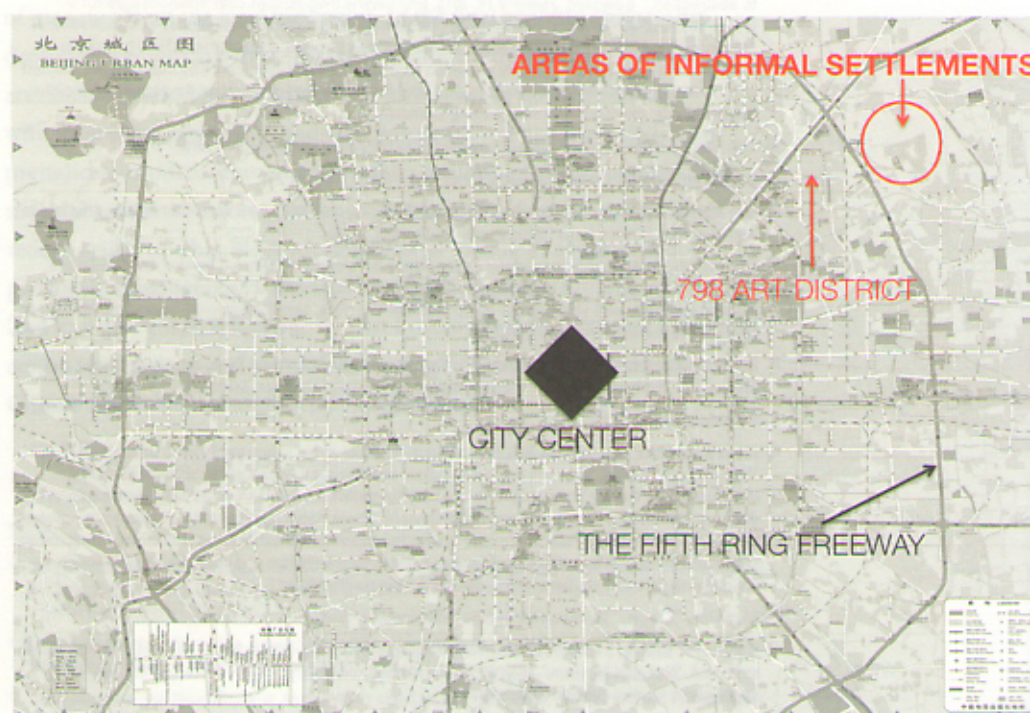


Danielle Shang

Urban Politics: Urbanization and Liu Wei's Art

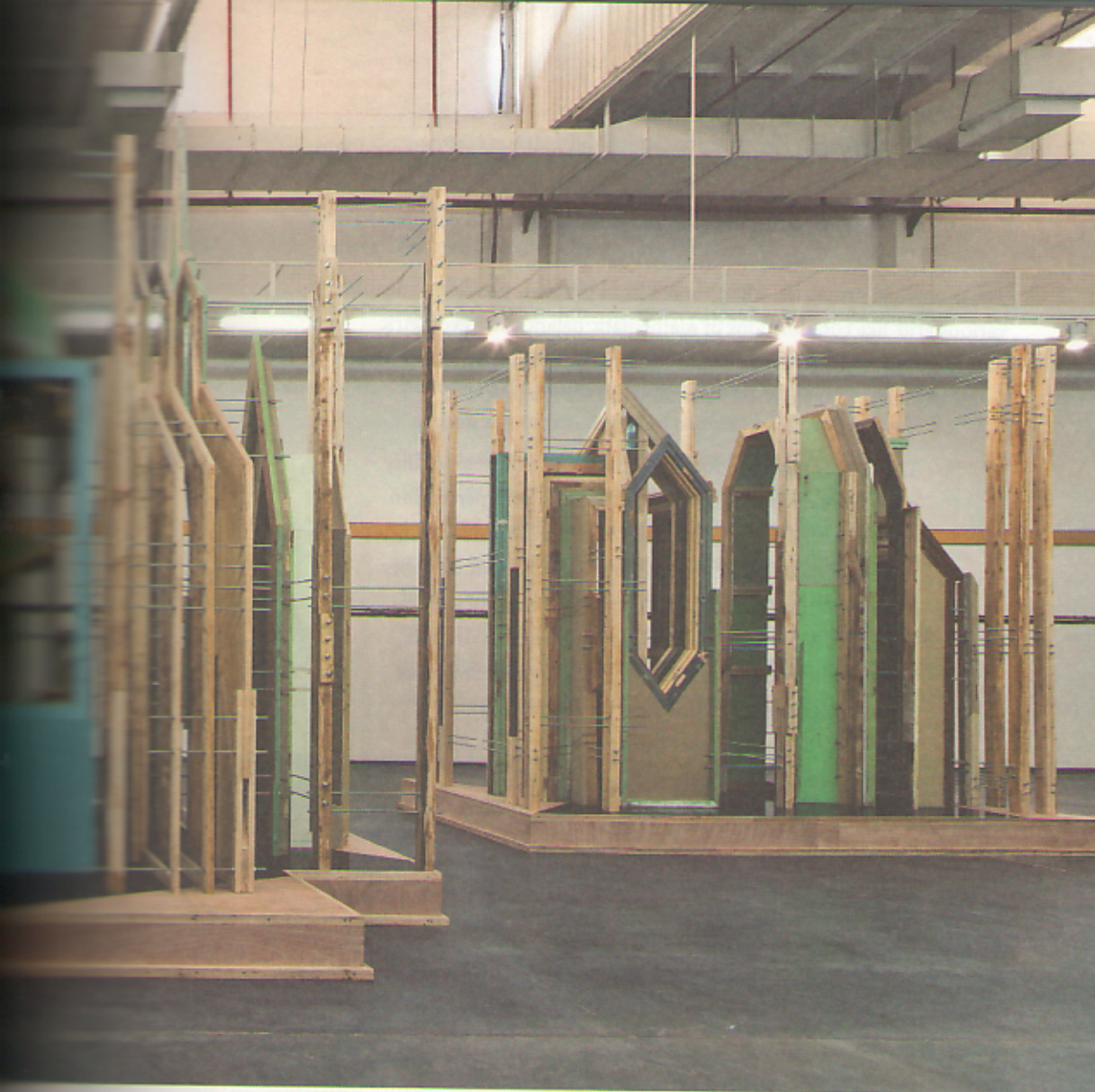


Map of Beijing showing areas of informal settlements, SinoMaps Press.

In this essay, I will investigate how the city of Beijing, its urban transformation, and the discourse of art globalization have shaped artist Liu Wei's vision and affected his art making. His art objects made from mutilated consumers' products, his monumental structures built with discarded building elements, and his cognitive cityscape paintings articulate the phenomena of China's urban gentrification, rural reterritorialization, consumerism, state capitalism, massive population migration, and restructuring of social class. I will also take a close look at his studio in an informal squatter community on the periphery of Beijing where he hires migrant peasant workers to execute his works, and, by extension, constructs a self-efficient and hybrid ecological fabric to prosper in the unofficial economy.

Beijing's City Planning and Urban Transformation

An imperial city for a thousand years, Beijing from its inception was meticulously planned and built with its ideological, symbolic, and ceremonial purposes embedded in its architecture and layout, reflecting the Chinese canonical prescription for a royal city built according to a perfect grid plan, with the imperial palace positioned in the centre. Significant edifices within the city all had their gates face south and were typically taller than other buildings to reinforce a hierarchical arrangement of space.



them. The remnants of paint are mostly in maroon and pastel green, commonly used in Chinese institutional and bureaucratic facilities in Mao's time, a now vanished episode in history. It can be thought of in terms of Rosalind Krauss's index theory:

[I]t is the building itself that is taken to be a message which can be presented but not coded. The ambition of the works is to capture the presence of the building, to find strategies to force it to surface into the field of the work. Yet, even as that presence surfaces, it fills the work with an extraordinary sense of time-past. Though they are produced by a physical cause, the trace, the impression, the clue, are vestiges of that cause which is itself no longer present in the given sign.¹²

