

## Mergers & Acquisitions

MONOGRAPH

**Xu Zhen** and his cultural production organization, **MadeIn Company**



*Faith*, 2012, polyurethane foam, 200 × 120 × 90 cm. Courtesy: the artist and MadeIn Company

Long before his mid-career retrospective 'Xu Zhen: A MadeIn Company Production' opened at Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in January this year, rumours began circulating that the show would cost as much as eight million yuan (£800,000) to mount. That kind of gossip is usually reserved for Chinese auction fodder, but here it was being meted out to a young artist normally associated with low production values and high conceptual stakes. That this 'scandalous' sum actually ended up being an understatement (the show ultimately cost over 12 million yuan, or £1.2 million, to produce) only added to the project's allure. But who set these rumours in motion? I had a nagging feeling that Xu Zhen himself was behind it. As is typical of his work, he can't resist prodding a problematic approach to see what comes out the other side. The exhibition's title was plain enough: the artist and his show were a 'production', and productions need big budgets. If Xu Zhen's conceptual stakes have always been high,

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and if he intended to use money in his retrospective as a kind of conceptual material, then this show would need to take real financial risks in order to be conceptually sound. In this context, the rumours seemed part of his plan, using art-world envy to fuel viral publicity for his show.

Based in Shanghai, Xu Zhen set up a 'cultural production' organization called MadeIn Company. Between 2009 and 2013, MadeIn Company replaced the artist's identity altogether, with all works attributed to MadeIn during that period. With this retrospective, Xu Zhen has been reincarnated, relaunched and rebranded as a 'product' of MadeIn Company, redefining the complex ontological perspective of his identity as an artist. But why would an artist create a company at all? If money is the ultimate goal, there are plenty of Chinese artists making buckets of it without resorting to such convoluted and potentially confusing means. Despite appearances, this equation is the wrong way round: money isn't the end, but a means. But a means to what end?

Before Xu Zhen launched MadeIn Company, he already had a multifaceted role in the Chinese art scene. He was in charge of China's first artist-run non-profit space, BizArt, which simultaneously operated as a company providing paid services for the art world, such as graphic design and public art project production. In 2006, he also launched what was then China's most popular contemporary art website, Art-Ba-Ba, and even started a commercial art space called Shopping Gallery. BizArt was China's only significant non-profit platform for emerging artists and it developed a symbiotic relationship with one of the country's most influential galleries, Shanghart. Many artists with critically successful shows at BizArt were picked up by this stalwart of the Shanghai scene. Similarly, Art-Ba-Ba was *the* online platform where Chinese artists, critics and curators could formulate debates and see exhibition news, reviews, images and even the portfolios of international artists. However, funding all this proved increasingly difficult as BizArt's commercial activities couldn't cover its overheads, and business sponsorship was hard to justify when their non-profit activities catered to such a small and specialized sector of society. What made all this particularly apparent was the closure of Shopping Gallery in 2009, simply because it didn't have the financial means to support artists' production costs and generate sales.



*Play-4*, 2012, silicon, iron, hemp cordage, feathers, shells, leather, 140 × 180 × 70 cm. Courtesy: the artist, MadeIn Company and White Cube, London

Xu Zhen's transformation into MadeIn Company was a response to these problems. As it's practically impossible to rely on commercial sponsorship to finance

