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Invisible Body and the Predicaments of Existence in an Urbanizing China

Meiqin WANG

Abstract: This article contextualises the art practice of Beijing-based artist Liu Bolin and examines ways in which his artworks illuminate the sociopolitical conditions that regulate the everyday reality of underprivileged social groups amid China's spectacular urban transformation in the 2000s. The tension between individual existence and the force of urbanization underlays Liu's most important work, entitled *Hiding in the City*. This performance photographic series, in which Liu covered his body thoroughly with paint so that he "disappeared" into the background, was initiated as a response towards the demolition of an artist village in Beijing where the artist resided and worked. The series has since been developed into an ambitious and years-long project in which the artist surveys the disparate urban living environment of the city, bringing to the surface dominant forces that render the existence of the individuals "invisible".

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Keywords: China, Chinese urbanization, invisible body, performance, construction, demolition, social control

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Introduction

A hallmark development in the history of contemporary Chinese art has been the officialisation of unofficial art, a category referred to as avant-garde art, underground art, or experimental art, depending on the occasions in which it is presented. The 2000 Shanghai Biennale marked the beginning point, when photography, video, film, and installation artworks (mediums that officialdom deemed to be inappropriate in the realm of high art) were exhibited in the state-owned Shanghai Museum of Art (Hou 2002; Berghuis 2004; Wang 2009). The climax of this new trend was the founding of the first Chinese Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2003, in which the cultural authority exclusively featured two contemporary mediums: installation and film (Wang 2009). After 2003, there was an explosion of artist villages in major cities across China, which was partially facilitated by the rise of culture industry, a new policy initiated by the Chinese central government in 2002 (CASS 2002; Wu 2002). This policy emphasizes exploring economic potentials in the cultural field and encourages regional official administrators to cultivate local cultures and transform them into economic capitals (CASS 2002). With the tremendous financial and reputational success that a few Chinese artists who reside in artist villages have made in the international art world, contemporary Chinese art has become a valuable cultural asset and the artist village has now assumed an important role, along with the rising cultural industry.

Suojia Artist Village was born out of such a context. It was an artist colony in the northeastern outskirts of Beijing, consisting of several rows of warehouse-like studios in a walled compound. In 2001, a Beijing agriculture-related company leased the land where the compound stood from the Suojia Village authority (Zhao 2005; Li 2009). In 2004, amid the wave of speculation on contemporary Chinese art, the company constructed large artist studios and sub-leased them out to artists. This was the beginning of the Suojia Artist Village, which was given the formal name of Beijing International Art Camp by some ambitious and globally minded artists who were among the first to move in (Li 2009). Many of them not only worked but also lived in their studios. This was the very location where Liu Bolin began his practice as a contemporary multi-media artist. The

present article¹ brings Liu's art practice into context and examines ways in which his artworks illuminate the sociopolitical conditions that regulate the everyday reality of underprivileged social groups amid China's spectacular urban transformation in the 2000s.

The Demolition of Suojia Artist Village and Liu Bolin's Performance Photography

Liu Bolin's earliest and most important art project, *Hiding in the City*, originally entitled *Urban Camouflage*, is a performance photographic series that centres on the complex social landscapes of Beijing, the capital and one of the most rapidly urbanising cities in China. This series provides a unique way for the artist to integrate his personal experience as a migrant artist working in the city, as well as to interrogate the conditions of existence of disenfranchised social groups in a rapidly changing society. His migrant identity is a result of his choice to leave an official institution in his hometown in Shandong province and come to Beijing to work independently as a professional artist. In *Hiding in the City No. 2 – Suo Jia Village* (2005, Figure 1), standing in front of a half-dismantled building with debris scattered around, Liu is painted into his surroundings: covering himself from top to toe with the colours and shapes of the background, he dissolves into the background and becomes almost invisible. A photo is taken after hours of painting on the artist's body. This photograph is at once a documentation of the performance and the end product of his artistic creation. The project combines painting, photograph, and performance and involves Liu's artistic vision, plan, and his and his assistants' painting skills. Equally important is his sense of space and of the human body within it, which has undoubtedly derived from his training background in sculpture (Tarocco 2008: 16). The early pieces of this series were a direct response to the enforced demolition of a

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row of studio complex in Suojia Artist Village where Liu worked as a studio assistant for a renowned sculptor.

Figure 1: *Hiding in the City No. 2 – Suo Jia Village*, photograph, 126x160 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2005.

At first glance, Liu Bolin's performance looks like an attempt to integrate himself into the surroundings. However, Liu himself argues otherwise: "I do not melt into the environment; on the contrary, I believe that I am encroached by the environment" (Liu 2008a: 8). Through the performing act that makes him disappear, he reveals the power of the engulfing environment. In the meantime, Liu's camouflage can also be seen as an act of self-protection: he voluntarily blends himself into the environment so he can spare himself from further damaging forces. This is an act of self-mutation, similar to that which many insects and animals do by camouflaging into their natural environment when threatened. This explains the work's original title: *Urban Camouflage*. As a migrant in Beijing, facing the sudden loss of his work place where he also lived and realising his inability to

change things, Liu Bolin metaphorically hides himself into the urban structures of the city to protect himself from further harm. This protection can only be symbolic, however, as Liu once wrote: “In human society, it is not enough to hide in order to make oneself safe” (Liu 2008b: 32). Nonetheless, the symbolic disappearance serves as a strategy through which the artist copes with his adverse reality and expresses his sense of powerless and vulnerability.