In other words, that episode in history is physically present but temporally remote. The reconfigured monumental gestalt that is built with these architectural remains, and, by extension, ruins, also underscores the potential of pragmatic use value of "trash," the material waste in the process of urban redevelopment driven by conspicuous consumption. Liu Wei creates a new vocabulary with fragments and ruins to convey new social meanings directed at China's breakneck pace of urban renewal. The once

familiar architectural elements, be they windows or doors, are morphed into an alienating phantasmagorical mega-cluster of what Rem Koolhaas calls "junkspace"¹³ disengaged from the condition of history and culture.

The geometric structures, when viewed from different positions, resemble various grid-like compositions of mathematic balance and geometric harmony that evoke an aesthetic idea of utopian equilibrium amid what seems like chaos and violence. According to Lutz Koepnick:

The Grid is not a product of the unpredictable temporality of the viewers' physical movement and sensory perception but a prearranged logic of compilation and construction, a mechanism seemingly engineering uniformity, universality and unwavering stability. . . .¹⁴ [T]he grid enabled art's capacity to distance itself from language, figuration, and representation and provided visual experiences favouring simultaneity over the sequential, the spatial over the temporal, the abstract over the representational, and the universal over the particular.¹⁵

Liu Wei's preoccupation with forms, shapes, and grids constitutes much of his visual vocabulary and emphasizes relational form and internal architecture, insisting upon optimizing visual pleasure through aesthetic balance and proportion—in this way it resonates with the philosophical utopian approach to the aesthetics of De Stijl and Bauhaus.

