

# Fall of the Artist Individual, Rise of the Art Corporation

## On tour with Xu Zhen

by Arielle Bier / translation Alexia Dehaene / photography Tang Ting

**Arielle Bier: Let's go back to the beginning of your career. Can you tell me about the founding of BizArt, which became one of the most influential art spaces in Shanghai?**

Xu Zhen: It started in the late nineties. I met some other artists in Shanghai like Yang Zhenzhong and German artist Alexander Brandt. There weren't very many art exhibitions happening in Shanghai at the time, or even very many art exhibitions in China in general. So we decided to start organizing it ourselves. We started curating exhibitions according to different topics we were thinking about, and found temporary spaces to use.

**AB: What kind of spaces did you use?**

XZ: It depended on the topic of the exhibition. Mostly they were public spaces. Otherwise, we used warehouses or places we could rent for short periods of time. For example, one of the first exhibitions we did in 1999 was in a supermarket, which was related to the topic of the show. It was called *Art for Sale*. The supermarket was divided in two parts. One part was like a normal supermarket and the artists were asked to make small artworks that could be sold at affordable prices that were placed within the store. The other part was more like a normal exhibition space with installations and videos. The public could go inside the supermarket and buy the small works, then, at

the same time they could visit the exhibition. This was one of our first big projects, but for different reasons it was closed down after two days.

Then in 2004, we did another exhibition called *Courier Exhibition* because at that time in China, it was very common to work with courier services. We decided to collaborate with a courier company, and asked about forty artists to contribute very small works that could fit in a suitcase. Then we put advertisements in magazines and newspapers saying that people could call a number and have an exhibition delivered for free to their place. Additionally, the courier was trained to make some performances. Whenever someone would call them, they would go to their place, show the artworks one by one, and do the performances. And before that, in 2002 actually, there was another exhibition called *Fan Mingzhen and Fan Mingzhu*, which was a twin exhibition. For the exhibition, we found a temporary space that we divided in two. We asked the artists to make two works to be displayed in each space, which should be very similar but had very small differences. At the entrance to each space, there was a twin sister. The visitor could choose to enter one space or the other and see the differences in each space between the two works. We created these types of exhibitions every two or three years

together. We really curated our own exhibitions as artists, gathering all the artists in Shanghai to make projects together.

Within that period, BizArt was created, around the year 2000 by Davide Quadrio. Altogether over ten years, BizArt organized about three-hundred exhibitions and art events including solo exhibitions, group exhibitions, poetry readings, performances, and music performances. All this activity was going on at the same time as these large off-site group exhibitions.

**AB: If there wasn't such a developed art scene in Shanghai at the time, how did they know how to organize exhibitions?**

XZ: The only way to really express ourselves as artists within society was to find solutions. First we would think about what we wanted to do, and then we would enquire here and there how to make it happen. Some of us had relationships with teachers at art schools who we could ask to help, or find help from friends and things like that. Then we had to find sponsors and funding to help finance the exhibitions. We really learned and practiced at the same time.

**AB: I've heard that BizArt offered commercial services to cover costs for hosting alternative,**



XU Zhen  
*Eternity-Northern Qi Standing Buddha, Amazon and Barbarian*, 2014  
Glass fiber reinforced concrete, marble grains, metal, gold foil  
304 x 115 x 340 cm, edition of 3, produced by Madeln Company



“All of a sudden, China was open for the first time. For us, whatever was new was interesting.”







XU Zhen  
*Physique of Consciousness Museum*, 2013-2014  
 Photographs, acrylic glass, glass, wood  
 Dimensions variable  
 Produced by Madeln Company

**not-for-profit exhibitions. What kinds of services were you selling?**

XZ: BizArt functioned more like an agency. If there were foreign institutions or artists who wanted to make an exhibition in China but didn't know how to find a place, BizArt became the coordinator — trying to source a venue, helping artists mount exhibitions, organizing shipments, or doing the promotion. Sometimes we even commissioned artworks. For example, there was a mall in Shanghai that wanted to have a public sculpture at the entrance. So we found an artist who offered different proposals, then commissioned them to produce the best one. Through that, we received service fees. We also coordinated tours for foreign exhibitions on design. With these projects, we were able to finance and run a BizArt exhibition space. We didn't have any production fees for artists we invited to exhibit. It was just the space, and eventually equipment like projectors. And the artworks were never for sale. Those exhibitions really were the art of the moment. It was the period when video art was starting to get big, so we did a number of video art exhibitions. We worked with a lot of young artists who were more focused on their own individual life and experiences, while there were some older artists who would work on other types of topics.

