Xu Zhen 徐震 (produced by MadeIn Company): Art & Spectacle

‘Andy Warhol and the Factory established a connection between art and commerce. They wanted to make art into commerce. We have already established the idea that art is commerce, what we are doing is making commerce into art.’ (Xu Zhen)

Xu Zhen (produced by Made-In Company) European Thousand Arms Classical Sculpture, 2014, glass-fibre-reinforced concrete, marble grains, marble, metal, 473 x 1470 x 304cm, installation view, Long Museum Shanghai

19 western classical sculptures are presented in a reference to the Buddhist deity, the ‘Thousand Armed Guanyin’

Course Content

Artists’ Practice
The Structural Frame: ‘reading’ contemporary artworks
The Postmodern Frame: Hybrid Contemporary Practices
Conceptual Framework: Artist/Artwork/Audience

Outcomes: P7, P8, P9, H7, H8, H9

This Case Study is focused on:
- Reading and analysing extracts of art critical writing
- Understanding ‘visual codes’ and iconography – applying the structural frame to understand how artists create meanings in their works through their choices of materials and their visual language
- Understanding how contemporary artists work in ways informed by globalisation and a post-industrial marketplace, incorporating theories of visual culture
- Developing art critical writing skills in analysis, interpretation and evaluation of selected artworks
- Comparative writing – learning how to compare works (by the same or different artists) in order to make inferences and deductions
Note to teachers and students

This Case Study focuses on the practices of the artist and the critic. In the first instance, students encounter the artworks themselves, in the gallery and/or in reproduction or online. A sequence of learning activities begins with a discussion of selected works and video clips, followed by examples of art writing and artist interviews, with questions. These provide information about the artist but are also models of critical practice. Whole class and small group tasks are suggested, with links to other artists, art movements and/or critical theories. An extended response question, with marking guidelines, requires students to develop an argument that demonstrates their understanding of the artist’s practice. The Case Study may be implemented over 4 -10 hours, depending on teacher and student interests and needs.

Background

Xu Zhen was born in 1977. He lives and works in Shanghai. A conceptual artist whose work often takes the form of provocative sculptures, installations and interventions, Xu Zhen challenges art conventions and expertly manipulates western expectations of Chinese art and commerce. In 2009, Xu Zhen founded ‘MadeIn Company’, a ‘contemporary art-creation corporation.’ Operating as MadeIn, Xu Zhen produced works ranging from sculpture and installation to performance and photography; from painting and tapestries to video. In 2013, MadeIn Company launched the brand ‘Xu Zhen’, thereby turning the artist himself into a ‘brand’. Apart from being an artist and a curator, Xu Zhen works collaboratively with other artists and designers to organise various art activities and events. These developments recognise a new reality – many contemporary artists no longer work alone in their studios, making works with their own hands. Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company are redefining the term ‘artist’.

Teaching / Learning

This Case Study may be approached in a range of different ways, depending on the particular interests of teachers and students. Strategies may include:

- Class and/or small group discussion of Xu Zhen and the MadeIn Company and a comparison with other artists and their working methods
- Independent research or collaborative investigations
- ‘Socratic Dialogues’ that unpack a range of meanings in specific works
- Debates or dialogues exploring the unusual practice of the MadeIn ‘contemporary art creation company’ and ideas about art as a commodity and the artist as a ‘corporate entity’
- The creation of student blogs or websites

A: Individually, students read each of the three texts and answer the focus questions before attempting the extended response.

B: In small groups students may choose to investigate:

- The material practices of Xu Zhen and his MadeIn collaborators/assistants – how are particular works produced, and what materials and technologies are involved in the selected works?
- The relationships between works by Xu Zhen and MadeIn and art history – both western and Chinese. Why appropriate and re-contextualise significant historical works, and what is the impact of this plundering of art historical imagery?
Many contemporary artists, including Xu Zhen, reference Marcel Duchamp in their work – can you detect influences from Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ and his insistence that art was conceptual?

How does Xu Zhen’s practice connect with international contemporary art practitioners such as Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst?

C: Optional extension activity. Research Andy Warhol’s ‘Factory’ in New York in the 1960s and his radical strategy of incorporating previously commercial processes such as screen printing into the world of ‘high art’. Compare and contrast Warhol’s conceptual and material practices with Xu Zhen’s.

