

MadeIn Heaven

— *Corporations are people, my friend.*¹⁾

Is the creation of MadeIn Company, by the artist Xu Zhen, a rational expression of an era marked by the erasure of distinctions between corporations and people? To be sure, Xu Zhen is not the first artist to transform himself into a company, and countless others incorporate more quietly to maximize their income and maneuverability. But MadeIn may be special in at least one respect: The company's production could be understood increasingly to contemplate the notion of heaven—not offering up a clear picture the way religious authorities might, yet keeping this abstraction in focus as a question.

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My first real glimpse of MadeIn dates back to 2009, the year of the company's formation, and the year I visited China for the first time. The group show "Seeing One's Own Eyes: Contemporary Art from the Middle East" was on view at Shanghai's ShangHART Gallery. (I had not traveled to Shanghai expecting to learn first about that proverbial "nearer" East, but confronting my own surprise at finding such a show in China did somehow make me reflect, or see in-

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side my own eyes, as it were.) If the system of the exhibition neatly bypassed the centrality of the West, the strange recognition elicited by the ensemble of works could not be said to entirely reform the gaze that has been formulated there.²⁾ On display were various sculptures, collages, and reliefs that drew on an iconography as familiar to the visitor of Art Basel as it would be to the readers of the *New York Times* or *Artforum*. Everything looked, well, just like contemporary art for the global market should: generically evocative forms spiced with enough ethnic detail to make their consumption feel like a border crossing,



XU ZHEN, *CALM*, 2009, water mattress, motor, brick, earth, dust, 275 1/2 x 197 x 8".

produced by MadeIn Company, installation view /

RUHE, Wasserbett, Motor, Ziegelsteine, Erde, Staub, 700 x 500 x 20 cm.

albeit a very smooth one, producing minimal difference and minimal threat.

Still, long after getting the jokes, one work from the exhibition stood out: a pile of rubble covering a large waterbed, thereby undulating ever so slowly, almost imperceptibly, and simply entitled *CALM* (2009). Although, in the context of the Middle Eastern exhibition, this strangely moving form could be seen to evoke the aftermath of destruction one associates with the world's most telegenically troubled region, its name and actual behavior (i.e. its horizontality and serene animation) paradoxically promised

something that only seems possible in another life: namely, peace in the Middle East.

I took note and resolved to show *CALM* in "Nether Land," an exhibition I was planning with Nicolaus Schafhausen at the Dutch Culture Center (a temporary venue built for Shanghai's World Expo in 2010). "Nether Land" intersected several cross-cultural projections or artists' views onto cultures that were not their own,³⁾ in an attempt to strike a somewhat dissonant note among the kind of production of national essences for mass consumption that occur at world's fairs, including biennials and other perennial

and “global” exhibitions of contemporary art. In MadeIn’s first exhibition, and perhaps particularly in CALM, I recognized a wry wisdom about the traps of this kind of exposure. This year, reading the catalogue of MadeIn’s latest exhibition, I was intrigued to find Huang Zhuan, an eminent critic and curator who has helped to shape the terms that define Chinese contemporary art for close to thirty years, mention CALM as a standout work:

I have a soft spot for the work that used bricks (CALM). It’s not like all the other works, it really is “good.” The ones with the boat or the trapeze, for instance, they still rely on symbols. You can see that it’s still a game, you can see how it’s played. But CALM would still be a “good” work no matter what context in which you place it.⁴

What makes CALM special? Is it that in slipping outside popular symbolism one finds on Google, it achieves a kind of autonomy—a sense that the imagination at work in making it is free of clichés and thereby capable of producing a new image or better still of quieting down visual noise?