**AB: Tell me about your experience as a curator. How did it feed into your own practice as a solo artist?**

XZ: Working as a curator influences your practice because the thinking is different. As a curator, you have to take into account all the different opinions of the different artists. You also have to think for the other artists and it's a broad field. The process of reflection is also very different from when you are creating. It offers perspective on your own creation because it gives ideas on the limit of creation around it. Whenever I curated a show, I had to think of the environment, how I wanted to express myself or respond to a specific situation according to the environment. Take, for example, the twin exhibition that I mentioned before; when looking at it today, you see it had a pop feeling because of the repetition within the exhibition. All of these ways of thinking and the thoughts behind it are related to the creative process.

**AB: Tell me about the founding of the online platform Art-Ba-Ba. What makes it so unique to the Chinese art scene?**

XZ: When we decided with a few artists to establish Art-Ba-Ba, other websites and forums about contemporary art already existed. But art critics managed them all, so there was this whole social network behind it. Whenever people placed information on these other sites, they also had to think of their relation to these critics, and had to make sure that the critics would agree with what they posted, so it was very limited in a way. Together with a few other artists we decided to create a forum, which was open to everyone. You could register on it using nicknames, and that protection opened up the opportunity to really express your ideas about art in general. Technically it was possible to do things like that on the Internet. It was very appropriate for people in society at that time because they didn't have

many platforms to express themselves freely, which is how Art-Ba-Ba became the perfect platform. You could have all kinds of comments. It could be insults or it could be praises, it was completely open. It uniquely reflects the situation in China because here, what happens is that the artists are always at the forefront, and the artists think the most quickly. There aren't any really good critics in China. The critics think much more slowly and need other educational backgrounds.

**AB: Speaking of expression and repression, you referenced this before with the exhibition that was shut down at the mall where your video work *From Inside the Body* (1999) was shown. Another important exhibition, *Fuck Off*, was curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, and included your work, which was censored by the police too. What type of artwork was being censored?**

XZ: During those ten years, there were a lot of changes. What was censored in the nineties can now be shown. The artists are always trying to find the limits within political issues here. In general, the situation really changed a lot and now it's much better than it was before. Even if you look at the history from the late eighties to now, you can see that it is very different from the past. Maybe nowadays there are still some works that cannot be shown, but then again, if you cannot show them in China, you can probably not show them in the West if they are against the government.

**AB: What was the feeling like for artists who were exhibiting provocative work at that time? Did they know that their work was going to be censored? Were they doing it as a political statement?**

XZ: Generally speaking, when we made a work, we were aware that maybe there could be an issue, but we never really knew, so we thought we should try anyway and see what happened. Sometimes nothing happened. Sometimes the exhibitions were cut short, but it was never the aim. It was never the aim to do something provocative against the government. We were just trying to make artwork that we thought was interesting.

**AB: Is there still a sense of artistic repression in China today in terms of what can and cannot be produced? I know things have changed, but are people still taking this issue into account when they produce and exhibit artworks?**

XZ: It really depends where the works are shown. If it's shown in a remote gallery or private space, then usually no one will really check, so it's not an issue. But if it's a big space in the middle of a mall or something, then it's definitely more of a problem. Nowadays, maybe the only one who really thinks about it is Ai Weiwei because he is the one who is really working around those issues, and trying to find all the holes within the system.

**AB: You have been following the art market for a long time and chose to critique it by creating a brand for your work called Madeln Company. How does the company function?**

XZ: When I was working as an artist, bit by bit, the art market was developing and becoming bigger in the background. Also on the creative



# “I can’t really be compared to these different artists because I’m not an individual anymore. I’m more like a brand.”

side, it was getting richer. There were more ideas, and more and more works. In 2009, I decided to create this brand to develop collaborations and not emphasize my work as an individual, but the work of my team. Also, it was very difficult for BizArt to survive and maintain itself because it was a non-profit art space. It wasn't like a gallery. We had a lot of problems trying to keep doing what we were doing. So I decided to create this brand to gather all these different roles – like the role of being an artist, a curator, or an Art Director. And now, the whole brand Madeln Company is trying to respond to this environment and become bit by bit itself like an institution. Within Madeln Company, we also have a gallery called Madeln Gallery that works with young artists. We plan on establishing a foundation to do all kinds of projects and incorporate diverse roles in the art field here.

**AB: How are ideas manifested at Madeln from initial conception to final production?**  
XZ: I'll come up with an idea and then talk about it with a few of the young artists working here, who will also think within this framework. Then we have a team who starts making experiments, and if the experiments are conclusive, they'll work on the production. But I still supervise it all.