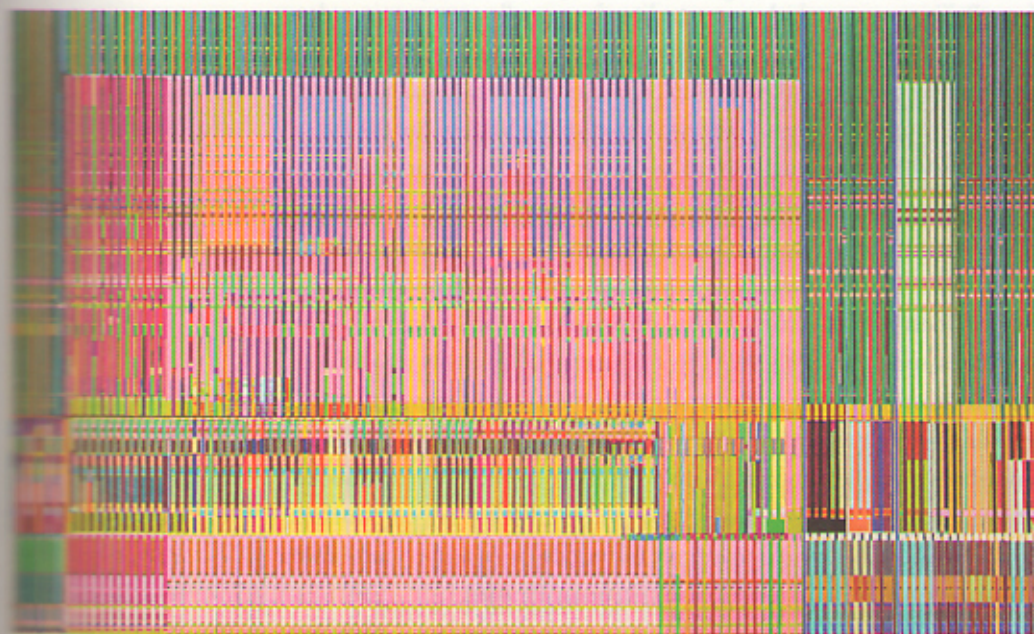
Studio Enterprise

Liu Wei's team of nearly three dozen workers executes these mega structures. Over twenty of them are full-time studio employees who complete various menial daily tasks: bargaining, purchasing, applying colours to the canvas, keyboarding, assembling, drilling, stacking, cleaning, and cooking, while Liu Wei, always handsomely dressed, juggles new artistic concepts and exhibition plans for his three representative galleries: Long March Art Space (Beijing), White Cube (London), and Lehmann Maupin (New York and Hong Kong), as well as proposals for numerous biennials and museum projects. It is Liu Wei's conscious choice to separate his art from his person and to divide intellectual faculty from manual work. From the moment when the raw materials are hauled in, all procedures are implemented in the studio by his employees under his supervision. Aside from an administrative office, storage, a room for him to entertain guests, and living quarters for the security staff, his studio compound also consists of two workshops: one for producing paintings and the other for making objects. Liu Wei's foreman hires those working on the paintings, mostly women, and the fabricators, mostly men, from nearby shanty villages. He prefers they don't have any knowledge of art.

The training for the painters involves the repetitive practice of applying lines with various brushes and tools that are sometimes made by the studio. The only skill that qualifies a peasant woman to earn a wage is the capability

of producing strokes either horizontally or vertically onto the canvas under strict directions of the artist; he does not allow room for individual creativity in the workshop. Walter Benjamin once explained the relation between practice and specialty:

With practice as the basis, “each particular area of production finds its appropriate technical form in experience and slowly perfects it.” To be sure, each area quickly crystallizes this form “as soon as a certain degree of maturity has been attained.” On the other hand, this same system of manufacture produces “in every handicraft it appropriates a class of so-called unskilled laborers which the handicraft system strictly excluded. In developing a greatly simplified specialty to the point of virtuosity, at the cost of overall production capacity, it starts turning the lack of any development into a specialty. In addition to rankings, we get the simple division of workers into the skilled and the unskilled.¹⁶



Liu Wei, *Truth Dimension No. 7* 2013, oil on canvas, 100 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

To produce the painting *Truth Dimension No. 7* (2013), for example, Liu Wei first sketches on his computer an image of an urban interior which does not represent an actual locale in reality but projects a sense of familiarity that is experienced in the city. The city is developing so fast that a new mise-en-scène constantly negates the old, resembling a palimpsest, giving no time to nurture an enduring memory attached to the concrete and the distinctive. He then allows the software to encrypt the picture into condensed vertical colour stripes before printing out the enlarged, detailed draft as a template for the workers to translate onto canvas by meticulously applying viscous strips of oil paint.

The artist decides the colour, width, and length of each strip. The transference process of “paint by command” closely resembles Warhol’s “paint by number,” but the lines do not need to be rendered as perfectly

as they would if produced by an automated device or by a professional artist. Accidental errors that betray lack of skill are welcome in voiding the rigid appearance of modularity. Occasionally, Liu Wei even dabs an unnecessary stroke here and there to leave a hint of his own hand. I once asked him whether art students or professionally trained artisans are also hired, Liu Wei replies that they are hired only occasionally when a deadline is dangerously impending:

Professionals are pain in the neck, because they have the tendency to mix colours or apply strokes on their own without consulting the instruction. They want to show off skills, which always collides with my concepts. Then my workers have to fix their paintings to realize the visual effects that a trained artist's hand cannot achieve.¹⁷

Only twenty years ago, all the artists had to either accept meagerly paid government-assigned jobs or scramble alongside migrant workers to eke out a living. Liu Wei, an academically trained and highly skilled artist originally from Beijing, once worked as an art editor for a small newspaper in order to collect a modest salary. Now he joins a significant number of elite artists who employ peasant workers to fulfill domestic and vocational tasks, and he is able to afford a team of over two dozen studio helpers. But the fact of affordability alone is not enough to explain his rationale for creating a complex ecological entity within his studio. Conventionally, artists hire studio assistants as a way to enhance the standard of the creation. Many artists depend on their assistants' talents and dexterity for producing works. Under normal circumstances, studio assistants are usually art school graduates, some even with MFAs. By hiring migrant peasants who have no artistic knowledge or craftsmanship, Liu Wei not only keeps a tight grip on the sole intellectual and artistic authorship of his work, but also underlines a parallel between his studio production and organized labour in manufactories, be it Foxconn or Nike, where unskilled migrant workers apply for assembly line jobs to execute end products that supply worldwide consumers' markets and move China's economy forward.