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such activities, and backing for non-profits doesn't exist in China, you have to be able to raise sufficient funds to support yourself. However, conceptual works sold at institutional discounts to museum collections can barely sustain a personal art practice, let alone generate the 'revenue' needed for the kinds of activities Xu Zhen was undertaking. By dissolving his artistic identity into that of a commercial company, the artist could produce anything he wanted, as 'he' became 'they' and 'the artist' became 'an operation'. MadeIn Company started by launching various product lines: cheeky conceptual art works that were as easy on the eye as they were to understand and, most importantly, could be produced in large series. Examples of such works include 'Spread' (2009–ongoing), in which cartoons are reassembled into satirical collages; 'Play' (2012), sculptures made from BDSM accessories; and 'Under Heaven' (2012–ongoing), which uses cake icing utensils to make gorgeous paintings that sell like, well, hot cakes. This started a revenue flow that has become the bedrock of MadeIn Company's funding. But, at the same time, this body of work was as challenging and complex as anything Xu Zhen had previously attempted. MadeIn also organized major not-for-profit thematic exhibitions such as 'Bourgeoisified Proletariat' in 2009, which featured 40 artists from all over China; and 'Poster Show' in 2011, with artists from all over the world (both shows included work by MadeIn Company). While continuing the Art-Ba-Ba website, MadeIn launched the Art-Ba-Ba Mobile Space – providing a platform for artists to mount large-scale experimental shows such as He An's site-specific installation *Who is Alone Now Will Stay Alone Forever* (2012) and (in the interests of full disclosure) the author of this article's two-part exhibition 'It Might Also Be', also in 2012. This frantic amount of activity seemed like an attempt to fulfil almost every possible art-world role and, for that very reason, was ultimately not sustainable. However, this combination of commercial and non-profit projects allowed Xu Zhen/MadeIn Company to formulate a longer term 'game plan' that is now settling into a pared back and efficient self-contained system; and it is this system that has enabled MadeIn Company to raise the millions required for Xu Zhen's mid-career retrospective.

The retrospective, staged in UCCA's appropriately named Great Hall, opened with an irreverent array of past and present works, not giving visitors even a second to acclimatize. One of Xu Zhen's oldest works, *Rainbow* (1999), and MadeIn Company's newer, lucrative series, 'Under Heaven', were placed on either side of the exhibition space. Between them was a giant rainbow-coloured Guanyin Bodhisattva standing atop a pile of war rubble that was swaying almost imperceptibly, like a calm sea (*Calm*, 2009). Serving as a backdrop for the oversized Buddhist figure was a life-size replica of a typical Chinese convenience store, *ShanghART Supermarket* (2007). If museums and shopping malls are the cathedrals of the contemporary era, then Xu Zhen isn't trying to be subtle. The Bodhisattva and the supermarket placed in ucca's cathedral-like interior hinted at a thematic tone for the show – though it went beyond a clichéd critique on contemporary capitalism to develop a nuanced exploration of what culture and money can mean today, for artists or anyone else.

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*ShanghART Supermarket*, 2007, installation view as part of 'Xu Zhen—A MadeIn Company Production', 2014, at UCCA, Beijing. Courtesy: UCCA; photograph: Eric Gregory Powell.

This exploration started in earnest with *ShanghART Supermarket*, which had to be walked through to access the rest of the show. This precise facsimile of a Shanghai market had one vital difference from the real thing: all the products were empty. Row upon row of bottles, cans, packets and jars; hundreds of items all immaculately presented with seals perfectly intact ready for visitors to buy. Checkout girls chatted at the cash registers waiting for customers. But what would customers be buying? Emptied of content, the items were also emptied of their practical use and value; these avatars of cheap commercial goods could only be art works; art works available for the same price as the products they simulated. Whether driven by a sense of novelty or an understanding of this conceptual trope, a queue started forming at the checkouts, and with every 'ping' of a cash register a member of the audience magically turned into an art collector.

Moving on from this pseudo-commercial environment, visitors found themselves in the *Physique of Consciousness Museum* (2013). MadeIn Company collated dozens of physical movements from religions around the world – such as Buddhist hand gestures, the postures of ancient Egyptian gods or Islamic prostration for prayer – and from this material devised, in their words, 'the first cultural fitness exercise ever made'. These T'ai Chi-like exercises were shown on a video monitor, while the documentary evidence proving the movements' cultural and historical provenance was meticulously displayed in vitrines, creating a kind of anthropological museum of spiritual gesture. The titular *Physique of Consciousness* is a play on the Chinese word for 'ideology', which literally translates as 'form of consciousness'. Here, MadeIn distilled the essence of physical and spiritual ideology by exploiting the formal qualities of religious ceremony, generating a hybridized cultural 'form of consciousness'.