Liu Bolin’s inspiration of this performance series came from an unfortunate event. Early in the morning of 15 November 2005, a few artists in Suojia Artist Village were woken by unusual noises outside. They then saw that a dismantling team with bulldozers sent by the district court was getting ready to tear down studios, accompanied by more than a hundred police (Wang 2010). While artists here had received an official enforcement notification from the court more than five months earlier announcing the decision to demolish, many were still hopeful about the matter since they were told that their landlord company was in the process of appealing to the local authority (Zhao 2005). Upon receiving the official notice, some moved out, but others decided to stay and watch, hoping that the increasing media coverage of their situation and protest would convince the decision makers to have second thoughts (Zhao 2005). To their dismay, they watched as a whole row of studios was torn apart in front of their eyes over two days.

This is not another story of Chinese authorities cracking down on contemporary Chinese artists on the ideological and political front due to their alternative artistic vision. If there were an ideology involved, it would be an economic and managerial one, related to the Beijing municipal government’s general effort to reclaim underused rural land for highly profitable urban development projects in the wake of commercialised urbanisation since the 1990s (Cartier 2001; Ho and Lin 2004). For that purpose, a tighter regulation was implemented to rule out illegitimate land use. According to the official enforcement notice, the reason for demolishing the artist village was that the buildings in this studio compound were constructed and used illegally since the company that owned it had not applied to the city authority for the necessary construction permit (Zhao 2005). However, the artists were not informed about the illegality of their studios (Zhao 2005; Li 2009). When the artists found out what had been going on, they protested and appealed to the authority, hoping that

the growing cultural significance of the artist village, with many famous artists as its occupants, would spare the compound from demolition. Their efforts seemed to work temporarily. The demolition decision was suspended for a couple of months, but eventually reenacted (Zhao 2005; Li 2009).

Out of frustration and anger, on 27 November 2005, eleven days after the demolition, art curators Zhao Shulin, Huang Yao, and Zhang Zhaohui organised an exhibition titled “Chai, chai! chai?” (拆, 拆! 拆?, Demolition, demolition! demolition?) (Li 2009; Wang 2010b). Artists hung their works along the dilapidated building. The show was a spontaneous protest by many artists who either had had their studios dismantled or lived in other buildings of the compound to witness the disheartening process. It was in this exhibition that Liu Bolin made his first appearance. His performance photographs attracted immediate attention among curators and artists and *Hiding in the City No. 2 – Suo Jia Village* was used as the poster image for advertising the show (Li 2009; Wang 2010b). His relatively innovative approach to art and the relevance of the message expressed by his work seemed to fit well with the purpose of the exhibition. He quickly became known among artistic communities. People were surprised by the sudden emergence of this young artist, whose art seemed to process a high level of maturity (Li 2009).

Inventing the “Invisible Man”

It is time to take a quick look at the bigger picture of the contemporary Chinese art scene in Beijing within which Liu Bolin acquires his inspiration, conception and methodology of art making. Contemporary Chinese art began to take off in the 1990s, when China was becoming more proactive in pursuing economic growth and material abundance. A more relaxed political environment and an increasingly commercialised society facilitated the circulation of ideas such as artistic freedom and individualism, while a rapidly changing society provided enough new social and cultural phenomena that prompted artists to take on as the subject matter of their artistic exploration (Gao 1997, 2005; Wu 1999, 2000). In the meantime, however, the lack of necessary institutional and public support also characterised the development of contemporary Chinese art of the 1990s, a residual legacy of the official hostility towards the avant-garde art movement

in the 1980s (Andrews and Gao 1995; Gao 1997). In 1989, the Chinese minister of culture issued a decree to prohibit artworks in contemporary media such as installation and performance to exhibit in public museums. This decree remained in place for most of the following decade (Van Dijk 1992; Gao 2005; Wang 2009).

Such were the circumstances for contemporary art practice when Liu Bolin spent his formative years studying sculpture. Born 1973 in the city of Binzhou in the Shandong province, he graduated in 1995 with a bachelor's degree in sculpture at Shandong Academy of Arts in Jinan. Four years later, he was admitted to the graduate school at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing under the tutelage of Sui Jianguo, a mid-career sculptor who had pioneered the transformation of academic and realistic sculpture into experimental and conceptual art. After receiving his MFA in 2001, Liu Bolin went back to his home province and taught sculpture at Shandong Academy of Arts for a couple of years. Without totally settling down there, he accepted an offer from his former advisor Sui Jianguo to work for him as one of his studio assistants (Li 2009). In May 2005, Liu arrived in Beijing to begin his new job. He worked and lived in Sui's studio, which happened to be located in one of the newly emerged artist colonies: the Suojia Artist Village. Artist Li Jianzhang provides a vivid description of what the colony was like during its prime:

For people who have never being to the Suojia Artist Village, its heyday is hard to imagine. Back then, there were plenty of big names [famous artists] as well as art galleries here. At the front of each studio there would be a group of people, either drinking tea or haranguing each other. Wandering crowds could be seen everywhere around the entire district: they came in twos or threes or more as they visited various galleries and passed in and out of every open studio. The liveliness and prosperity was almost comparable to that on the eve of the Olympics in 798 [also known as 798 Factory, one of the many artist colonies that had transformed into a famous art district and official tourist site by 2008] (Li 2009).