When MadeIn Company recently produced its maker—Xu Zhen—for the exhibition “Movement Field” (2014), the gesture somehow confirmed that the artist who founded the company in the first place was becoming a special kind of product. But was he or is he still human? Is the person born of the corporation somehow distinct from the mortal whose only mother is a woman, whose only father is a man? In “Movement Field” (as in other exhibitions produced by MadeIn), there was little to be gleaned in terms of Xu Zhen’s biography, personhood, or personality. As the artist works collaboratively with his studio employees and less formal advisors and producers (all of whom are very rarely profiled or named), this deflection from individual biography could somehow be seen as a new kind of autobiography. What we get is a counter-image of the psychological subject; a strange entity asserts itself whose complex, communal makeup mirrors that of the corporation. Is it not, after all, the uncertain subjectivity of the corpora-

I’ll go a little further. I think the particular pleasure of CALM stems from its ability to “play the game,” and play it quite shrewdly but also to offer something extra. This element exceeds the rational calculation, the head-spinning, circular logic and the delirious volley of references that can be said to characterize most works by MadeIn. Perhaps, like MadeIn’s best products, it opens up to something that is missing in so much (art) production within what is now called the “new spirit of capitalism.” That something carries another kind of “spirit.” Somehow the subtle animation of CALM suggests an anima, and a peaceful one at that. And although it can be difficult to find a name for that part of existence, which tends to be drained by human functioning inside a capitalist system, one should not be embarrassed to try. For now, I will simply call it heaven. What makes MadeIn interesting is that—rather than resisting capitalism covertly—its questioning of the heavenly realm, which might just undo or otherwise transform capitalism’s soul-draining spirit, seems to come from *inside* the corporate frame.

tion—the fact that it is driven by people yet able to act as a kind of super-subjectivity, at times strategically depersonalized, at times all too human—that lends it so much power in today’s transforming environment, where market forces are often spoken about as if they had feelings of distrust or confidence?

“Movement Field” concentrated on abstractions, or the abstraction of human beings to be precise: lines describing the movements of multitudes in protests (often against the rise of corporate power) and marches across the world. The exhibition title echoed the name of an ongoing (one could even say living) work, which first manifested as a series of “horizontal monuments” inscribed in the landscape—paths matching the trajectories traveled by protesters and other mass movers in the streets of cities as diverse as Cairo, London, Santiago, and Ottawa. Again, the individual is nowhere to be seen or felt, but the viewer experiences MOVEMENT FIELD by walking along these paths, joining the protests in an abstract



*XU ZHEN, MOVEMENT FIELD, 2013, grass, earth, stone, trees, dimensions variable,
produced by MadeIn Company, exhibition view, "The Garden of Diversion," Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, 2013 /
BEWEGUNGSFELD, Gras, Erde, Stein, Bäume, Masse variabel, Ausstellungsansicht.*

way. And here a question arises: If the corporation is the corporeality (the incorporation) of the "spirit of capitalism," might the only way to transform, reform, or downright oppose this increasingly powerful entity lie precisely in a different kind of incorporation, understood as embodiment? The lack of corporeality—the dehumanizing abstraction of the human makeup of companies, which is the great threat of corporations to human value—is here asserted by the

ultra-abstraction of the work, and then (potentially) subverted by the mindful, embodied engagement by human individuals.

MadeIn Company's oeuvre can also be characterized as moves within a playing field. And the artist's work might attract scorn precisely for being "just a game"—as does so much art made in China. Yet MadeIn somehow takes this scorn—or what Xu Zhen associates with the "Western gaze" (something he has



XU ZHEN, *CURRENCY'S IDEAL*, 2014, limited edition toy, fabric, mixed media,
18 1/8 x 6 3/4 x 19 3/4", produced by MadeIn Company / WÄHRUNGSIDEAL, Spielzeug, limitierte Auflage,
Stoff, verschiedene Materialien, 46 x 17 x 50 cm.

felt since he entered the picture)⁵¹—and absorbs it into the DNA of its works. Now critics in both the East and the West agree that MadeIn is clever. Some will venture to say that, of all the artists in China trying to be clever, “it’s only MadeIn that’s really solved the system’s riddle.”⁶⁾

Consider what another corporation, the publication giant Phaidon, had to say about the phenomenon, on the occasion of Xu Zhen’s invitation to be the featured artist at last year’s Armory Show in New York:⁷⁾

Finally, those after a \$10,000 souvenir of the 2014 fairs should register their interest in Xu’s special Benefit edition, produced exclusively for the fair, CURRENCY’S IDEAL, 2014. This soft sculpture of a ponderous figure atop of a wringer churning out bank notes reinterprets Rodin’s THE

*THINKER in the style of Claes Oldenburg, with a touch of Cattelan perhaps. Proof that, when it comes to art fairs, East Asian artists are now thinking along the same lines as the rest of us.*⁸⁾