Xu Zhen (produced by MadeIn Company) *Calm*, 2009, water bed, carpet, building rubble, 15 x 500 x 350cm, image courtesy White Rabbit Gallery

Two video clips to begin:


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOv7r0r4y-U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOv7r0r4y-U) Philip Tinari explains Xu Zhen’s significance

Useful References and Resources


[http://artradarjournal.com/2014/05/30/chinese-artist-xu-zhen-art-can-create-a-new-culture-interview/](http://artradarjournal.com/2014/05/30/chinese-artist-xu-zhen-art-can-create-a-new-culture-interview/) Xu Zhen answers questions about his practice
Essential Vocabulary for this Case Study

Installation
Conceptual Art
Performance Art
Postmodernism / Postmodernity
Post-internet
Post-Mao
Curator
Globalisation
Mass-production
Consumerism
Fabrication
Satire/Satirical
Commodification
Spectacle
Xu Zhen (produced by MadeIn Company) *Play*, 2013
leather, artificial leather, BDSM accessories, foam, metal, wood, ropes, 330 x 545 x 300cm
image courtesy White Rabbit Gallery

Readings and Questions

Reading #1

*The Armory Show Celebrates the Provocative Conceptualism of Artist Xu Zhen*  
(extracts from the New York Armory Show press release, 2014)

A “chameleon of concept,” he has built an extensive body of work that includes video, installation, performance, and photography. From theatrical merry pranks to quieter works playing on human sensitivity, Xu Zhen has developed a repertoire confronting social-political taboos within the context of contemporary China and beyond.... Throughout his career, Xu Zhen has been at the forefront of critical thinking about the role of art and artists in contemporary China, engaging smartly and humorously with many of the big issues facing cultural production there today... Born in Shanghai in 1977, Xu Zhen is regarded as a leading figure of that city’s art scene and of the larger generation of artists born in the Post-Mao era. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, he organized a number of ground-breaking underground exhibitions including ‘Supermarket: Art for Sale’ and ‘Twins.’ In 2001 he became the youngest Chinese artist ever to show at the Venice Biennale. In 2006 he oversaw the development of the online discussion platform now known as Art-Ba-Ba, which remains a key grassroots conduit for the circulation and dissemination of information and images about artistic developments around and beyond China. In 2009, he began working under the alias “MadeIn,” a studio conceived as a company and taking on commissions and projects as well as producing new work.

Focus Questions

1. List the various elements of Xu Zhen’s practice as outlined in the press release.
2. What can you infer about his practice from your list?
3. What is surprising or unusual about his practice?
4. Look at a series of works by *Xu Zhen* (pre 2009), *MadeIn* (2009 – 2013), and, most recently, *Xu Zhen produced by MadeIn Company*. How does he challenge conventional ideas about art and artists?
Substitution and inversion are twin themes in Xu's work. Images and objects from different cultures and different parts of the world are juxtaposed, creating new meanings. He sees his generation as global beings who have moved beyond ideas of national identity.

Reading #2

Glossary

Dialectic: A method of examining and discussing opposing ideas in order to find the truth.
Ontological: Relating to ontology (a theory about the nature of being.)
Duchampian: Influenced by the ideas or actions of early 20th c. artist Marcel Duchamp.

MadeIn is a ‘cultural production’ company established in 2009 by leading Chinese conceptual artist Xu Zhen. Almost every article on MadeIn’s work starts with such an explanation, and this article is no exception. The need for an explanation stems from the fact that this form of creative production hasn’t existed before. The act of a respected artist devolving his unique identity within a commercial structure provokes suspicion that the artist has ‘sold out’ to a corporate mentality whose role is simply to exploit and be exploited by the market. The very duty of the artist in society has been to provide a spiritual space for us to escape our everyday reality. By crossing over to the ‘dark side’ such an artist supposedly becomes part of that dark reality we all strive to set ourselves apart from. While art history is populated with artists who pull us into that pure and spiritual realm of experience, the sheer size and complexity of today’s commercialised art world seems to obscure the boundaries between our material dimension and its spiritual counterpart, watering down the idea of experience itself. Ever since Warhol blurred the allegedly clear moral line between the black and white worlds of art and money with the quote “Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art”, artists have been busy smudging that dividing line to the extent that all we have left is a giant grey area.

