YANG Xu
Zhen 震
MADEIN COMPANY

沒頂公司

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANN WOO
The moment you label something, you take a step — I mean, you can never go back again to seeing it unlabelled.
—Andy Warhol

Out of a need for comprehension, we like putting labels on artists. But the labels of our age are not made of elegant, smooth matte vinyl lettering, shimmering in a white cube: they are the hashtags that appear, millions per second, on social networks. There is a wide array of hashtags associated with Xu Zhen: #artist, #bossofMadeIn, #Xuzhen (the brand), #curator, #BizArt, #photography, #video, #painting, #sculpture, #performanceart, #internetart, #politicalart, #conceptualart.... In the Post-Internet era, the formation and dissemination of concepts are not linear, temporal or geographical — and yet the mainstream art world continues to divide artists into two camps, according to dichotomized concepts such as East and West, modern and contemporary. But how much distance lies between those artists whose concepts operate in idealistic settings, their visions exceeding their present circumstances, and the concepts with which we label them? We must explain unknown concepts to dichotomized concepts such as East and West, modern and contemporary.

From Xu Zhen’s perspective, he has no preconception. Indeed, when he is thinking conceptually, then perhaps, out of moral concerns, he wouldn’t have hired a Guinean child living in Guangzhou to star in The Starving of Sudan (2008) — a re-enacting a Pulitzer-winning image of a gaunt African girl lying on the ground; perhaps, due to considerations involving sensitive issues of colonialism, racism and female objectification, he wouldn’t have installed sculptures of nude African women wearing ornate headpieces in Play—4 (2011); perhaps, in resistance to the over-commercialization of art, he wouldn’t have let MadeIn’s tentacles extend into large-scale production of art derivatives. It is as the artist himself has stated: “Many things cannot be taken for granted.” It is precisely because he rejects preconceptions that he can reply to questions regarding his morals with confidence. “People often ask me why I have no sense of morality,” he says. “My initial reaction is, what is this so-called moral sense? You may say that what is intrinsic to humans rarely changes, but the initial reaction is, what is this so-called moral sense? You may often ask me why I have no sense of morality,” he says. “My...
video works show similar interests: in China, video art began in the mid-80s. From today's perspective, as Davide Quadrio, the Italian curator and co-founder of BigArt, wrote, "A group of artists, curators, and gallery managers, committed to creating a suitable environment for the survival of contemporary art in Shanghai in late 80s... This is how BigArt was founded." At that time, Xu Zhen was no longer simply an artist, but a leader invested in changing the living conditions of contemporary art in Shanghai. In the absence of legitimate exhibition spaces and official acknowledgment of their works, they produced works and held exhibitions on their own. In 1999, for instance, Xu Zhen was involved in the preparation of a project named Supermarket Exhibition. Held in a shopping center, the exhibition was divided into two sections: one was a parody of a small supermarket, the other an attempt to present contemporary art as a satire of the commercialization of art; the other was reserved for performance art and installations. Although officials shut down the exhibition within a day of its opening, it remains a milestone event in the history of contemporary Chinese art.

Interestingly, after an interval of eight years, Xu Zhen created Supermarket in 2007. The installation is a 1:1 reproduction of a typical Chinese supermarket. From soft drinks, cigarettes and dairy product to pickles, dried fruits, newspapers and liquor, the "products" appear to be plentiful, but one soon realized that there was nothing inside any of the packages. Objects that have lost their intended functions become another kind of commodity in an artistic context—at the cash registers near the exit, visitors can purchase any item at its typical grocery store price. Its 1999 iteration had been staged outside an art institution; this time o...
A year later, Xu Zhen founded MadeIn, an art production company with a staff of over fifty employees in a suburb of Shanghai. MadeIn not only creates and produces artworks based on Xu Zhao's artistic direction, but also has its own gallery promoting young artists recently; it also launched the brand PIMO, selling art derivatives. Its business model as both a studio and a company recalls artists like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, each of whom consistently promotes the integration of art and business. In response, Zhen points out, “I paint and do so—hence, there is no difference there... Our current mode as a company is a kind of art in itself; the company is an artist. In this age, whether you're practicing art or venturing in business, you are nonetheless in a creative process.”

