

*Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interface*

Edited by MINNA VALJAKKA and MEIQIN WANG

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018

324 pp. €95.00; £85.00

ISBN 978-94-6298-223-9 doi:10.1017/S0305741019001188

One of the most striking features of China's megacities is the ubiquity of construction and demolition in the urban landscape. This structural ephemerality has provoked a range of artistic responses from film-makers, photographers and visual artists keen to document the spatial transformations unfolding in the built environment. The subject of a growing body of scholarship, recent volumes including Wu Hung's *Remaking Beijing* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), Robin Visser's *Cities Surround the Countryside* (Duke University Press, 2010), Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen's *Spectacle and the City* (De Gruyter, 2013) and Meiqin Wang's *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (Routledge, 2016), to name but a few, have provided wide-ranging critical analyses of the representation of the Chinese city. Joining this growing corpus of literature comes Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang's edited volume, which promises to offer a "multifaceted investigation of the dynamic interrelations between visual arts and urbanization in contemporary Mainland China" (p. 13). Thematically split into two sections: representations (chapters one to five) and urban interventions (chapters six to ten), the anthology brings together scholars of art history, film studies, visual culture and the social sciences to probe the socio-political dimensions of Chinese urbanization, extending scholarship "into the realm of cultural activism in urban China" (p. 16). Major themes that emerge from the essays include the role of migrant labour in the transformation of China's cities, the impact of widening socio-economic disparities and urban demolition, the temporal-spatial restructuring and staging of the Chinese city and an exploration of artistic creativity contingent on the built environment.

A short review of a multi-author volume by necessity precludes a full summary of each chapter, and while I won't discuss the invaluable insights offered by Maurizio Marinelli, Jiang Jiehong, Judith Pernin and Minna Valjakka, I would like to discuss some of the volume's individual contributions. In chapter one, Zhen Zhang explores the digital video (DV) turn in documentary film through the lens of Yang Lina. Tracing Yang's career, Zhang not only situates her as an "emblematic transitional figure between Urban Generation cinema, DV documentary and independent feminist film-making" (p. 38), but also demonstrates how she "re-embeds the sidewalk *xianchang* documentary aesthetic within a 'spectral realism' that anatomizes contemporary Chinese urban life" (p. 35). Focusing on the conceptual photography of Ni Weihua, Meiqin Wang's individually authored chapter examines his response to the saturation of Shanghai's urban spaces with both state-produced and commercial images, illustrating how these works represent the artist's efforts "to simultaneously document and deconstruct China's official discourses of economic development and consumerist urbanization" (p. 117). In chapter five, Stefan Landsberger provides an important counterpoint to these arguments in his analysis of posters designed to promote officially sanctioned state rhetoric. Focusing specifically on representations of the "Chinese dream," Landsberger delineates not only the "premeditated control of urban aesthetics as a whole" but also shows how "the positive messages introduced into the urban fabric are essential tools of socio-political and cultural reconstruction" (p. 152).

Part two on “urban interventions” begins with Nancy P. Lin’s stimulating chapter, which explores the early practice of the Big Tail Elephant group in 1990s’ Guangzhou. Convincingly demonstrating how the group’s urban-centric performances were distinct from Chinese performance art of the period, Lin articulates how the group’s “urban insertions” represented “an entirely new approach to site-based engagements with the urban environment” (p. 194). In chapter seven, Chris Berry explores the work of Cao Fei, examining her significant and sustained response to contemporary Chinese urbanization through several of her most critically acclaimed works – *RMB City*, *Whose Utopia* and *Haze and Fog*. Berry demonstrates how the artist’s “magical metropolises” constitute an aesthetic as well as ethical response to China’s rapid urbanization, one which might suggest the possibility for alternative rather than oppositional spaces of criticality. Elizabeth Parke’s chapter is another of the volume’s highlights, exploring urban migrant presence through the numerological graffiti of Beijing streets – the illicit and hastily drawn phone numbers and scrawled advertisements used to obtain fake certificates (*banzheng*). Parke considers their contested position as an act of defacement, a form of public calligraphy and one of the capital’s most conspicuous “public secrets.” Providing an important footnote to previous chapters by calling for “an urbanism from below rather than that of the aerial” (p. 262), she reveals the role of *banzheng* as evidence of contested “rights to the city” (p. 263).

Of the volume’s ten chapters, five have previously been published in a special issue of *China Information* and although the commissioned chapters do compensate for this, the editors acknowledge that “more detailed research on the specificity of visual arts in different cities in Mainland China beyond Beijing and Shanghai is needed” (p. 27). While many of the contributions focus on established figures, a discussion of the work of a younger and more diverse range of artists and film-makers could have counterbalanced the presence of works which have been discussed extensively in previous scholarship. Similarly, the editors’ statement that “ethnographic methods have not gained prominent recognition in visual art studies” (p. 22) ignores recent contributions by Sasha Su-Ling Welland and Winnie Wong. That being said, the strength of this volume lies in its ability to address the speed, scope and scale of Chinese urbanism from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives, providing detailed and engaging case studies that will be of interest to students of art history and urban studies, as well as those interested in learning more about ongoing artistic responses to China’s hyper-urbanization process.

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*Mapping the New African Diaspora in China: Race and the Cultural Politics of Belonging*

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New York and London: Routledge, 2017

x + 202 pp. £110.00

ISBN 978-113867306-9 doi:10.1017/S0305741019001322

In recent years, African migration to China has become a “hot” research topic. In *Mapping the New African Diaspora in China*, Shanshan Lan goes beyond the dominant migration perspective by turning her ethnographic lens to the contestation and co-production of racial knowledge in southern China. By deploying the term “racial