This preamble on the conceptual and material commercialization of artistic practice is not to excuse MadeIn’s apparent collusion with it, but to provide a clear distinction from it. The transformation of the individual artist Xu Zhen into the cultural production company MadeIn is a provocative question posed about the nature of a contemporary artist today. Xu Zhen has sacrificed his identity as unique artist in order to pose this question, putting himself inside the question by providing the problematics of this important dialectic. Since the moral division between art and money has become a grey zone, Xu Zhen has made his very identity a grey zone.
After all, if artists can have large commercial structures backing them or running their studios, does their name turn into a brand? If artists rely on an art world that operates and even thrives within a global capitalist system they protest against through their art, what _ontological_ issues does this raise about the artist? Walter Benjamin proposed 80 years ago that the work of art lost its aura; Xu Zhen through establishing MadeIn is proposing that the artist has also lost his aura.

The identity of the artist is about representation, and representation is at the heart of what an artist does. Another important reason for Xu Zhen to change the nature of his identity is to shape a different way an artist is represented. If there is one series of works that epitomises MadeIn’s method of representation, it is _True Image_ ... a series of installation and sculptural works produced by MadeIn are on show, but only in photographic form. The photographic representations of the works are exhibited after the originals have been destroyed. The representation of the original becomes the surrogate original. Moreover, the title of the series, _True Image_, takes this logic a step further; it dictates that the surrogate becomes the original as the original no longer exists. As such, MadeIn is a representation of Xu Zhen, but now that Xu Zhen has been annulled, MadeIn becomes the original, although stripped of the artist’s aura. ... Here, MadeIn’s destruction of the original elevates the documentation of it to the status of art in one _Duchampian_ gesture. Behind this gesture, however, is the current reality of how art is experienced by more and more artists, curators, and audiences today. Mechanical reproduction has been replaced by digital dissemination, and the local museum has been replaced by the global online community. Now that contemporary art is a global cultural phenomenon, how does that relate to the experience of art? While artists in New York, London, and Paris can appreciate art emanating its original aura at MoMA, Tate Modern, and the Pompidou, what modern art experiences are on offer for artists in Beijing, Mumbai, or Cairo? If the experience of art relies on contact with its aura, then what implications does this have for the vast majority of artists around the world who are developing their own practice without this fundamental experience...

The nuance MadeIn is exploring is guided by the knowledge that everything informs the act of looking. There is no innocent look, as every look is charged with what has been seen before and is contaminated by what is being looked at.

_Extract from MadeIn by MadeIn (Colin Chinnery)_.
The whole article may be found at:  

**Focus Questions**

1. In Chinnery’s account, Xu Zhen has “sacrificed his identity as a unique artist” in order to pose provocative questions about the nature of a contemporary artist today. What are the questions that Xu Zhen poses about the nature of art and the role of the artist?
2. What advantages and disadvantages do you see in an artist making himself into a corporate ‘brand’ and leaving his individual identity behind?
3. Xu Zhen sees himself as a ‘post-internet’ artist, influenced by his ability to access global culture online, rather than experiencing the ‘aura’ of the originals. How does his practice transform conventional ideas about the value of the unique, irreplaceable work of art?
“I’ve become so interested in this idea of artworks as product lines. We are working on catalogues now to introduce our different series of works, our product lines. They look and feel like automobile sales brochures.”

(Xu Zhen in conversation with curator Philip Tinari, in Parkett No, 96 2015)

Reading #3

An extract from ‘An Open letter to Xu Zhen’ by Chiu-Ti Jansen (of Sotheby’s Art Auction House)

Dear Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company:

1. Individual “Artist” or “Commercial “Business”? Are you Xu Zhen or MadeIn Company? In 2009, you founded a contemporary art creation company with a doctrinal purpose to focus on the production of creativity. In my mind, MadeIn takes Andy Warhol’s The Factory a step further, engaging in an ongoing investigation into the “system of art.” Since its debut, MadeIn Company has produced many headline-grabbing projects, including the temporary relocation of its corporate headquarters to the Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai in late 2012.

What is the distinction between an artist and a commercial enterprise, as well as between an individual and a collective? The Armory Show’s official announcement identifies you as “XU ZHEN (MADEIN)” in the headline, but throughout the press release you are simply referred to as “Xu Zhen.” So who, then, is the commissioned artist—Xu Zhen or MadeIn Company?