Xu Zhen claims that the company staff often cannot keep up with his rapid rate of creative thinking, MadeIn's output in the last few years could definitely be described as “plentiful.” Whether it is in the exhibitions “Seeing One's Own Eyes” and “Lonely Miracle” (both 2009), filled with Middle-Eastern symbols; the comic-themed 2009 series “Spread,” a collage of cloth strips; the 2013 installation connecting the heads of the Winged Victory of Samothrace and Tianlongshan Grottoes Bodhisattva; European Thousand-Armed Classical Sculpture (2014), which combines a Buddhist thousand-arms Guanyin statue and Western classical statues; or the 2003 “Under Heaven” series, “painted” with a cream dispenser that piles up pigment on canvas, the artworks produced by MadeIn are spectacular, filled with political and cultural labels without aspiring to profound meaning. They recall various elements of the vanity of communication in a strange but fun situation. Similarly, for their original intentions, Xu Zhen believes that as people practiced art for years, still find it very important to adhere to an empiricist and pragmatist, “if one's sense of existence has advanced. In addition to artworks that exist in physical form, several of Zhen's performances and installations reflect his “interesting” method of production. For instance, in the performance March 6 (2002), Xu Zhen invited one hundred farmers, workers and unemployed people, along with one hundred college students, to dress up in striped pajamas. He then asked each of them to follow a visitor at a two-meter distance without talking or making any physical contact, thus allowing visitors to experience a silent form of communication in a strange but fun situation. Similarly, for the installation Action of Consciousness, exhibited at the 2011 Armory show in New York, he asked two hidden performers to throw fifty large objects mid-air inside a sealed cube. These objects came in various shapes, ranging from limp Tianman meniscus sculpture models to a half-sized statue of Van Gogh. The audience outside the cube could only see these objects for a split second—an allusion to the real-life scenario of art fairs, where there are too many artworks on display for the audience’s eyes to absorb. The installation was humorous and sarcastic, more like a social experiment, conveying a postmodern and light-hearted take on recreation and consumption while thrilling the audience's senses organs at the same time. It perfectly merits the description of being “interesting.”

In 2013, MadeIn founded the brand Xuzhen. While one could wonder, give its name, whether Zhen, prompted by the success of MadeIn, is calling for the further advancement of his sense of existence, he has proven himself to be an open-minded and flexible company CEO. In contrast to many artists who, having practiced art for years, still find it very important to adhere to their original intentions, Xu Zhen believes that as people change with their experiences and environments, their intentions will change accordingly. An empiricist and pragmatist, he is capable of making prompt self-adjustments according to actual situations. From BirArt to MadeIn, from Xu Zhen to MadeIn not only creates and produces art but also provides an abundance of possibilities, but is in and of itself a massive trap. Nevertheless, Xu Zhen remains adept at making strategic moves and puts extreme emphasis on the connection between art and social reality, arguing that it involves aspects of both business and academia: “the academic must be able to survive the challenges of reality. That is the real academia. Otherwise, it is just empty talk.”
Xuzhen, from a nonprofit organization to an art enterprise, from exhibitions in the basement to the forefront of global commercial art, from starring in self-produced video works to collaborating with designers on a platform that sells art derivatives, from artistic practice to consumerism, followed by political pop: perhaps even Xu Zhen himself doesn’t know what his next label will be. But as an artist who advances with the times, and frequently benefits from their evolutions, Xu Zhen is keen on explaining reality with reality: whether it be the importance of social media, the necessity for artists to make self-adjustments, the relativity of personal beliefs and values, or the triviality of non-core issues, these are “reasonable by existence.” For Xu Zhen, an artist’s sense of existence must be reflected by present reality; as the Internet has allowed information sharing to explode, it leaves no excuse for artists not to examine their own positions from the perspectives of space and time. Quick-thinking and with endless ideas, he has little interest in art that is nostalgic; his practice, a comprehensive production of business, art, and academia, incessantly inspires our curiosity and excitement.