In his studio, Liu Wei is the CEO, the designer, the quality controller, the sole shareholder, the brand, and the spokesman; he is more than what Steve Jobs was for Apple. His gesture of meticulously separating art and thinking from manual labour uncomfortably implicates the removal of artists from the déclassé working class. It raises the question that Julian Bryan-Wilson once asked:

How is the making of a sculpture any different from the making of some other kind of commodity? At the heart of this question lie several critical issues: the division of labour under capitalism, the importance of skill or *Techne*, the psychic rewards of making the weight of aesthetic judgments, and the perpetually unfixed nature of the artist's professional status since roughly the fifteenth century.¹⁸

As for the hired peasant workers, the job in a studio is just a job, no more or less than jobs elsewhere. They are not there to seek opportunities for breaking into the elite art world; nor are they interested in arguing about authorship or proper credit. Similar to line workers who never assume the ownership of the products that they assemble, the studio workers do not question Liu Wei's authorship and ownership of the paintings, objects, and structures that they participate in producing. If the job pays regularly, and the environment is not hostile, it is a job worth keeping. By working in the studio, they consider themselves socially useful, even though they are aware that they could never afford the products that they produce. It then makes sense when Liu Wei insists that art should not have longevity; it should only have a shelf life, like other mass-produced products. "We do not expect an iPad to last forever; why should we make such an unreasonable demand on art?" He argues, "After all, it is the concept, not the material, that constitutes art."¹⁹

This notion of "idea as art and art as idea" is new in China. So is the concept of a society of consumer. Liu Wei does not wish to contest commodification of art and the profit-based system of exchange. He understands that he is at the beneficial end of the economic spectrum. If art were not a commodity, he would not enjoy the autonomy and privilege that he does. In other words, he accepts the fact that artists are participants in the state's capitalist logic, which inescapably poses moral concerns of inequality in art practice. When asked what his employees think of him, Liu Wei laughs and replies, "They think I am capitalist. But you know we get along very well. We are a family. Some of them have stayed with me for over ten years."²⁰ In light of this, Andrea Fraser's argument comes to mind:

If our only choice is to participate in this economy or abandon the art field entirely, at least we can stop rationalizing that participation in the name of critical or political art practices or—adding insult to injury—social justice. Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidized by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality—the (not so) new legitimating function of art museums. The only "alternative" today is to recognize our participation in that economy and confront it in a direct and immediate way in all our institutions.²¹

To a certain degree, Liu Wei's interest in "an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works"²² owes something to relational art, such as the work of Santiago Sierra, who creates situations to expose the alienated labour and subsequent exploitation by paying itinerant workers to perform temporary, useless, and often physically difficult tasks in galleries or museums. The itinerant labourers function as his exhibition material and his institutional critique. But Liu Wei's intention is not to temporarily exhibit the economic context by hiring day labourers to perform as day labourers. Nor does he choose to confront the unequal economic system that he participates in. His position is ambiguous, but not without



critique. It is not difficult to detect his attempt at intervening in the volatile socioeconomic conditions within his studio ecology for him to be active in the self-organization of urban-rural informality. Meanwhile, he articulates the interface of two polarized social sectors through art production. Of course exploitation occurs, and it probably exacerbates the already uneven economic and spatial effects as the artist profits enormously from hiring informal laborers and taking up a studio space that is much larger than several labourers' shelters combined, but at least the labourers are not subject to public humiliation or precariousness as in Santiago Sierra's *250 Cm Line Tattooed On 6 Paid People* (1999) where six unemployed young men from Old Havana were hired for \$30 in exchange for being tattooed and displayed only for the sake of the ephemeral exhibition.

Santiago Sierra, *250 Cm Line Tattooed On 6 Paid People*, Havana, Cuba, 1999. left: screen shot from video; right: gelatin silver print on paper, 76 x 104 cm.

Liu Wei's mutilated consumer products, his monumental structures built with ruins, and his cognitive cityscape paintings represent sprawling global cities, the encroaching junkspace, and the hegemonic material world. While Liu Wei is not ostentatiously taking a "correct" political stance to critique the obvious, there is no doubt that his art offers us a narrative of China's collective consumption, urban expansion, rural transformation, uneven social organization, and volatile ecological patterns. His art practice does not propose a black-and-white political tone, but by his production studio physically existing in the precarious space of an informal and liminal shanty village, and by pushing the boundaries of the power structures that he inhabits within the framework of culture production, Liu Wei's work is unmistakably embedded in urban politics. As Claire Bishop observes:

Politics and aesthetics . . . overlap in their concern for equality, their ways of intervening in how ideas are made and distributed, and the forms of their visibility. In short the aesthetic need not be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it already contains this ameliorative promise . . .

