up novel discourses and terrains of problematization" (p. 27).
- 2 This anthology deals with the phenomenon of "growing interdependence" between "the arts and the city," a "distinctive

characteristic of contemporary cities in the era of global urbanism" (p. 19), by studying artistic productions since the 1990s, in some chapters also going back to the Mao era. Most scholars adopt an ethnography-inspired methodology and thus question relations of cultural intimacies. Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang have divided the book into two parts of five chapters each: the first dealing with representations and the second with urban interventions. The practices studied are mainly emerging, small-scale ones on a local and even trans-local scale, but not ignoring their relation to globalisation phenomena. Each chapter is perfectly illustrated, with interviews and linked to the others thanks to cross-referencing.

- 3 In Chapter 1, "From Sidewalk Realism to Spectral Romance," Zhen Zhang presents the work of director Yang Lina 楊荔鈞, the female face of independent cinema, who defends a direct street-level approach – somehow mixing fiction and reality. The chapter sheds much light on her immersive and aesthetic practice, which stems from her technical choice of using a DV camera. Analysing several of her films (*Let's Dance Together*, *Old Men*, *The Loves of Lao An* and *Longing for the Rain*), Zhen Zhang shows how and why the filmmaker goes beyond frontiers of the visible, offering a post-utopic vision of a melodramatic realism. In Chapter 2, Maurizio Marinelli deals with History from below, of forced evictions and marginalised populations, studying the works of Zhang Dali 張大力, Jin Feng 金鋒, and Dai Guangyu 戴光郁. He develops the argument that urban phenomena induce in artists interested in them a changing aesthetic and questioning, mainly revealing Chinese cities' violence, social inequality, and utopic dreams. In "The Transient City," the next chapter, Jiang Jiehong considers contemporary Chinese photography as intangible reality born of urban transformations. He says the medium characterised by transience does not suffer from the "tyranny of the present" (Baschet 2018). He analyses how photographers such as Wang Jinsong 王勁松, Rong Rong 榮榮, Inri 映里, Zhang Dali 張大力, Zhang Peili 張培力, and Wang Qingsong 王慶松 show human establishments' ephemeral nature. He powerfully presents the stakes raised by the cycle of urban destructions and constructions, interrogating the complex interrelation of people and their environment in the current era. Chapter 4, "Shadow of the Spectacular, Photographing Social Control and Inequality in Urban China," offers a vision of urban space through the filter of censorship and political propaganda in the work of photographer Ni Weihua 倪衛華. Meiqin Wang argues, relying on Ni's works, that advertising is allied to political slogans mixing passers-by, signboards, written messages, and urban spaces. The author says these photographs convey an imagination of social and urban fractures, which highlight the coexistence of luxury and poverty in Chinese urban space. Next, Stefan Landsberger brings a historical and chronological analysis of commercial, political, and social slogans that resonate with the previous chapter. He analyses discourses and actors evoking the context of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, examining the grey area among diffused political artistic and media messages,

which induce an idea of multiple propaganda. The study helps in understanding propagation desires and mass effects of local and global policy around an international event.

- 4 The book's second part entitled *Urban Interventions* begins with the chapter "Urban Insertion as Artistic Strategy, The Big Tail Elephant Working Group in 1990s Guangzhou." Nancy P. Lin offers one of the first analyses in English of the Big Tail Elephant Group collective consisting of Lin Yilin 林一林, Xu Tan 徐坦, Liang Juhui 梁鉅輝, and Chen Shaoxiong 陳紹雄. Interviews, illustrations, and descriptions of each of their creative processes illustrate the way in which the city constitutes both their material and medium of choice. Nancy Lin offers the "urban insertion" concept (p. 184) to characterise their work as they mimic, criticise, and embrace the city in its evolution, between fictionalisation and appropriation of urban space they approach in what they call "small gaps of opportunity within the city" (*ibid.*) of Guangzhou. In Chapter 7, "Cao Fei's Magical Metropolises," Chris Berry maintains that the work of multimedia artist Cao Fei 曹斐 is not merely a representation but also intervention, transformation, and even appropriation of cities where she works. The author relies on a quadruple hermeneutic framework that introduces Michel Foucault's heterotopia concept and the notion of participative art before offering the idea of "magical metropolises" and ending with gestural practices present in the videos of Cao Fei (*Hip Hip Guangzhou*, *RMB City*, *My Future Is Not a Dream*, and *Haze and Fog*). The next chapter deals with independent documentary cinema and the phenomenon of evictions in Beijing artists' neighbourhoods or villages. Judith Pernin considers the acquisition process and spread of competences in the face of urban transformations wrought through the struggles of a generation of filmmakers who protested and recorded relocations, experiencing them from the outside and then from within. For this, she analyses the documentaries of Hu Jie 胡杰 and Zhao Liang 趙亮 on the Yuanmingyuan artists village, and then the more recent films of Zheng Kuo 鄭闊, *The Cold Winter*, and Wang Wo 王我, *A Filmless Festival*, on the resistance movements of artists and filmmakers in other Beijing districts. In "Migrant Workers and Public Space in Beijing," Elizabeth Parke focuses on the notices and telephone numbers inscribed in urban spaces for advertising purposes. She holds that through their omnipresence and forms, they bear witness to demands of migrants' rights to the city. First, she presents how "degradation" induced through these illegal practices confronts the authorities' public space management. Then she considers the definitions and qualifications of such texts, which constitute forms of urban calligraphy. Finally, she relates these inscriptions with the social and political situation of Beijing's public spaces. In the last chapter, "Translocal Site-Responsiveness of Urban Creativity in Mainland China," Minna Valjakka opens the debate on the trans-local issues of urban creations in China brought by foreign artists (Marcella Campa, Stefano Avesani, Kaid Ashton, and Julien Malland). The author offers a new reading of trans-locality by relying on international exchanges in urban spaces between

Beijing and Shanghai. She analyses these processes, deeming them natural, organic, and inherent to urban transformations and presents the deconstruction of local engagement through the sharing of experiences and transcultural interaction. The author deftly shows the integration of residents' opinions and their attachment to the city in each of the chosen projects.

- 5 By strongly and sensitively showing the fundamental contribution of the study of visual arts in approaching urban issues and their impacts in China, this work usefully contributes to multi-disciplinary studies that take the city and visual arts as points of departure for analysis.

AUTHORS

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