Whatever form his output takes, one believes that he will continue making interesting attempts inside and outside the realm of artistic production. Perhaps the end goal of these attempts is to blur and dilute the rigidity of the ideas he explores, such as the East-West dichotomy, globalization, cultural colonialism, consumerism, and art-as-entertainment. However, in Xu Zhen’s mind, acceptance and rejection are one and the same. No matter what method he employs, his ultimate concern is the advancement of his own sense of existence.

Xu Zhen (Chinese, b. 1977) is an artist who lives and works in Shanghai. He is represented by Long March Space, Beijing; ShanghArt, Shanghai; and James Cohan, New York/Shanghai. He has had solo shows at institutions such as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2014); the Minsheng Museum, Shanghai (2012); Kiasma Helsinki, Finland (2011); and S.M.A.K., Gent, Belgium (2005). Furthermore, he has participated in major international group exhibitions such as “14 Rooms,” co-curated by Klaus Biesenbach and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Art Basel (2014); the 12th Biennale de Lyon (2013); “Art of Change,” Hayward Gallery, UK (2012); and “The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China” at Tate Liverpool (2007). He was also included in the 49th Venice Biennale (2001), and represented China at the 51st Venice Biennale, (2005). Upcoming projects include “15 Rooms,” co-curated by Klaus Biesenbach and Hans-Ulrich Obrist at Long Museum, Shanghai.

Xiaowen Zhu is a documentary filmmaker, media artist, curator and writer currently based in London.

XU ZHEN

Xu Zhen (Chinese, b. 1977) is an artist who lives and works in Shanghai. He is represented by Long March Space, Beijing; ShanghArt, Shanghai; and James Cohan, New York/Shanghai. He has had solo shows at institutions such as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2014); the Minsheng Museum, Shanghai (2012); Kiasma Helsinki, Finland (2011); and S.M.A.K., Gent, Belgium (2005). Furthermore, he has participated in major international group exhibitions such as “14 Rooms,” co-curated by Klaus Biesenbach and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Art Basel (2014); the 12th Biennale de Lyon (2013); “Art of Change,” Hayward Gallery, UK (2012); and “The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China” at Tate Liverpool (2007). He was also included in the 49th Venice Biennale (2001), and represented China at the 51st Venice Biennale, (2005). Upcoming projects include “15 Rooms,” co-curated by Klaus Biesenbach and Hans-Ulrich Obrist at Long Museum, Shanghai.
DOWN
PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS,
2011

RIGHT
NEW (DETAIL), 2014
THIS IS THE ART WORLD, AFTER ALL—IT WON'T KILL YOU!
LEFT MADE IN CURVED VASE – FAMILLE ROSE W/ BUTTERFLIES AND PEACH BLOSSOM DESIGN, YONGZHENG PERIOD, QING DYNASTY, 2013

DOWN SHANGHART SUPERMARKET, 2007/2014
艺术界，死不了人的。
LEFT
THE PEOPLE IS A BEAST OF MUD Y BRAIN.
IT DOES NOT KNOW ITS OWN FORCE;
IT ONLY KNOWS ABSOLUTE OBE DENCE.
SERIES NO. 2, MATERIAL: MARBLE. 2007

DOWN
CORPORATE-APHRODISIAC, 2014
DOWN
PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS
MUSEUM, 2013-2014

RIGHT
PLAY – MISSILE OF LOVE, 2013
INTERVIEW BY DAVID QUADRIO 采访/陆亚东

XU ZHEN 陆亚

Let’s begin by discussing Madel, the “contemporary art creation company” you founded in 2009. How is it structured? What makes the company different from a production workshop like Murakami’s Hirono Factory?