Please reread that last sentence. Let the sense of relief sink in: *Finally, a Chinese artist who thinks just like “us”—let’s welcome him to the US!*

Is this heaven? Surely, the company is basking in a halo of praise, critical acclaim, and some financial success. But I think MadeIn matters not only because the enterprise is clever enough to match the expectations of its Western audience or because it confirms the image the West has of itself as exporter of culture. MadeIn does all this while, with its very name, it rubs in the indisputable reality of China’s extraordinary productivity and enormous trade surplus. The

company's name is like an empire that wants to go on, to extend—seemingly prophesying a whole world made in China. Still, if the project playfully nods toward China's imperial self-image—positioning itself on the productive side of 天下 (pronounced *tien-hsia*, meaning “under heaven”⁹)—it also complicates the very idea of a nation.

MadeIn Company points to the notion of the nation as a corporation and leaves the position of art or culture ambiguous. On the one hand, art might simply be a tool for the successful commodification of a national brand. As such, art is perhaps not entirely *under heaven* (within the nation, the world) but hovering in the heavens so that it can perceive and produce an image of what lies underneath. At these times, art must take up what, from my current domicile in Athens, I might call the “Olympic viewpoint”: a kind of removed, universal, even heavenly stance, which remains at a critical distance from the action. The elevated view of protest routes is perhaps only possible from this vantage point. But it is available to anyone who looks at Google Maps. And yet, art's heavenly dimension is not always and not entirely the production of critical distance—and this is crucial.

What lies beyond or deeper within (art in the service of) the corporation-nation? And how can this alterity be rendered corporeal? MadeIn's research into what it calls PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS (2011–)—an exhaustive collection of data on and re-enactment of religious, political, and otherwise socially potent rituals, exercises, gestures, and forms aimed at the transformation of spirit or ideology—may be interpreted wryly as new age pabulum for the soul-starved, dehumanized masses.¹⁰ But watching the video of the PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS EXERCISE 1 (which is available on YouTube as a kind of promotional tool, in good corporate fashion), it is also possible to follow the slow movement of the monk-like demonstrator (cast against a celestial background, submerged in synthetic massage-parlor sounds, and guided by soothing, English-accented female instruction) and come to other conclusions. For those inclined to understand contemporary art as false consciousness alone, this can prove an awkward image due to its unwinking aspirations toward holistic healing and cultural fitness through exercise.

The consciousness at stake here is not true or correct (the opposite of false). It is physical; thus, the old division between physical and mental processes dissolves slowly, and something that has not been part of art for centuries comes back from a repressed state.

I will conclude provisionally with a proposal that this is a kind of heaven in the making. Certainly, the mission is far from accomplished. As Guo Juan writes of the MOVEMENT FIELD project:

The decision to undertake this work carries with it certain risks. It means the forced, rushed release of a road map that one has publicly acknowledged can never be successfully completed; it means making one's future suppositions the fixed prerequisites for further discussion. And yet the artist's goal remains: changing the world in which we live. This means more than mocking modern life, or offering a purely intellectual challenge. It goes beyond establishing a complete symbolic system—even if the system established is in balance with the real world, and can both generate and deconstruct itself. Symbols cannot ever really truly replace the world, and life is more than the rules of some game. Perception remains, for us, a basic ability worth cherishing.¹¹

Much practice, exercise, and repetition is needed to reshape perception. And perhaps exercise must come ahead of spiritual awakening.¹² The eureka impulse of the Enlightenment is there to confuse things. For centuries, art has tended to serve this impulse through the production of consumable symbols. As a result, we have too few tools for embodying, let alone persisting in any consciousness for longer than an “aha” moment. Some weird idea of pure spirit haunts us. Meanwhile, the body cannot be imagined. To add to the problem, many corporations want to render human bodies robotic, working away to produce even themselves as consumables that will be cannibalized and sometimes shared by other starving souls. The deceptively simple question of what happens when art incorporates needs to be asked again (and again). Does the artist, who has partly given up on the classical notion of an individual human subjectivity and begins to experiment with corporate personhood, have a special opportunity to imagine another kind of existence? It seems that MadeIn has begun to address these questions, but much work remains. To persevere in this quest, to preserve the necessary *chi*, one must relax and stay calm.