**AB: Madeln Company is often referred to as an artist community. Who are some of the people that work there and what are their backgrounds?**  
XZ: All together we are about fifty people. We have a graphic design office, project managers, bookkeepers and administrators. Then there are about thirty to forty people working on production of the artwork. Some are people who just graduated from art school, others are artists who have their own careers outside the company, and some are workers or elderly women who specialize in technical aspects.

**AB: If it’s a collaborative project, why put one name on the brand and call it Xu Zhen instead of just calling it Madeln?**  
XZ: Now I use my name as ‘Xu Zhen produced by Madeln Company.’ This name by itself is also a brand. At the very beginning, I only used ‘Madeln Company’ as the signature. But then we started all these different projects, including the gallery and the foundation. So we decided to use ‘Xu Zhen produced by Madeln Company’ as the brand for the creative parts.

**AB: The motto of the Madeln Company brand is “The dedication to the production of creativity.” Why focus on creativity?**  
XZ: There are a lot of creative problems in the art field nowadays because there are so many roles you can play, and people are giving themselves

too many roles to take on as well. Because of this, people are also giving themselves a lot of limits. The company is a form of extreme individualism. Technique and technology are becoming more important than art because with technology, you can amass and diversify knowledge, which in turn changes art and the creative process too.

**AB: Would you say we’re in a crisis of creativity?**  
XZ: It's not a crisis, but it's a beginning. Everyone still has to learn a lot about the world. The notion of the individual today is very different from the notion of the individual in the past. Because of our current environment, the whole concept of individualism is modifying and changing. We have to start preparing for these changes.

**AB: Do you have any advice for how to work through the changes?**  
XZ: You can already see these changes taking place. For example, sometimes you feel that you don't even have to go see an exhibition in person; instead, you can completely see it through the Internet. The Internet is becoming even more and more important. Also, even with the critics, you don't know if they write for the art market or whether they write for the intellectual aspect of it. These are some of the different changes happening at the moment. We should try to be critical about it, but we also should try to find some kind of perspective or different angles to look from.

**AB: Your early work was very physical, like with the video *Rainbow* (1998), which dealt with flagellation. You also focused on subverting hierarchical systems in a satirical way, like with *18 days* (2006), which was about invading China’s neighboring countries with remote-controlled toys. And now, with the creation of Madeln, your work is more focused on subverting the artist’s role in the art market by making a commodity of yourself – the artist, as a brand.**  
XZ: I'm not interested in working as an individual artist anymore. Sometimes when we work on projects, we don't know if we are really creating or whether we are thinking as an institution, because we are mixing all these different fields and working aspects. But I feel this is a good thing because you can place your interests in creating, but also in the institutional work like building relations or things like that. In the end, it's a much broader field, or broader way of developing myself.

**AB: What are your thoughts on considering an art object merely as a good or as a commodity? It seems as if you’ve renounced the importance**

**or the need for the artist to involve themselves in the materiality of art objects.**  
XZ: The Internet will change our notion of materiality. For some things that really are about material, then I still need to engage with the material aspect. But for some things like information or images, I think they've already lost the sense of materiality. It's like when you buy something on the Internet, for some of the objects, when you just look at the images, you know already what it is and you can just buy it. But sometimes, for other objects, you feel that you really have to touch it, and *concretely* touch it to know what it is. For me, art is the same.

**AB: Similarly, I wanted to ask about the work, *Physique of Consciousness* (2011). It brings together a spiritual ideology and also this concept of wellbeing for the mind and body. The work exists as a video, but also as a performance. What are the ideas behind that piece?**  
XZ: Aside from the video and the performances, I also did a kind of a museum, which is a bit like an anthropological museum made with classical vitrines. Each vitrine presents a posture from the exercise and explains the background of this position in different religions, and also in different cultures. We used positions you might find in social movements like at protests, or from everyday life. It creates a parallel or juxtaposition of meaning of certain positions in different cultures. The museum is a reflection of how we look at the world, or how we know the world. Basically, when you look at an artwork, it already contains all these different ideologies. That's what this work is really about, and also, how education or experience can influence the way we experience an artwork. In a way, it plays with our subjectivity and objectivity, like how, when we look at something, we tend to be subjective.