The company consists of Madel Gallery and the brand XuZhen; we also run supporting media, such as the Artbabba Internet forum. It’s a very comprehensive operation, by no means limited to artistic projects; we have people who focus on project management, creative administration, etc. As of now, we have around 50 staff, with an office space in Songjiang, Jianghu.

I believe that the difference between Madel and other art companies is that our enterprises will become more obvious in the future. Some claim that we work similarly to Jeff Koons, in that we don’t eliminate many restrictions. It’s like venturing into business: As you start, you realize that the market is actually different from a profession. It’s like evolving from a student to a teacher, from an intern to an entrepreneur, from a beginner to a tale.

What is the core of your operation, by no means limited to artistic projects? What processes do you put into it, by no means limited to artistic processes?

We don’t really operate in such a way. I think it is very comprehensive. We’re not really operating in such a way. Our company exists to create value, that’s why we founded the company. You can’t just do art, you have to create value. And that value comes from the company’s various outlets and goals. The core is the creation, production, and marketing processes.

The spirit of the time progresses, none of these are of great use. As long as it is healthy and positive, evolution is a strong gene—and as for the market, the academic world, or historical positioning, none of these are of great concern to us.

That’s a fairly provocative idea: that one might change intentions but retain his objectives. Others might insist that they hadn’t deviated from their initial aims.

It’s interesting: the idea of an “original intention” can easily bewilder people. You may come to this aim within a certain context, but as you grow more mature, doesn’t your sense of existence, for me, what do you call “original intention” change? It’s like how every boy fancied their English teacher when little, though it is unlikely that they will end up marrying each other. Isn’t that a change of original intention?

That’s true. We may often think of “original intention” as something analogous to a goal, but it may simply be what you’re called a “sense of existence.”

Exactly. These things are confusing, and people tend to mix them up. In the case of the “sense of existence,” I believe that if you’ve found it, you must make it the job of many people to experience it in many ways. But that doesn’t make it a matter of intention. This is why I say that I am not “conceptual” in my work. I haven’t much concept of things.

But you seem quite adept at playing with concepts.

Not really. Much of my work belongs to the category of conceptual art, but I generally do not understand things in a conceptual way. For instance, people often ask me why I have any sense of morality. My initial reaction is, what is this so-called “moral sense”? You may say that it is intrinsic to human beings, rarely changes, but the signified changes drastically over time—which means that if you abide solely by concepts, it will be difficult for you to understand the world. You must let go confidently. Perhaps I am just confident.

DQ: Have you always been like this?

I’m just never afraid. There isn’t much to be afraid of. This is the art world, and you must be bold.

Last year, you and David Chau established a brand called PIMO, which produces various limited edition products and brands artists’ works. What’s the connection and difference between the PIMO and the gallery?

We don’t really operate in such a way. I think it is very comprehensive. We’re not really operating in such a way. I think it’s very comprehensive.
static way. For instance, we call it a gallery, yet for those artists whose works obviously won't sell, should we not offer some support? We should not limit our business to painting, or whether or not an artist's works sell fast. We should help to generate as many high-quality artistic phenomena as possible, so that the market as a whole is supplied with guidance and atmosphere. We ourselves live and breathe the art world, but we have become numb to it, unaware that society still needs art. It still needs the kind of art that is strange, inexplicable, emotional; works that remain unfathomable even if sold for a million RMB. The organizational structure of society itself demands art as a catalyst.

How does MadeIn divide its resources between presenting and managing other artists and producing items through XuZheng? Are these activities ultimately a form of collaboration?

This may sound pretentious, but I think of MadeIn as producing creativity, not artworks. The artworks are merely the byproducts of creativity. This is why we place heavy emphasis on training, inspiring our colleagues to learn in various ways. We may fail much of the time, but eventually, one or two talents do come along. Although MadeIn is within the realm of contemporary art, no one knows how it will develop in the future. I and we are not willing to be constrained by a single scope. As for resource distribution, we make decisions based on practical considerations. For instance, “Xuzhen” is currently doing well and is highly profitable, so that’s been our focus. Then, once you’ve made “Xuzhen” into a success, it is easy to work on other projects with the brand effect. But we invest more in young artists than other galleries: for instance, we will be so attentive that we look into what a young artist upsets his WeChat “moments,” how he titles things, how he writes descriptions. We’re interested in digging up the values that others have witnessed but not realized.