There were more than a hundred artists in this colony, many of whom were well-known in China. This booming art scene must have excited and inspired Liu Bolin. In an interview he reflected on the vastly different atmosphere between the time when he was studying in Beijing and the time when he came back:

I have never seen such big studios in Jinan [the city where he taught] and they were beyond my imagination [...] it was utterly different from the time when I left Beijing. There were rows and rows of artist studios, there were even art galleries in the village, and so many artists were making art there. It felt like heaven (Li 2009).

Liu found himself arriving at the heart of a thriving contemporary art scene, which had just entered into a period that could be termed “the age of artist villages and big studios” (Wang 2010). The overwhelming optimism, boosted by the thriving international art market for contemporary Chinese art (Vogel 2006; Ebony 2006; Elegant 2006), had motivated many young artists and art graduates to leave their hometown for Beijing, or to stay if they had graduated from an art school in the city, joining the army of migrant artists. Here they expected to be better informed about current trends of contemporary art; build up connections with leading art critics, curators and galleries; and, of course, achieve greater success more quickly. Artists streamed into Beijing and artist migration characterised the formation of the artist population there (Wang 2010a). They often rented large studios and filled up artist villages across Beijing, as the thriving art market had convinced many artists that renting a big studio in an artist village was a necessary investment because it made a strong statement that the artist was seriously engaged with his or her art (Wang 2010; Wang 2010a). For young artists who had yet to be able to make such investments, working for an established artist provided an alternative to be in an artist village. This was a time when many Chinese artists, boosted by generous funding from domestic and international galleries and museums, were making ever-larger art projects and needed a lot of studio assistants. Liu Bolin apparently followed the second path and was excited to be living and working in the Suojia Artist Village until its demolition half a year later (Li 2009).

Many established artists could easily move to one of the plentiful nearby artist villages. For Liu, it could have been traumatic, since not long ago he thought Suojia Village was an ideal place for art making. When his boss’s studio was torn down, Liu temporarily lost his place of work and sleep. His response to the devastating situation was swift and artistically inspiring. Two days’ after the demolition, he inaugurated his performance photography series *Hiding in the City*, which expressed his utmost dismay and sense of vulnerability. Robin Visser,

in her study of Beijing urban aesthetics in the mid-1990s, adopted the concept of “spaces of disappearance” to refer to the creative response and aesthetic resistance of a number of cultural professionals including avant-garde artists facing the construction boom in the city (Visser 2004). Liu’s art seems to continue this tradition of inventing “spaces of disappearance” as a creative form of resistance. Through demonstrating a virtual disappearance, he silently protests the real dominant social force that practically renders his existence “invisible”.

Liu’s performance photography received immediate acclaim in the contemporary art circle of Beijing, where artists, curators, critics, and galleries abounded. Many were surprised at his sudden emergence. Indeed, he had not made himself known to the contemporary art circles, either when he was a sculpture student or when he worked as a studio assistant. However, living in one of the most thriving artist villages and working for an established sculptor certainly exposed him to the most cutting-edge trends and thoughts of contemporary art. In an interview, Liu stressed that he was already in the middle of conceiving an art project to express his experience as an “unknown” and “invisible” migrant living in a fast-developing urban society, before the demolition of the artist village took place (Li 2009). He had actually already done some preliminary research and preparation, which explains why he was able to materialise his conception only two days after the demolition. Furthermore, he attributed his successful implementation of his ideas in early pieces of *Hiding in the City* to many discussions he had with Sui Jianguo, his former advisor and then boss (Li 2009).

In the meantime, as discussed earlier, the climate has become conducive for new Chinese art and new artistic expressions. On one hand, the Chinese cultural authority was investing more and more in promoting contemporary art in an effort to take ownership of this dynamic component of contemporary Chinese culture, for various reasons (Berghuis 2004; Wang 2009). On the other hand, the international demand for contemporary art from China seemed to be increasing constantly, with a seemingly insatiable demand for new artworks (Vogel 2006; Ebony 2006; Elegant 2006). Domestically, art dealers from China and abroad established numerous art galleries and primate museums in major cities. These new exhibition spaces were eager to display new art that had yet to find a place in the state-

funded exhibition spaces or cultural programs. Consequently, there were plenty of opportunities for young artists to exhibit their art. In the case of Liu Bolin, a positive reception at the “Chai, chai! chai?” exhibition encouraged him to continue exploring the potential of combining performance art, painting and staged photography and using his body as the medium for art making. He soon began working as an independent artist dedicated to the ongoing series *Hiding in the City* and, from the second half of 2006, he started participating in many exhibitions staged at the 798 Factory (Serpotta 2008: 107; Li 2009). He became known as the “invisible man” as his “invisible body” performed throughout Beijing against a wide range of urban settings.