The Chinese rendition of MadeIn Company, meiding gongsi...is a double entendre of “a company without a head” and “a company drowned by [its] head.” Some critics have bemoaned the end of an artist and the birth of a CEO. In 2013, the Company launched a brand named “Xu Zhen.” If Xu Zhen and MadeIn have effectively become synonymous, does it matter which name you choose to adopt? You once said, “Identity is only a tool.” How is your shifting identity different from when Karl Lagerfeld designs for Chanel as opposed to for his own namesake label?
[Note: a ‘double entendre’ is a phrase, saying or sentence that can be interpreted in two different ways.]

2. Art and Patronage. Whether it’s Xu Zhen producing art under the corporate alias of “MadeIn,” or MadeIn creating art under its marketing marque Xu Zhen, we are compelled to ponder the inter-connections between patronage, commerce and cultural production. How does a contemporary creative collective differ from an old master’s workshop? How is an art fair’s commission of Xu Zhen different from, say, the Medici’s patronage of Michelangelo?


Focus Questions

1. What questions would YOU ask Xu Zhen? And how do you imagine he would respond?

2. Argue a case for or against the proposition that Xu Zhen’s MadeIn corporation, where many assistants are making artworks, is no different from the workshop of a Renaissance master.

3. Each of the three readings deals with ideas about representation: the representation of the artist’s identity, the representation of art in a globalised post-internet age, and the representation of ideas in artworks. Write a press release for ‘Xu Zhen by MadeIn Company’, explaining the most important characteristics of this ‘brand’ and what it represents.

4. Describe and analyse TWO works selected from this list:
   a. European Thousand Arms Classical Sculptures (2014)
   b. Eternity (2013 - 2014)
   c. Play (2013)
   d. Under Heaven (2012)
   e. Calm (2009)
   f. In Just a Blink of an Eye (2005)

The next step is to apply your understanding of Xu Zhen’s practice to an extended argument about the nature of contemporary practice, comparing his body of work with the practice of another selected contemporary artist.

Xu Zhen (Produced by MadeIn Company) In Just a Blink of an Eye, 2005
(installation/performance view at ‘13 Rooms’, Sydney, 2013)
Comparative Art Criticism – an Essay

Answer this extended response question with reference to TWO works by Xu Zhen compared with a work or works by ONE of the following artists:

- Jeff Koons
- Andy Warhol
- Ai Weiwei
- Damien Hirst

Plan and write an extended response to this question:

‘Contemporary art is a global cultural phenomenon: the game has changed for both artists and audiences.’

Assess this statement with reference to specific examples.

Additional References and Sources

http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/JeffKoons


http://www.warhol.org/

http://www.saatchigallery.com/aipe/damien_hirst.htm
## Marking Guidelines

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<th>Descriptor</th>
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<td>o A comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the practice of the selected artists is evident and sustained throughout&lt;br&gt; o A sophisticated analysis and interpretation of the visual codes, materials and techniques used by the selected artists, demonstrating extensive knowledge and thorough understanding of the works within their contemporary context, informed by contemporary theories of art&lt;br&gt; o Appropriate art terminology is employed fluently and persuasively</td>
<td>A&lt;br&gt; 9 - 10</td>
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<td>o A sound knowledge and understanding of the practice of the selected artists is evident and well-sustained&lt;br&gt; o A good analysis and interpretation of the visual codes, materials and techniques used by the selected artists, demonstrating sound knowledge and understanding of the works within their contemporary context&lt;br&gt; o Appropriate art terminology is employed competently</td>
<td>B&lt;br&gt; 7 - 8</td>
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<td>o Some knowledge and understanding of the practice of the selected artists is evident&lt;br&gt; o A satisfactory analysis and interpretation of some visual codes, materials and techniques used by the selected artists, demonstrating some knowledge and understanding of the works in a more descriptive manner&lt;br&gt; o Some appropriate art terminology is employed more naively</td>
<td>C&lt;br&gt; 5 - 6</td>
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<td>o A limited knowledge and understanding of the practice of the selected artists may be expressed in less coherent ways&lt;br&gt; o A simple analysis and interpretation of some visual codes, materials and techniques used by the selected artists, demonstrating a developing knowledge and understanding of the works, is applied in a descriptive or more limited manner&lt;br&gt; o A very simple attempt to apply appropriate art language</td>
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<td>o A foundational understanding of artmaking practice&lt;br&gt; o Limited, poorly researched or prepared, revealing an elementary understanding of the visual codes, materials and techniques used the selected artists&lt;br&gt; o Little or no attempt to apply appropriate art language</td>
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