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Review of Valjakka, M.; Wang, M. (2018) Visual arts, representations and interventions in contemporary China: urbanized interface

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Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interface, edited by Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 316 pp. €85.00 (cloth).

This edited volume investigates the interrelations between visual arts and urbanization in contemporary China. It does so through detailed studies of particular artworks, artists, artists' groups, and urban creativity more generally. The main argument is that “innovative artistic and creative practices initiated by various stakeholders not only raise critical awareness on sociopolitical issues of Chinese urbanization but also actively reshape the urban living spaces through the formation of new collaborations, agencies, aesthetics and cultural production sites” (13). In light of increasing urbanization in China, the book is particularly timely. Five of the chapters were published in a special issue of *China Information* in 2015 but were—to varying degrees—revised for this volume.

The book is divided into two parts of five chapters each, which focus on urban representations and interventions. This approach is helpful, because it highlights a variety of types of engagement between visual arts and cities. Representations and interventions are not juxtaposed but rather complement each other, and the boundaries between the two parts of the book are porous. Both the artistic representations and the interventions are used as ways to explore cultural activism in China, which is understood as comprising artistic and creative practices that “aim to raise public awareness, foster alternative subjectivities, reclaim civil rights, and encourage collaboration at the grassroots level” (17). It is an understudied and welcome topic.

The book is firmly grounded in the humanities, with no social scientific contributions, but offers a broad palette in terms of disciplines and methodologies. The authors approach their subjects from a number of perspectives, such as art history (primarily), cinema studies, and China studies. Methodologies are not discussed in detail, but they include contextual visual analysis and fieldwork. The latter is very appropriate, since it allows one to study actual engagements with the urban environment.

The book focuses on the PRC, primarily Beijing but also Shanghai, Guangzhou, and even artwork about an imagined RMB City, as well as the urban landscape in general. A broad variety of visual arts are covered, including performance art, photography, documentary films, and graffiti. Some of the artists are renowned and relatively well-researched, like Cao Fei, Zhang Peili, and Zhang Dali, while other artists have received less scholarly attention, like Ni Weihua and Yang Lina. Paintings are conspicuously absent, whereas some phenomena are unexpectedly interpreted as artistic. For instance, Elizabeth Parke conceptualizes painted phone numbers, which are ubiquitous on the sidewalks in Chinese cities, as artistic interventions and argues that they can be interpreted as public calligraphy. Despite the diversity of topics, the editors and contributing authors made a laudable

effort to make the book cohesive. Multiple cross-references between chapters are very helpful to understand how chapters speak to each other.

Whereas most of the chapters focus on recent artworks in a contemporary context, the book provides some historical depth. Nancy P. Lin, for example, focuses on the Big Tail Elephant Working Group and studies their innovative ways of engagement in the 1990s with the urban environment, which she calls “urban insertions.” The book’s focus is on unofficial/independent artists, although Stefan Landsberger’s chapter, which is positioned as “an essential counter-perspective,” investigates government propaganda. Whereas the choice to focus on artists “outside the system” is certainly justified if one wants to study cultural activism, it would have been interesting to explore the complexity of the cultural landscape in China by including the cultural activism of artists from “within the system.”

The chapters are diverse in theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks, and also differ in analytical strength. All told, the book contains numerous insights, but it could have drawn stronger conclusions to pull the diverse chapters together. Although in the introduction the editors present cultural activism as the central concern of the book, the subsequent chapters do not directly engage with this concept. Also, most of the chapters do not generalize or position their research in relation to contexts other than China. Given this, a clearer articulation of cultural activism would have been welcome. For example, are certain types of visual arts in China more suitable for cultural activism? What kinds of visual artists engage in cultural activism related to the urban sphere, and why? Does Beijing, characterized by the presence of the central government, differ from other localities in terms of the intensity and kinds of cultural activism? How does cultural activism manifest itself across different cities’ urban contexts?

Positioning the chapters’ research in the cultural activism literature would have helped elucidate the specificities of cultural activism in China’s visual arts. Although the reactions of the public and of officials are mentioned briefly in several chapters, the effects of the visual arts are mostly assumed, and there is no evaluation of how successful cultural activism is in China, especially today at a time of a rapidly tightening cultural climate.

The main contribution of this book is that it showcases the rich variety of practices at the intersection of visual arts and urban space. Through detailed studies it extends our knowledge of particular artists, artists’ groups, and creative practices such as graffiti and provides insightful analyses of a number of visual artworks. The volume will be of value for scholars who focus on visual cultural phenomena and on the interplay between visual arts and society in contemporary China.

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