Engaging Other “Invisible Bodies”

The personal frustration that Liu Bolin endured as a migrant artist living in Beijing became the source of his artistic experiment and put him on the map of contemporary art. Importantly, Liu did not stop with the predicament that he experienced personally as an artist in a city where unprecedented opportunities existed side by side with unpredictable stresses. Instead, he became preoccupied with the process of urbanisation in China and the “interstices between freedom and control, expression and silence, the individual and the communal, presence and invisibility” (Tarocco 2008: 14). Starting with the distressing experience inflicted upon the artist village, he soon went beyond and embarked on an ambitious project that aimed to explore the complex urban environment of Beijing and its spatial and social relationships that have shaped the conditions of existence as well as experiences of many other “invisible men”. These included laid-off workers, migrant workers, and other poor urban dwellers in Beijing, many of whom he encountered personally. Nationwide, Chinese urban transformations have contributed to an alarmingly widening gap between the rich and poor (Liu et al. 2003; Roberts and Kanaley 2006), which was already in place since its adoption of the market economy (Hanser 2004; Zhao and Belk 2008). This inequality and increasing urban poverty are being produced particularly in major cities, where urban expansion and construction characterise their economic activities and the transformation of the urban landscape (Cartier 2002; Visser 2004; Broudehoux 2007). Beijing seems to ex-

emply this process, especially with the spectacular architectural projects built there for the Olympics, which displaced many urban dwellers from old communities in the city centre (Visser 2004; Broudehoux 2007: 389). Furthermore, “construction for the Olympics has also triggered a dramatic rise in property prices, making it less affordable for people to live near the city center” (Broudehoux 2007: 389). Left with no choice, many people had to relocate to urban peripheries where migrant artists usually congregated, offering many contemporary artists first-hand experience of the problems of urban development. As such, the “invisible body”, an artistic invention of Liu Bolin, found its solid social foundation in the urban reality of Beijing.

Hiding in the City No. 17 – People’s Policeman (2006, Figure 2) is a sarcastic portrayal of the relationship between people and “people’s policeman” – the appellation for Chinese police, even though, in reality, people’s policemen often do not work on the side of the people (the majority commoners). In this piece, a policeman, the agent of state power, dressed in his solemn uniform, is covering up the eyes of the artist who is seated on a chair. The body of the policeman appears to penetrate that of the disappearing artist – the encroaching environment that the artist refers in this scenario is the state power. The image highlights the tension between individual freedom promised by a growing consumer society and continuous social control over individuals through such state mechanisms as policing and national policies. In particular, the experience of encountering police constitutes a bitter collective memory of migrant artists who have lived in an artist village in Beijing, as many of them have experienced being randomly questioned, expelled, or even detained and their exhibitions being intervened or cancelled by the police (Feng 2003; Yang 2007; Li 2009). Furthermore, blindfolding the subject says a lot about the changing practice of policing in China in the past two decades when police were constantly deployed to secure home evictions, neighbourhood demolitions and land confiscations for urban construction. It is undeniable that there has been a growing distrust among Chinese people towards the authority and its policing – a system that has been increasingly seen as the state or local governmental machinery that functions to cover up truth from the public, collaborate with the powerful and wealthy, and persecute the poor and powerless (Yang 2010; Chang 2013; Bristow 2011).

Figure 2: *Hiding in the City No. 17 – People’s Policeman*, photograph, 160x100.2 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2006.

In 2006, at a major exhibition in 798 Factory, Liu participated with his *Hiding in the City No. 18 – Laid Off 706* (2006, Figure 3). This work features several Beijing residents who were once employees of a factory in the same architectural complex where 798 Factory is now – this whole area used to be a state-owned arsenal factory – during the planned economy era, but were laid off during the nationwide market reform and economic restructuring in the 1990s. Six former 706 Factory workers line up against the wall of the deserted factory space that once provided them job security. Still in their work uniform, the pale and ghostly presence of these figures reminds insider viewers of the past glory of this former state enterprise and its inevitable fading out from history, taking with it the hopes of people whose labour once enlivened the banal room. The legacy of Communism is occasionally

visible in Beijing as represented by the large characters on the walls in old buildings that temporarily survived the wave of urban demolition and reconstruction. Austere slogans such as the one painted high above on the wall, reading “The force at the core leading our cause forward is the Chinese Communist Party”, used to play a dominant role in mobilising Chinese people for high productivity. But these no longer carry meaning in a city that opens itself for global capitalism and is in the midst of a rapid transformation into a fully-fledged consumer society. The Communist Party has found new causes to lead in a capitalist economy and the old causes have been abandoned, together with its former supporters. As Anne-Marie Broudehoux sharply put it, “the Communist Party that once fought alongside the workers against capitalist exploitation is now supporting the capitalists in their struggle against the workers” (2007: 391).

Figure 3: *Hiding in the City No. 18 – Laid Off 706*, photograph, 160x130.3 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2006.