- 1) Mitt Romney, then Republican candidate for president of the United States, speaking to a heckler at the Iowa State Fair, August 11, 2011; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2h8u-jX6T0A> (accessed March 17, 2015).
- 2) I am deliberately keeping the geography of the West vague here, and I call it up somewhat uncomfortably, but nevertheless, it signals a space that largely invented the persisting notions and geographies of China and the Middle East, supplanting designations such as the Middle Kingdom and the empires of Persia and the Ottomans.
- 3) The exhibition departed in large part from Allan Sekula's *This Ain't China: A Photonovel* (1974), and that work's astute questioning of cross-cultural perceptions at a time when the fledgling Left in the West sought solace in Maoism. Apart from MadeIn and Sekula, the show came to include works by Meschac Gaba, Jacques de Koning, Erik van Lieshout, Ken Lum, Sarah Morris, Jennifer Tee, Liedwien van de Ven, and Zheng Guogu—artists holding Chinese, Dutch, American, Canadian, and Cameroonian passports, each representing distinct conceptual continents.
- 4) Huang Zhuan, quoted in "Creating Spectacle, Subverting Spectacle: A conversation between Wu Hung, Huang Zhuan and Xu Zhen" in *Movement Field: Xu Zhen—Produced by MadeIn Company* (Shanghai: MadeIn Company, 2013), 199.
- 5) Xu Zhen, in *ibid.*
- 6) Huang Zhuan, in *ibid.*, 3.
- 7) It is interesting to note that the market is somewhat confused by this new type of corporation and prefers to profile the individual.
- 8) "The Armory Show Looks to the East," *phaidon.com*, March 4, 2014; <http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2014/march/04/the-armory-show-looks-to-the-east> (accessed March 17, 2015).
- 9) 天下 is a term used to designate the realm of mortals but also a way in which Chinese emperors designated their domains. It also happens to be the title of a series of paintings, begun in 2012, produced by Xu Zhen as a product of MadeIn. The paintings are made using candy-colored oil paint squeezed straight onto canvas, in a manner resembling cake frosting—if the paintings are not in fact edible, they are eminently consumable. Given MadeIn's penchant for cannibalizing American Pop-art

enterprises, there is surely also a nod here to Jeff Koons's 1989 sculptures entitled "Made in Heaven," featuring the artist and his then wife, Italian porn star Cicciolina, in the midst of various sex acts. While this series of paintings partly clued me into the question of heaven in the MadeIn enterprise, I will not analyze them further here. Suffice it to say that they function well as a kind of currency, which (in their lush abstraction) allows for meaning to remain open and for cash to flow.