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*Physique of Consciousness*, 2011, performance documentation. Courtesy: MadeIn Company and Long March Space, Beijing

From here, the exhibition opened up onto a cavernous space in which works both past and present formed clusters and constellations. Even Xu Zhen's most important

early works got no more space or consideration than MadeIn's commercial 'products'. But despite the apparent cacophony, the whole exhibition maintained its perfectly symmetrical design, where art works on either side of the space seemed to mirror each other. A sophisticated deadpan joke, the considered installation of *Physique of Consciousness Museum* offered a light-hearted approach to a serious subject – namely, the relationship between faith and contemporary culture. Two vital clues to the artist's intention appeared at the beginning and end of the show. At the far end of the space, *Perfect Volume* (2009), a work consisting of a circle of cut-off us army boot tips mounted on the wall, was intended to form a halo for the multi-coloured Bodhisattva at the show's entrance. Xu Zhen took a cue from the soaring heights of UCCA's Great Hall to explore the power of symmetrical religious architecture, often brimming with art, to create an immersive experience for worshippers. Although Xu Zhen was not suggesting that his art could have such a hold over audiences, he deliberately used this symmetrical format to imply something important: that we still need a vehicle to experience something beyond the material and mundane, and



that art works need to strive for this kind of meaning.

*8848-1.86* (detail), 2005, installation, video, photographs, rock climbing equipment, tents, refrigerated box. Courtesy: the artist, MadeIn Company and Long March Space, Beijing

But for Xu Zhen, creating meaning in such a vast and complex society as China involves having a

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voice strong enough to affect the cultural landscape. This is where MadeIn Company – and money – comes in. Xu Zhen’s response to the question of what kind of art exhibition could make a real impact here in China would probably be to create ‘an exhibition for everyone’. While most shows cater to three distinct groups – art professionals, the public and wealthy collectors – artists mostly focus only on the first group. Since the presumed expectations of each of these groups differ – artistic rigour for professionals, entertainment for the public and collectable products for the wealthy – few artists are able to provide something for everyone. But this is what Xu Zhen strived to achieve with his retrospective and, judging from the public and professional response, he seems to a large extent to have succeeded. Of course, such a show costs a vast amount of money and, in raising the requisite funds, Xu Zhen pulled off an act no artist had previously managed in China. Galleries, dealers, auction houses, art funds, museum collections and private collectors all had to be rallied and cajoled by MadeIn Company over the course of many months to ensure the huge sum could be raised: something that would have been almost impossible for an individual artist to achieve.

What MadeIn Company can do for Xu Zhen is protect his autonomy; by creating his own self-contained system, he avoids being manipulated by the larger art world, allowing him to expend energy where it is most needed. MadeIn can also be flexible. As a new generation of rich Chinese turn their attention towards art, it is becoming clear that collectors will become the driving force of the Chinese contemporary art scene. MadeIn has anticipated this by launching MadeIn Gallery, whose inaugural appearance at the Armory Show in New York this March consisted of a booth in the ‘China Focus’ section featuring three artists, including Xu Zhen. While artist-run companies are nothing new (Takashi Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki Co. springs to mind) MadeIn Company has so far operated outside of established parameters, reflecting, on the one hand, the unpredictable nature of China’s development and, on the other, the highly adaptive practice of Xu Zhen.

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*Xu Zhen is an artist and curator based in Shanghai, China. In 2009, he established MadeIn Company, a contemporary art production company. MadeIn Company’s latest product, launched in 2013, is the brand ‘Xu Zhen’. In 2014, Xu Zhen was the commissioned artist of the Armory Show in New York, USA, and MadeIn Company had a retrospective at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China.*