In a magazine review essay, Liu Bolin shared an anecdote involved in the making of this piece (Xia 2011). With some effort, he located these former 706 Factory workers who were now in their 50s and all without a formal job. Depending on a small state pension, some had to take care of their elderly parents and still support the education of their children. Most of them shared an apartment of 20 square meters with their single child without any prospect of purchasing an affordable home in the near future due to the skyrocketing property prices in Beijing. Liu Bolin was deeply touched by their hardship and wished to speak for them through his art. He invited them for a meeting and told them his intention. They rejected him, asking questions such as: What are you up to? What if this raises social controversy? and What if we are laughed at by foreigners? It was only after half a month of persuasion that Liu was finally able to convince the former workers that his art was meant only to raise social awareness of their problem rather than create new problems. On the day of the exhibition opening, the six former workers dressed up in their old work unit and shoes, which they had kept all this time, and teamed up against the wall. Liu Bolin, assisted by his three painter friends, painted on the workers until they “disappeared” into the dilapidated walls. The work attracted a lot of visitors and was selected by the exhibition review committee as the most innovative and humanistic piece of the exhibition (Xia 2011). According to Liu, the most satisfying experience came when he was later told by these participants that some local officials had been motivated by this piece to start resolving the hardship of workers laid off from the 706 Factory. In this case, an artistic intervention of the social problem has produced a positive result, not only in awareness but also in reality. This kind of exercise belongs to what Robin Visser described as the kind of urban aesthetics that is part of “a new realm of agency” and a form of creative solution towards problems brought up in Chinese urban development (Visser 2010: 33). In particular, Liu’s efforts seem to have transcended, even only with a small number of people, the common practice of self-policing, a practice widely encouraged among the Chinese public (Broudehoux 2007: 392).

Figure 4: *Hiding in the City No. 45 – Family*, photograph, 160x100 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2007.

Hiding in the City No. 45 – Family (2006, Figure 4) consists of two migrant worker parents and a son engulfed in a glistening redness that shows five yellow stars shining over their heads. The enormous Chinese national flag is a reminder of the absolute dominance of the state authority over its citizens, in this case the one-child policy introduced in 1978 to curb population growth. Parents and the child are alike being confined within the suffocating redness, which renders their features and identities indistinguishable. To bypass this policy, many peasant families migrated to cities so they could raise more than one child without being fined by officials from their hometowns. In recent years, however, wealth and vital social resources have been allocated toward establishing world-class Chinese cities, resulting in a dramatically worsened urban-rural gap in income, infrastructure, education, healthcare and social insurance (Broudehoux 2007: 393; Ye

2009: 118; Li 2012: 42–54). In order to provide their offspring with a better start in an urban area, many more peasant families have left their homeland and migrated to cities. They often have to live in urban-rural fringe zones where they rent cheap and shabby houses from local peasants and work on low-wage jobs. This is also the locus where migrant artists live and work, so their paths often cross over. Many artists have employed rural migrants to participate in their art by serving as models or collaborators or conducting some manual labour for their art projects. A number of conceptual artists such as Song Dong, Wang Jin, Wu Wenguang, and Zhang Dali are known for employing a large number of migrants in the creation of their art (Gao 2005: 209–234). Liu Bolin also employed such migrants on several occasions, including this work, which again involved a process of conversing with them for their voluntary participation (Wang 2010b).

Hiding in the City No. 56 – Illegal Taxi Driver (2007, Figure 5) illustrates the practice of unlicensed private taxi services that are often found near bus and subway stations or the entrances of major residential compounds, particularly those located away from the center of Beijing. Known as *heiche* (黑车, black automobile), those vehicles are owned by individuals who operate outside official regulations, avoiding paying tax or other fees associated with regular taxi companies. The drivers are mostly unemployed urban dwellers, peasants who have recently become urbanites after their farming land was urbanised, or nearby rural migrants who no longer consider farming work a worthy job. Their practice belongs to the kind of “urban informal” sector that has seen a proliferation in the process of urbanisation across the developing countries and is generally denounced by local governments (Roy 2005). Drivers for *heiche* service, like migrant workers and migrant artists, are often subjected to official cleaning during important political events (Zhang 2001; Yang 2007; Li 2009). I had first-hand experience of this in Beijing in November 2013, when the Third Meeting of the Eighteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was in session. Though discouraged by the city authority as illegal business and inappropriate for the spectacular image that Beijing has constructed into, private taxis are popular among the low-income population living in the urban-rural fringe zones where public transportation or regular taxis are not easily available. Also, the service is usually cheaper than a regular taxi fare. This

piece depicts a mini-van and its “disappearing” driver captured on an empty highway. The driver is painted into the gray tone of his vehicle, and his invisible body seems to suggest the preferred anonymity of his “informal” practice.

Figure 5: Liu Bolin, *Hiding in the City No. 56 – Illegal Taxi Driver*, photograph, 118x150 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2007.

Overall, these works demonstrate Liu Bolin’s critical engagement with the urban living space of Beijing and his participative approach in realising his artistic concept. At the center of these pieces are the collective experiences shared by disenfranchised individuals who live in Beijing. In all of these staged photographs, figures are unanimously painted into the colours and patterns of a carefully chosen background. The inability of individuals to stop the supposedly progressive (as presented in the official rhetoric and public media) but often distressing changes brought about by market-driven urbanisation in China is presented by figures standing still with closed eyes totally

engulfed by the environment. They all become “invisible”. However, the invisibility of the figures urges viewers to think about factors that have brought up such a result and to become aware of how the dominant power and ideology have rendered individual existence precarious and marginalised.