**AB: A number of your projects take into account Western art history with pieces such as *Eternity* (2013) that combine Greek sculptures standing upright with Chinese sculptures turned upside down and the two parts attached head to head. What does it mean to you to take figures from Western art history and mix them with those from Chinese art history?**  
XZ: When you actually look at my entire practice and my creations in general, you will discover that the creation itself is really simple. For example, the idea for *Eternity* is really simple, but at the same time, it's a classic. What I mean by it being a 'classic' is that it can combine a lot of different things, but at the same time, you can see it as something that doesn't mean anything. For me, this is also the same thing with the *Physique of Conscious Museum* (2011). When people look at it,



XU Zhen  
*Eternity-Parthenon East pediment, Northern Qi golden and painted Buddha, Tang Dynasty torso of standing Buddha from Quyang City, Northern Qi painted Bodhisattva, Tang Dynasty seated Buddha from Tianlongshan, Northern Qi painted Buddha, Tang Dynasty torso of a seated Buddha from Tianlongshan grotto No. 4., 2013 – 2014*  
Installation: glass fiber-reinforced concrete, marble grains, sandstone grains, limestone grains, chalk, steel, mineral pigments, 1522.5 x 93 x 460 cm (pedestal included)  
Produced by Madeln Company





XU Zhen  
*Corporate (4 knives group)*, 2014  
 Installation (C-print, dibond), 1100 x 300 x 170 cm  
 Produced by Madeln Company

they project all sorts of ideas and references. But at the same time, they may not have all these different references. I like to play with that.

**AB: And what about the mixing of Western and Eastern culture?**

XZ: People from my generation were born right after the reforms in China. All of a sudden, China was open for the first time. For us, whatever was new was interesting. One of the new things we got access to was information from the West. For a certain period of time, just about everything that came from the West was really new. Whenever people looked at things from the West, they would start to look back at their own culture. Maybe there's something about that aspect in this work, but for me, it's not really so much about East and West. It's also related to the Internet and globalization in general. I feel like I'm from the first generation that participated in the beginning of the notion of globalization.

**AB: Then again, projects like the *Light Source* series — where you repainted photographs of master paintings with flashlight reflections — reference very specific historical works by artists like Courbet, Gauguin, Rembrandt or Cranach. How do you choose which works to use in your version?**

XZ: When I thought of these different paintings, I thought of them in reference to all the fake reproductions that you can find in restaurants or hotels in China. From this point of view, the information flow between the East and West is really fluid. Everything communicates together. When you look at the flashlight, it may feel like the work is made through a digital process, but what it really shows is that everything is again connected through the Internet. The original source of the work is from images sourced on the Internet that people had taken using flash. Then, we asked these very classical painters to repaint the paintings. Actually, when they painted the work, even technically, it wasn't according to the original painting; it's a painting of an image with a flashlight on it.

**AB: Your work is often compared to Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst. Sometimes references even come up to Andy Warhol's Factory in regards to Madeln Company. These are all pop artists, but your work is more of a critique of pop and tends to be more cynical. How do you set yourself apart from these other artists?**

XZ: I can't really be compared to these different artists because I'm not an individual anymore. I'm more like a brand. I don't think like an individual anymore, but instead, I think more about how to create a certain value. This is one aspect. The other aspect is that, nowadays I don't feel like pop art exists anymore. The whole society itself is pop, which means that making pop art would be really problematic. If society itself is already a 'pop' society, then what are you trying to express through your art? For me, what's more important is what you are becoming — like if you are becoming a social phenomenon or a brand within society. This is what I think is more important.

**AB: A lot of the artists I just mentioned also play into the role of celebrity. Do you think the idea of the artist celebrity is still relevant?**

XZ: I think that the role of the artist as celebrity is still relevant, but I feel that the act of becoming famous is how you make more money. Everything is linked together. Even though people might say that everyone is equal through the Internet, it's still all about money and power.

**AB: Why have the symbols of pop become so important in China today?**

XZ: Chinese society has become a pop society because you can buy anything. Really, everything can be bought. In a way, a lot of people think it's not very healthy, but there's nothing that can be done about it. It's the reality of today.

**AB: If an artist is working today and succeeding as an independent entrepreneur, why need a gallery?**

XZ: If you want to develop yourself, you still have to be connected within the art world. That's why we opened a gallery because we still need the art world to do what we have to do. In the long term, the company might not need a gallery anymore, but it will take time to find new ways of surviving.

**AB: Do you have any advice for young artists trying to get a start?**

XZ: Young artists should be more audacious and not think so much about the gallery system, magazine critics, or institutions. Really do what you want to do! Then all of those other things will follow naturally.

**AB: Do you have any thoughts on what it means to be a successful leader?**

XZ: Being a good leader means not being afraid to make mistakes. We are always making mistakes but we are always finding solutions to get through them.