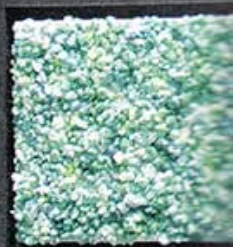
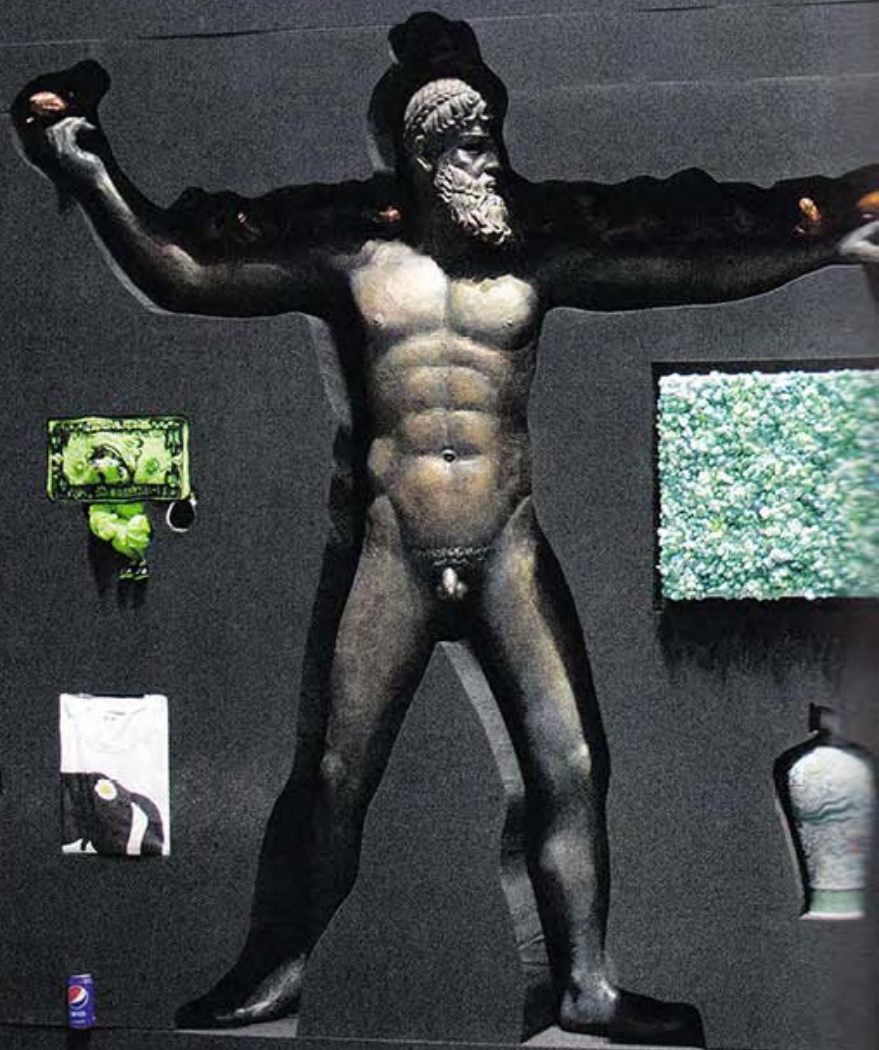
10) As Colin Chinnery has pointed out, the title is a play on the Chinese term for "ideology," which literally translates into English as "form of consciousness." See Colin Chinnery, "Mergers & Acquisitions," *Frieze* 163 (May 2014); <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/mergers-aquisitions> (accessed March 17, 2015). It is interesting to note that of all the different movements profiled by the project, the Falun Gong, or Falun Dafa, is missing. The group's inclusion might upset Chinese censors, and like all rational enterprises, MadeIn is not in the business of inviting resistances. Yet one wonders if the silent, peaceful, although highly physical resistance of this group, which has been persecuted in China for many years, has not lodged itself in the consciousness of MadeIn's physical exercises.

11) Guo Juan, "Movement Field: Measuring and Mapping" in *Movement Field: Xu Zhen—Produced by MadeIn Company* (Shanghai: MadeIn Company, 2013), 166–67. All texts in the catalogue are translated from the Chinese by Matt Schrader.

12) In his 2009 book *Du mußt dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik* (translated into English in 2013 as *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*), Peter Sloterdijk unfolds a varied study of what he terms the "practicing life," in part to address the challenge that the "specter of religion" poses to the Western world as a repressed force within the Enlightenment. But rather than defend either religion or the Enlightenment (underscoring their opposition), Sloterdijk performs a diagonal cut that aims to combine lessons from Enlightenment philosophy, new age religions, literature, acrobatics, and non-Western wisdoms. His twin epigraphs are telling: "Forge ahead in vigilance!," from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*; and "Works, first and foremost! / That is to say, doing, doing, doing! / The 'faith' that goes with it will soon put in an appearance / —you can be sure of that!," from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Daybreak*.



XU ZHEN, IN MASS EXERCISE, THE GREATER THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THEORY AND REALITY, THE STRONGER ITS EAGERNESS TO IMPOSE BELIEFS ON OTHERS, 2010, wax, military caps, variable dimensions / MASSEN-ÜBUNG, JE STÄRKER DER KONFLIKT ZWISCHEN THEORIE UND REALITÄT, DESTO GRÖßER DIE BEGIERDE, DEN ANDEREN VORSTELLUNGEN AUFZUZWINGEN, Wachs, Militärhüte, Masse variabel.





XU ZHEN, ETERNITY – "ARROGANCE" SET, 2015, set of artworks,
114 ¹/₈ x 59 x 127 ¹/₂", produced by MadeIn Company /
"ARROGANZ"-SATZ, Satz von Kunstwerken, 290 x 150 x 324 cm.