Performing to Reveal

The above-mentioned works are a few examples of Liu Bolin being compelled to incorporate the bodies of others to most powerfully visualise the tension between the individuals and official directives that they either live by or break away from. Most often, however, Liu deploys his own body as the medium as he stages various scenarios for his performance of “disappearance” in more than a hundred different locations in Beijing. Here he follows the artistic legacy shared by performance artists worldwide, while simultaneously departing from that tradition. Performance art involves working with one’s own body, demonstrating certain level of physical endurance, and showing oneself physically during a private or public demonstration (Berghuis 2007; Lincot 2007). Most performance artists aim to engage with their audience, either physically or mentally, during the performance. In China, performance art has been regarded as one of the most unconventional and experimental mediums (Qian 1999; Berghuis 2007: 12–33). However, Liu’s goal is not to engage viewers with the medium itself nor during the process of performing, but to reveal a fraction of the urban reality after the performance is completed. And, of course, he hides rather than “shows” his body in his performance. Furthermore, his breaching of the code of performance art is also presented in his combination of a traditional medium, painting, and an academic realistic style that was long denounced as non-experimental and conservative by avant-garde artists in China (Andrews and Gao 1995; Gao 1997, 2005). Liu also incorporates photography, more as a tool to document and present his performance than as a form of art of its own right. As such, it becomes clear that his choice of medium and style is closely related to the content he seeks to express; that is, to reveal the disparate urban spaces of Beijing where mainstream discourses exercise their effect upon individuals.

Figure 6: *Hiding in the City No. 48 – Beijing Welcomes You*, photograph, 118x180 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2006.

Hiding in the City No. 48 – Beijing Welcomes You (2006, Figure 6) is one of several of Liu's pieces related to the theme of Olympics, a once-dominant visual reality of Beijing. In this one, Liu "disappears" into the background of a large construction fence that shields a construction site from public view. The fence is curtained with gigantic cheerful images of the Olympic mascots, accompanied by their names underneath, in both Chinese characters and pinyin. Read together, they sound like "Beijing welcomes you", which is also written underneath the mascots. In Beijing in 2006, it was impossible to miss seeing these mascots and other Olympics-related signs. At this time, when Beijing was in the middle of conspicuous urban redevelopment and construction for the Olympics, Liu was "disappearing" on such a construction site. Accompanying dramatic physical transformations of the city, the state mounted a massive civic political campaign in order to promote the Olympics and to show to the world the "Beijing spirit". Slogans such as "New Beijing, Great Olympics" and "Civi-

lised Olympics” were printed on billboards and shown on electronic screens in every corner of the urban public space, subjecting the urban public to a constant reminder of this national undertaking and its significance. By so doing, as Maurizio Marinelli argued, the Foucauldian concept of “knowledge” and “governmentality” are at work (Foucault 1991):

The citizens became part of the normalising force: they both had to internalize the myths, which represented the source of power, and, simultaneously, they were subject to mechanisms of surveillance and reinforcement, which aimed at conforming their behavioural patterns to the explicit and implicit rules of the grand design of the State (Marinelli 2012).

Hiding in the City No. 50 – Construct Harmonious Society Together (2007, Figure 7) deals with an outdoor billboard advocating “Building a harmonious socialist society”, where again we see the official “knowledge” being produced and projected as the normalising force (Foucault 1991). This is an overall strategic objective of social development that was officially brought up in 2004 by the new government administration under the leadership of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao after they came into power in 2002 (CCP 2004). The new mandate aimed to address the severe social and environmental problems caused by the previous administration’s over-focus on GDP growth and the development of eastern coastal cities (Li and Cary 2011). Chinese cities were soon “harmonised”, as the slogan and its variations in texts and visual delineations appeared in all kinds of forms and took over public spaces. Here, Liu Bolin asks viewers to look at an assortment of images highlighted by coloured panels depicting people of different races, ages, and nationalities enjoying a joyful moment. They all look happy, and as if to conform to one of the directives promoted by the “civilising” programmes that urge people to smile more for a better collective image of Beijing, they all smile (Broudehoux 2007: 390). The irony is that Beijing showed no sign of slowing down its rampant urban development, which had been the main cause of major disharmonies and violence that the “harmonious” discourse aimed to overcome. By calling attention to this official discourse, Liu exposed “the fractures in China’s harmonised cultural discourse” (Tarocco 2008: 18). Furthermore, as some critics observed, rather than creating a fairer and more harmonious society, the rhetoric has often been used to justify the increasingly

tight controls on the media and the Internet in China (Li and Cary 2011; Larmer 2011).

Figure 7: *Hiding in the City No. 50 – Construct Harmonious Society Together*, photograph, 118x150 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2007.

Liu Bolin apparently was aware of this contradiction as he soon completed the piece *Hiding in the City No. 55 – Demolition* (2007, Figure 8). Demolition has been an almost omnipresent phenomenon in Beijing since the 1990s when the city started commercialising its urban centre (Visser 2004), but became particularly intensive in the years right before the Olympics. One way that Beijing has modernised itself is by expanding its urban proper and transforming its traditional spaces either into spectacular architecture for a competitive image of global city or highly profitable commercial projects (Broudehoux 2007, 2010). Beijing is not unique in this case, as cities across China have been engaging in an effort to expand their urban territory by converting rural counties into municipal districts and bringing in large areas

of rural land under the municipal government's direct jurisdiction (Cartier 2001; Sargeson 2004; Ho and Lin 2004; Hsing 2010). The urban-rural integration movement, a national policy that was initiated in 2002 but only really began in Beijing in late 2008, has further expedited the transformation of rural land into urban proper and rural population into urban dwellers (Ye 2009). This was considered a major source of economic growth as it transfers rural population and their land "from low-productivity rural sectors to high-productivity urban sectors" (Ye 2009). Reflected in the domain of housing architecture, urbanisation is manifested in one-story peasant houses being replaced with commercialised high-rise apartment complexes and relevant urban structures. In the distance, behind the half-dismantled brick house where the artist "disappears", is a row of newly built apartment structures, on the left of which is unfinished construction.