Good art . . . must negotiate the tension that pushes art towards "life" and separates aesthetic sensoriality from other forms of sensible experience. This friction ideally produces the formation of elements "capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability."²³

The informality of urban Beijing can offer itself as both the text and the context of new debates about fundamental social relations during

urbanization. Many artists' communities in the informal settlements could be the site to introduce "new identities and practices that disturb established histories."²⁴ The artist occupies a dual spatial existence: he produces art in an informal settlement but participates in a formal culture and economy. Within the micro-economy of informality, the artist plays the role of architect, and the hired informal labourers act as contracted builders who undertake the physical work to realize his blueprint. The art and the economic practice underscore the informal labour force that moves the peri-urban economy toward a market system. On a macro level, it offers us a glimpse of the unique narrative of Chinese urbanization in the globalized world.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Miwon Kwon and Dell Upton for helping me shape my critical ideas and sharpen my analytical skills. This essay is dedicated to them.

Notes

1. "Seven Sisters" refers to seven skyscrapers built in Moscow from 1947 to 1955. They later served as Soviet architectural role models for skyscraper projects in the Soviet Union.
2. Wing-Shing Tang, "Planning Beijing Strategically: 'One World, One Dream'," *Town Planning Review* 77, no. 3 (2006) (Globalisation and the Making of Asian World Cities), 265.
3. The process of mutation, according to Rem Koolhaas, is the transformation of both the city's environment and traditional architectural forms under the pressure of globalization and urbanization.
4. Roland Bosbach, "Living in a white elephant—Jianwai Soho, Beijing," *Building Material* no. 18 (Spring 2009) (global/local), 19, 24.
5. Changfu Han, *Migrant Workers In China* (Singapore: Cengage Learning Asia, 2011).
6. See Nezar AlSayyad's "Urbanism as a 'New' Way of Life," *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 7–30.
7. *Ibid.*, 10.
8. Pauline J. Yao, "Dark Matter," *ArtForum*, January 2012, <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201201&id=29816/>.
9. Robert Morris, "Anti Form," *ArtForum* 6, no. 8 (1968), 33–35.
10. Pamela M. Lee, *Object To Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 58.
11. *Ibid.*, 87.
12. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2," *October* 4 (1977), 65.
13. The concept of junkspace was created by Rem Koolhaas. There is not a simple and straightforward definition of it. It is a built environment to accommodate consumerism. It is not relevant to the history, environment, and culture of its site. Think of offices, malls, and airports. "If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet." Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October* 100 (Spring 2002), 175.
14. Lutz Koepnick, *[Grid <> Matrix]* (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2006), 53–54.
15. *Ibid.*, 8.
16. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 329.
17. Liu Wei, phone interview with the author, February 2014.
18. Julian Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 26.
19. Liu Wei, phone interview with the author, February 2014.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Andrea Fraser, "L'1%, C'est Moi," first published in *Texte zur kunst* 83, September 2011, 114–127 http://whitney.org/file_columns/0002/9848/andreafraser_1_2012whitneybiennial.pdf/.
22. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall, 2004), 70.
23. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *ArtForum*, February, 2006, <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=200602&id=10274/>.
24. James Holston, "Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship," in *Making the Invisible Visible*, ed. L. Sandercock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 48.

In 1949, when the Communist Party relocated the capital back to Beijing, the Soviet Union imposed a new plan of the city based on the spatial ideology of Moscow. The plan was implemented in 1953 with a strong emphasis on developing Beijing into a strong industrial centre. Manufacturing compounds and workshops mushroomed. What also emerged from the newly reconstructed cityscape was Stalinist high-rise architecture in the style of the Seven Sisters.¹ The space outside the Tian'anmen Gate (or Gate of Heavenly Peace) of the Forbidden City was transformed into a bizarre, European-style public square with a tall obelisk commemorating dead soldiers at its centre. This model of urban planning was soon replicated throughout China in big and small cities and towns, often with a statue of Mao replacing the obelisk. In Wing-Shing Tang's *Planning Beijing Strategically: "One World, One Dream,"* he argues:

What emerged from the Soviets was the following framework of a plan formulation for Beijing—it must be informed by the national economic plan, concerned with middle-ground issues within a definite time frame, aided by the political and borrowing from the experience of Moscow. . . . The industrial function of the city in line with the drive for industrialization at the national level was emphasized, but its cultural and historical past were neglected. All these were considered in terms of financial cost.²

At the end of the 1970s, China began to integrate itself into the global economy, and Beijing was the locus for flaunting China's superiority to the world. Three master plans were submitted to the central government in 1982, 1993, and 2005 in a strenuous effort to "mutate"³ Beijing into a global city. When, in 2002, Beijing won the bid for hosting the 2008 Olympics, the race for gentrification and urban expansion was accelerated at a breakneck pace. The city's augmentation was marked by the rapidly increasing number of enclosed freeway rings that quickly rippled from the city centre to uncharted hinterlands on the outskirts.