In recent years, China has been increasingly driven by commercial enterprises and power-driven structures (Long Museum, Yuz, etc.) that play a vital role in supporting the development of the arts in China, especially in Shanghai. Do you think MadeIn’s success is directly related to this particular situation?

Of course. If China had not reformed and raised the GDP, how would we have the capital to practice art? If I don’t even have enough food to keep me full, I obviously won’t care about art. So the relationship is quite direct. Being based in Beijing, what sort of challenges has MadeIn faced?

We’re still in the first stage of things—we have not boldly begun with what we set out to do. This age provides you with many opportunities: I don’t have to queue up behind whatever number of Western artists; I don’t have to abide by Western rules. As you said, capital provides many possibilities. But capital itself is a massive trap—and it’s not just capital. Many play the cards of cultural difference, of politics.

I had a chat with an artist a while back, during which I asked him, “Your work criticizes society, and yet you drive a BMW, live in a villa; the object you are criticizing actually brought you the fortune you enjoy. I believe that is the nature of the movement of capital.” He replied, “I was poor for more than ten years before selling my paintings.” I said, “To borrow some concepts from the investment world, you were not worth a penny, and then you achieved some good results, earning an Angel Investment.” To put it simply: “Idealism,” “Idealism pervades all kinds of systems. It is the belief that as long one does his work well, with no concern for the system, whether it be capitalism or communism, he will be rewarded. However, I am concerned with the advancement of my sense of existence. That is to say, have I evolved? Who or what is my counterpart? The Renaissance reached a certain height; so did Impressionism and Modernism. To what degree should I advance myself? Of course, this also comes down to specificity: For example, the Internet era has changed almost all forms of understanding of previously existing systems. What, then, should an artist do? You appeal to truth, good, beauty and authenticity, yet your audience is changing, and then, how should you yourself be? To put it simply, Mere nostalgia! The world of ten years ago! Many professional (technical) issues can be discussed, but the art world in China still examines the market, whether it be capitalistic or bureaucratic, and that this trend is more and more prevalent all around, not just in China. As a writer, I’m personally interested in the pioneering field that uses commercial spaces and language in the art world. The
Here's a personal question, since you talk.

So what use does it have? The academic setting is a gift of charity. Is an academic setting, please be active? You can't say "I'm sorry, this is an academic setting, please be active." It would be absurd! This form of academia is a gift of charity. So what use does it have? The academic setting is a gift of charity. I am pretty adept at skills and responsibilities are ended.

To keep living, fervently and with keen curiosity. This is actually very challenging, because you no longer form judgments based on something else, and you fall for pop art the day after.

What kind of role do aesthetics play in your work? We are all very familiar with your deliciously beautiful paintings, which was part of your American debut in the Armory Show. But at the same time, not all your work is aesthetically pleasing. How do you reconcile these different approaches?

Everything originates from demand. This age has made us not so simple, or single-minded, because information recognitions in different ways, one ceaselessly encounters new images. But at the same time, not all your work is aesthetically pleasing. How do you reconcile these different approaches?

Those is actually very challenging, because you no longer form judgments based on something else, and you fall for pop art the day after.

What new works have you been working on recently?

Recently I've been working on the "Thousand-Hand Classical Sculpture" series that was exhibited at Long Museum. We are preparing for next year's events; some big, new concepts will be realized. I believe I am in the golden age of my time, and I'm old enough to write my version of War and Peace. I should be able to create something that demands attention, something that puts a capstone on my whole life; it comes down to a matter of luck. Some people keep their mouths shut, and work on things secretly, because they are scared of failure—unlike me, so shameless, saying it out loud first.

That's because of your confidence.