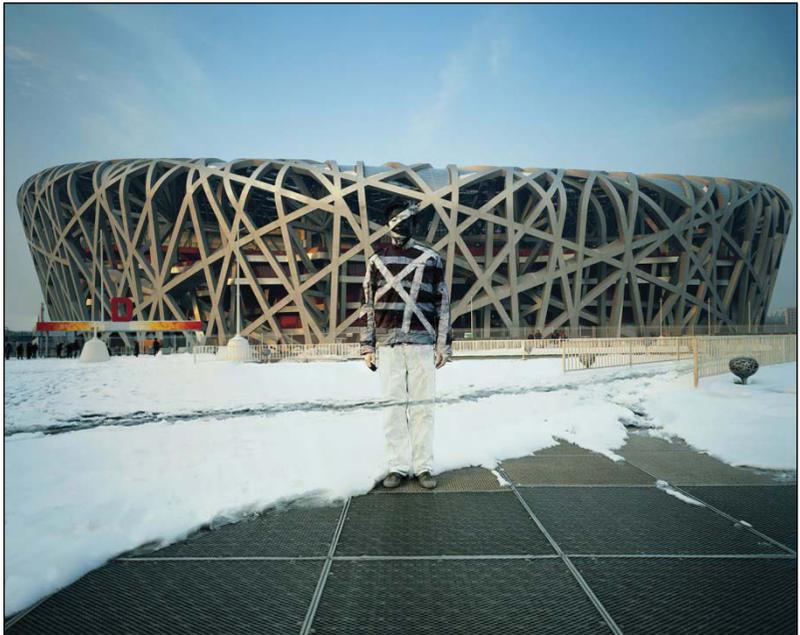
Figure 8: *Hiding in the City No. 55 – Demolition*, photograph, 118x150 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2007.

This is just a glimpse of the spectacular construction boom in which China has engaged itself, a topic that has been addressed by a number of scholars (Cartier 2002; Campanella 2008; Mars and Hornsby 2008; Hsing 2010). Replacing the industrial movement of the earlier decades, the urban construction movement is also an essential part of the continuous and remarkable achievements in the economy that China has become known globally for in the past two decades. As many have noted, urbanisation has become a policy priority, and construction (and, I should add, demolition) has become the primary motor of accumulation (Liu et al. 2003; Hsing 2010; Zhang 2011).

Figure 9: *Hiding in the City No. 86 – Bird's Nest*, photograph, 118x150 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2009.

As a thousand-year-old city, Beijing holds ancient landmarks such as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City that still play a role in conferring the cultural identity of contemporary China. Liu's "invisible body" interacts with these sites by disappearing into them, reminding viewers of the continuous role these structures have played in the

urban fabric and cultural imagination of contemporary Beijing. In the meantime, as one of the most modernised cities in China, Beijing is now embracing globalism and boasting cutting-edge technology and forward-thinking architectural designs, as demonstrated by the newly built National Stadium, also known as the Bird's Nest. Eulogised as a technological feat, its process of construction had been closely reported by the official media. *Hiding in the City No. 86 – Bird's Nest* (2009, Figure 9) highlights this joint venture of leading Chinese and international architects, with the artist disappearing in front of this postmodern structure, a symbol erected to represent China's global ambition as well as national pride, and “an intoxicating spectacle” that conceals the collusion between the state's autocratic power and the economic interest of a few at the expense and exploitation of the disenfranchised (Broudehoux 2007, 2010).

The accumulated wealth of the people who have benefited from China's development is now expected to be spent on consumption. The shift away from the old communist ideology was accompanied by turning away from its former production-oriented planned economy and embracing the consumption-oriented market culture (Zhao and Belk 2008). In particular, consumerism has played a core role in the Chinese urbanisation since the beginning of the 2000s and has been actively promoted as a sign of urbanity. Leaving its material shortage and “shortage culture” behind (Hanser 2004: 14), the thriving Chinese economy has contributed to the material abundance and urban consumers are now provided with more than enough commodities to choose from. *Hiding in the City No. 93 – Supermarket No. 2* (2010, Figure 10) presents a section of a supermarket shelf filled with neatly piled drinks of various Western brands, seemingly capable of offering consumers infinite options. The freedom to consume (if one has the means to consume) is the new slogan here, reflecting the American-led consumer modernity that has captured the mindset of Chinese urbanites and formed the foundation of urban consciousness. Being modern and urban, which has always been desirable, is now being interpreted as consuming (Zhao and Belk 2008; Schein 2001). Furthermore, people who can afford to consume are even represented as ideologically superior and regarded as more active and desirable members of the society (Zhao and Belk 2008: 237). In the context of global consumer capitalism, David Harvey rightly argues that

Quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy (Harvey 2008: 31).

In this context, urbanity can and must be acquired and expressed through consuming.

Figure 10: *Hiding in the City No. 93 – Supermarket No. 2*, photograph, 118x150 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2010.