With the Forbidden City at the centre and its wall forming the first ring, the Second Ring Road [completed in 1992] follows the outline of the former city wall and defines the historic inner core with its threatened *hutong* [alleyway] fabric. The Third and Fourth Ring Road[s] accommodated most of the industrial development and associated housing of the early People's Republic and [are] today Beijing's urban motor with its prestigious Central Business District, new "western style" high-rise housing developments and the Olympic Park. The Fifth Ring Road defines the sprawling territory of Beijing's secret population, the estimated five million migrant workers, while the Sixth Ring Road in contrast connects Beijing's outer suburbs with its exclusive lush villa compounds.⁴

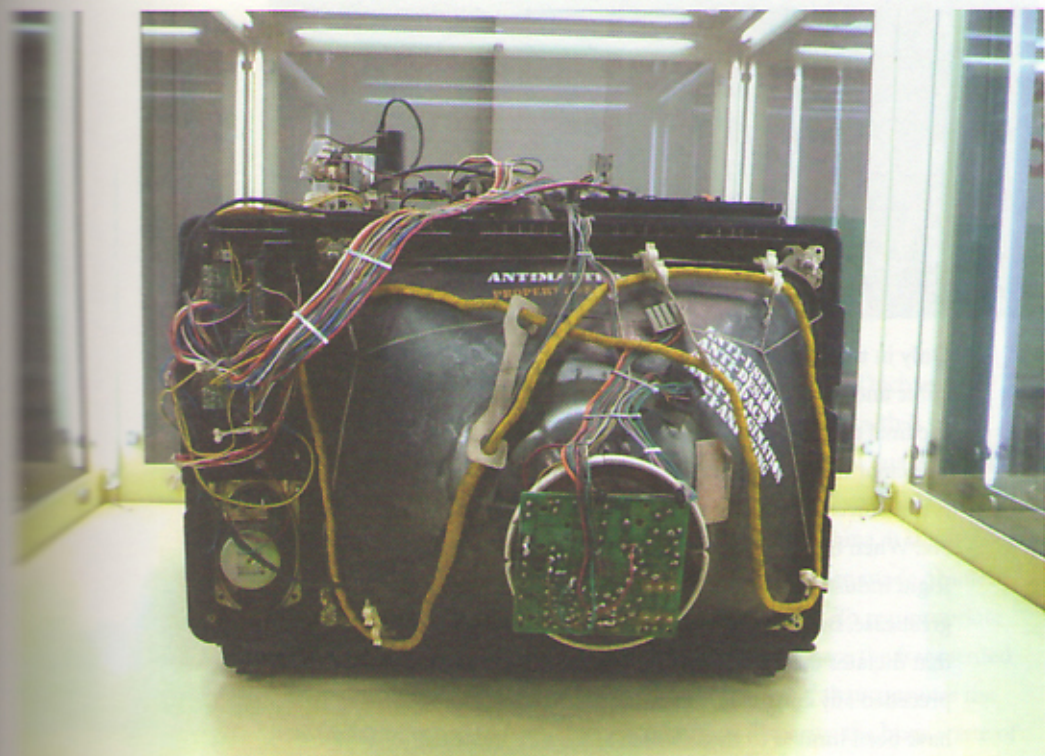
The avalanche of construction knocked down buildings and street blocks that had stood for centuries to make way for clusters of soaring skyscrapers that promised to pack in the ever-growing population. The heavy industrial plants that were installed under the direction of Moscow have now been removed from the city. Urbanization has been integral to modern China's economic, social, and, ultimately, political restructuring under the new guidelines of state capitalism, helping to maximize profits and to put Beijing on the world maps of finance, information technology, politics, consumerism, and entertainment.

Beijing's urban gentrification and rural reterritorialization have defamiliarized the city and its social space, fomenting a growing gap between marginalized populations consisting mainly of low-income urban dwellers and migrant peasant workers and the newly emerging bourgeoisie representing the leading sectors of global capital. The uneven spatial renaissance produces a deleterious effect on the disadvantaged; many of them live in colossal squatter settlements outside the Fifth Ring. The squatters' status of residence is illegitimate or unrecognized at best. As in many informal settlements in the world, construction is unregulated and is not guided by city planning. Infrastructure, public services, and welfare systems are insufficient, although the land is often within a formal jurisdiction. However, unlike the shantytowns of Cape Town or favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Beijing's informal housing does follow some zoning instructions and building codes to enable postal, Internet, telecommunications, sewage, and utility services. Additionally, the settlements are typically devoid of drug problems, violent crime, contaminating diseases, prostitution, and even vandalism. It is safe enough at night even when there are barely any streetlights after dark. However, with the increasing visibility of uneven wealth distribution, the tension between the rich and the poor is escalating, and the days of relative safety within the informal settlements are numbered.

The current environmental hazards are the dwellers' immediate concerns. The water is usually contaminated; the soil is sometimes toxic; streets are often littered with mounds of uncovered garbage; and the air is fetid with dust and smoke. Also undermining living conditions in informal settlements are the insufficiencies of garbage removal, gas service, medical service, public transportation, and street lighting. Although austere, chaotic, and heavily polluted, these communities are temporary havens for countless migrant workers, eight-five percent of them between the ages of eighteen and fifty.⁵ Despite the fact that they seek jobs in the city and take shelter on the urban fringes, they are still rooted in their rural communities at home. Their parents, and sometimes spouses and children, still live in the countryside, where the families own properties and plots of land.