A consequence of this rapid economic development through industrialisation, urbanisation, and excessive consumption, is the severe deterioration of ecology and the highly polluted urban living environment. Mountains have been deforested, if not split or leveled for urban constructions; rivers have been dried if not contaminated by industrial wastes; and landscapes have been transformed beyond recognition. In particular, for urban dwellers, outdoor air pollution has recently been identified as the fourth-leading factor for premature

death in China (Wong 2013). To compensate for the destruction of nature, urban planners started designing green zones and parks amid concrete jungles made up of urban high-rises to bring a small piece of nature back to human living. *Hiding in the City No. 94 – In the Woods* (2010, Figure 11) speaks to the belated human awareness of the importance of trees, nature, and clean air, in which Liu Bolin “disappears” into a small forest in an urban park.

Figure 11: *Hiding in the City No. 94 – In the Woods*, photograph, 118x150 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2010.

Following this performance, Liu immediately created his next piece, *Hiding in the City No. 95 – Coal Pile* (2010, Figure 12), identifying a major factor that has contributed to the notorious air pollution in Beijing. The problem has long tortured Beijing dwellers and other living in northern cities but, since the winter of 2013–2014, it has become a national problem, shrouding most central, and even many southern and eastern cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing (Ramzy 2013). The heavily polluted air and the hazardous smog have forced

the closure of many schools and other facilities (Li 2013). Absurdly, this human-induced disaster has created potential opportunities for businesses. For example, a prominent property developer was reported to have recommended that all real estate developers install air filtration systems (Ramzy 2013). It seems that the entrepreneurs are quick to react, not to solve the source of problem to benefit all, but to capitalise from the situation. If this is to become a reality, we will find ourselves in an even more severe situation, in which air pollution continues to get worse, while clean air, an elemental gift of nature, needs to be purchased. Harvey criticised the commodification of water – another formerly common property – but it is likely that the accelerated condition of capitalism will lead to air in China soon being “brought within the capitalist logic of accumulation” (Harvey 2003: 145–146).

Figure 12: *Hiding in the City No. 95 – Coal Pile*, photograph, 118x150 cm



Source: Liu Bolin 2010.

Conclusion

Trained as a sculptor, Liu largely conceives his performance as “social sculpture”; that is, living sculpture with a social content (Benedetti 2008: 23). The body, a solid entity, is established (by simply standing, sitting, or lying) like a piece of sculpture to interact with the space surrounding it and through which it brings to surface what is otherwise invisible or ignored. With this concept of “social sculpture” in mind, he has continued to explore the larger urban environment of Beijing and occasionally other cities where the process of “normalising” citizens takes place. His “invisible body” of himself and of others becomes a critical tool with which Liu can illuminate the multifaceted social environments that have profoundly conditioned the lived space of urban dwellers there and Chinese citizens in general. The intrinsic value of those widely cherished ideas, such as progress, modernisation and development, are silently questioned through the motionless body whose identity and personality are indiscernible. Essentially, Liu interrogates the often incongruous experiences in an urban setting where socialist and Confucian ideologies that promulgate collective ideals are combined with consumerism and global capitalism that promise personal choice and individual freedom. However, as Liu’s art has made clear, the latter is not guaranteed for everyone. All of these combinations have produced various forms of control over individuals across the three realms of the urban space that Lefebvre (1991) identified: physical, mental and social.

Liu Bolin’s art is grounded on his examination of these social processes, and this is what makes his art relevant in understanding contemporary Chinese society, particularly the urban living experiences of Beijing. Richard Hertz summarises the characteristics of postmodern art (contemporary art), in comparison with that of modern art, as

rather than exclusivity, purity, and removal from societal and cultural concerns, the emphasis is on inclusivity, impurity, and direct involvement with the content of contemporary experience (Hertz 1993: xii).

Liu’s art carries clear traits of postmodern art defined by Hertz and one may argue that the strength of his art lies in its expression of social and cultural concerns. Through his artistic persona the “invis-

ible body” and his signature process of “disappearing”, Liu engages closely with the content of contemporary experiences.

Although many of Liu Bolin’s artworks bear clear political message and his art has generally been read as a critique against politically oppressive power (Tony 2011; Celi 2012; Shen 2012), Liu actually rejects a pure political interpretation of his art (Benedetti 2008: 23). He maintains that the political dimension is one of the many living conditions that he engages in his art and he is primarily interested in the development of all humanity (Liu 2010: 38). As such, he is more concerned with urging his audience to reflect upon, through concrete scenarios staged by his performance photographs, how our contemporary society in general has rendered individuals invisible. He voices his broader critique as follows:

What it means to be human today is complicated by economic development. What disappears with death is the human body, but what is slowly weakened by rushed economic development is the human spirit (Liu 2008b: 32, 34).

If we are to follow the perspective of the artist, then the predicaments that Chinese individuals experience that he exposes are by no means only relevant to the people of China under the country’s political and social specificities. On the contrary, the tension between the economic and urban development and the inadequacy and injustice produced along the process has a worldwide resonance with the coming dominance of global capitalism. In particular, Liu’s portrayal of individuals deprived by the unchecked economic development has only become more pertinent in a time where a distressing process termed “the urbanisation of poverty” has been unfolding across the globe (UNHSP 2011). Reporting on the alarming increase of slums worldwide, researchers have argued that

the vast urban slums of the present day are the creation of new global economies that offer little promise for advancement through education and employment (UNHSP 2011: 583).

This only means that more and more “invisible bodies” are being created under the current global economic system.

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