Nezar Al Sayyad calls for updating our analytical toolkit to approach the contemporary processes of informal urban development beyond Latin American models.⁶ In this spirit, I would like to take a closer look at urbanization in Beijing, paying special attention to the lives of people in

the informal settlements to discover, as Louis Wirth puts it, “the forms of social action and organization that emerge among individuals under these conditions of density, heterogeneity, and anonymity.”⁷ I would argue that patterns of economic decentralization and self-organized networks of informality are imperative for the Chinese “squatters,” especially the ones from the countryside, to complete the ultimate cycle of transformation from rural to urban in a state capitalist economy. The squatter settlements represent a new paradigm for understanding a different but essential urban culture of survival. I also would like to problematize the conventional logic of urban informality, as the informal settlements in Beijing do not simply consist of the activities of the destitute or correspond to a particular status of labour, but also include participation in the global economy by artists who produce artworks there that are then disseminated at prestigious cultural institutions. This decentralized, alternative economic mode of informality affords Chinese artists the opportunity to create works of mammoth scale and with sophisticated technologies but at low cost in order to compete in the international art market. In this sense, informality is not only a means to survive but also a form of catalyst for prosperity.



Liu Wei, *AntiMatter-TV*,
2006, mixed media,
100 x 100 x 70 cm. Courtesy of
the artist.

Property of L. W.

It is against this background of uneven development that Liu Wei emerged after the seminal exhibition *Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion* (1999), a privately organized underground exhibition, curated by artist Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun, held in the basement of a residential building and conceived of as a platform for artists to go against populism and stereotypes in favour of an alternative experience of art making and art viewing. In 2004, Liu Wei rented a small studio and hired a couple of assistants. In another two years, he moved into his current studio in Shijiacun, one of

the squatter communities on the northeast fringe of the city beyond the Fifth Ring Road. The village, far from the city centre, is, as Pauline J. Yao puts it, "an embodiment of the destabilizing and disorienting effects of the transition from an agrarian to an industrial and postindustrial economy."⁸ Knowing that his studio, together with the informal squatters, could be forced to relocate anytime if the government reterritorializes the land for new developments, Liu Wei has nevertheless built his enterprise in two rows of houses filed along a narrow courtyard.

In 2006, at the zenith of Chinese economic growth and the art market boom, Liu Wei produced the *Antimatter* series. Antimatter is a scientific term for the binding of antiparticles. Many physicists speculate a mirror universe to ours, one that comprises only matter. When matter and antimatter collide and try to annihilate each other, they produce a formidable destructive power. But the Chinese title *fanwuzhi* 反物質 is a double entendre that means antimatter as well as anti-materialism, a notion that is opposed to consumerism. Liu Wei appropriates this term as the punning title for a ventilation fan, a TV, a refrigerator and a washing machine that are sawed open, taken apart, and reconfigured with their insides out. The English phrases "antimatter," "property of L. W.," "anti-useful," "anti-design," "anti-space," "anti-imagination," and "anti-anything" are stenciled on each object as his open address to viewers, calling their attention to China's new reality of inflating and wasteful material consumption.

There is another layer embedded in this series of "antis." He is gently poking fun at Robert Morris's infamous "antiform" statement. In his 1968 article "Antiform," Morris wrote:

Only in the case of object-type art have the forms of the cubic and the rectangular been brought so far forward into the final definition of the work. That is, it stands as a self-sufficient whole shape rather than as a relational element. . . . In object-type art process is not visible. Materials often are. When they are, their reasonableness is usually apparent. Rigid industrial materials go together at right angles with great ease. But it is the a priori valuation of the well-built that dictates the materials. The well-built form of objects preceded any consideration of means. Materials themselves have been limited to those which efficiently make the general object form.⁹

Liu Wei by no means intends to revisit the plasticity of rectangular industrial materials, but he is enormously interested in the *priori* quality of materials and their *posteriori* evaluation. Revealing the process of cutting, composing, assembling, and reconstructing, Liu Wei calls our attention to the mutilated forms of the objects and presents a naked truth of material things that is alienating and unsettling.

In the same year, he extended the idea of reclaiming ownership of objects by stenciling "Property of L. W." on debris from demolished buildings—

Property of L. W.,
2006, made on debris.
Courtesy of the artist.



evidence of Beijing's frenzied growth—to create a series of Duchampian readymades entitled *Property of L. W.* (2006). Economic growth is fueled by producing, consuming, and ultimately wasting increased quantities of products and materials so that the profit can be made to partially reinvest in a further spiral expansion of productivity. Today, in China, it is not only building materials that are rapidly produced and then made obsolete, but also labour—manual labour and intellectual labour. To reappropriate discarded construction materials is for Liu Wei to embrace the fragmented past and to question the meaning of “private property” that connotes the new frenzy of consumerism, the new economic disparity, the huge waste of resources, and the increase in social conflicts ignited by inequality.

To further articulate the idea of reclamation, in the same prolific year, Liu Wei inaugurated a third series, *As Long As I See It* (2006). In this series, Liu Wei first took Polaroid pictures of a billiard table, a cabbage, a refrigerator, a washing machine, and a tree. The objects in the photographs were then cropped by the white borders of the photo paper. He then had the actual objects placed at the exact same positions and angles in accordance to the photographic images and displayed in the same composition next to the photographs, with the cuts visible to the viewer. By moving the objects away from their original settings and juxtaposing them next to the



Liu Wei, *As Long As I See It—No. 1*, 2006, pine trees, iron, concrete, telegraph poles, Polaroid photograph, 500 x 300 x 140 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

photographs in a gallery, Liu Wei gave these mundane things an elevated status, and demonstrated their existential reality twice: first as subject of art in photographs and then as an object of art on display. Isolated from the original context, the peculiarity of the fragmentation is magnified, as the viewer cannot help but wonder about the history of the objects and the locations of the settings. The compositional logic of the cuts in the objects lies in the white borders; the guiding principle in selecting objects to photograph and then to cut seems to be determined only by the gaze of the artist in his daily life. If taking Polaroid pictures seems effortless, cutting the objects and removing the fragments can be challenging, especially when the objects are telephone poles or juniper trees. Similar to Gordon Matta-Clark's architectural fragments, Liu Wei's objects assume their autonomy like shards conserved from archeological sites, but they are, in fact, as Pamela M. Lee points out in Matta-Clark's cut pieces, "underwritten by its provenance, the property from which it is extracted or produced, exhibited and preserved. . . . Such property only emerges from—is thrown into stark relief by—the fragment itself, which lays claim to the site in its absence."¹⁰

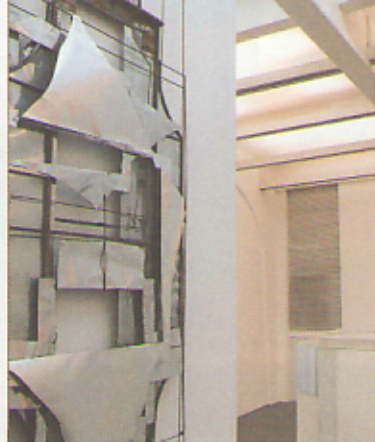


Liu Wei, *As long as I see it—Washing Machine*, 2006, washing machine, Polaroid photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Through the process of cutting and recomposing, the sculptural objects that Liu Wei puts on display are no longer ready-mades; however, the characteristics of the original objects are still preserved, and the dimension of everydayness is brought into the open for scrutiny in an alternative social space. The cross sections invite the viewer's gaze to penetrate the surface and interrogate the internal engineering

systems, and to compare what the author has assigned through the lens with the actual material fragments. Here the gaze of the author and the

Liu Wei, *Crucifixion*, 2014, iron, steel, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



gaze of the viewer bring different values to the objects. Liu Wei's gaze claims ownership of the property by simply looking. The white borders of the Polaroid play out as the limits of the properties claimed by Liu Wei's gaze. The viewer's gaze functions as appraisal of that value and legitimizes the autonomy of

the crippled and defunct objects that in return exemplify the fluidity that can exist between art as property and property as art. By exhibiting the defunctness of the objects, Liu Wei demystifies them to reveal what Daniel Buren calls "internal architecture" and "the ideological interface between art and the institution in which the art is circulated."¹¹

Liu Wei's interrogation of material culture, urbanistic ramifications, and correlations of authorship, ownership, and production continues to be manifested in his works through his career, including the recent large installations by him that were on view at the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art from February 7 to April 17, 2015.

Liu Wei, *Outcast*, 2007, old doors, windows, iron, tables, chairs, soil, fans. Courtesy of the artist.



The Grid and the Geometric

Liu Wei's curiosity about urbanization and the reorganization of social structures culminated in series of colossal sculptural installations. The first was his 2007 *Outcast I*, an enclosed, airtight mega-structure of a ghostly vacant conference room built with recycled doorframes and windows salvaged from demolished institutional and bureaucratic facilities around the city.

Then there was the dramatic installation *Merely A Mistake* (2009–11), which resembles an archipelago of vertically oriented architectural structures, aggressively sprawled across an enormous exhibition hall. The structures are assembled with layers of recycled timber building materials that are fastened



together with long stainless steel bolts to form geometric silhouettes of pseudo edifices in Gothic style with pointed arches on the top. A kaleidoscopic pattern recedes into the inner centre of the structure on each side. The effect of multiple reflections is realized by the accumulated layers of a symmetrical pattern built with the scraps of wooden frames to form the object chamber.

As the viewer walks through towering structures his/her attention is drawn to the exposed material and the complex compositions of grids that are constantly shifting in scale and form, depending on the vantage point of observation, to create a somatic correlation between the viewer and the gestalt. The exposed cuts of the wooden beams remind the viewer of half torn down buildings or the *Antimatter* objects that Liu Wei turned inside out with violent force. The awareness of both the material and the construction process engages the viewer with the built space of salvaged wood beams, as well as the history of the places embedded in them. The contingent and relational viewership, integral to Liu Wei's conceptualization of this work, opens up an infinite number of readings.

One reading stems from the transformation of reclaimed, previously discarded building elements that are still left with the original paint on

Liu Wei, *Merely a Mistake II* (detail), 2009–11, recycled door frames, found wooden beams, acrylic board, stainless steel. Courtesy of the artist.