

Corporate

Xu Zhen (Produced by
MadeIn Company)

27.09.2015-10.01.2016

Space01

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This text is published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Xu Zhen (Produced by Madeln Company)

Kunsthaus Graz

Universalmuseum Joanneum

September 27, 2015 until January 10, 2016

Following on from exhibitions in 2007 and 2008, Chinese artist Xu Zhen is now at the Kunsthhaus Graz for the third time. This is however his first solo show here, and is conceived as an exhibition project specially adapted for this location. Xu Zhen transforms Space01 into a supermarket and plays with the meaning of series in art. The show focuses on the power of constant reiteration, highlighting repetition as an unavoidable law of the market. His work centres around a critical and ironic commentary on a transient, consumerist global society. The works shown create potential systems for a cultural and spiritual reconciliation.

ShanghArt Supermarket

Welcome to the *ShanghART Supermarket*! Everything is 'Made in China' and arranged just as one would find it in any 24/7 Minimarket in Shanghai. Here too, each product is on sale at its standard price with an exchange rate of 1:1—you can actually shop here! Simply pay at the till in the Kunsthau foyer. Everything here consists only of packaging, though—there is nothing inside. These product façades are a reflection of everyday consumerism. They reveal the globalisation of megabrands such as Nestlé, and show how drab urban life can be in markets like these—but also how uniform they are throughout the world. At the Kunsthau Graz, Xu Zhen has positioned his supermarket in an exhibition space that — unlike an art fair, shopping centre or gallery—is usually uncommercial. Nonetheless, when you visit this exhibition you are encouraged to be a consumer as soon as you walk in: browsing, choosing and buying is welcome, and yet what is this all about? What motivates us to buy and want?

Xu Zhen
ShanghART Supermarket, 2007/2015

Eternity

The *Eternity* series immortalises the classics of great cultures and fuses the various ritual elements into one cultural heritage that transcends time and space. Copies of a famous Hellenistic Aphrodite from the Paris Louvre encounter copies of the Buddhist enlightened being Bodhisattva of the northern Sui Dynasty. Elsewhere, replicas of historic originals are merged into a new version, such as the soldier of Marathon collapsing with exhaustion while pinning down the wounded and defeated Galatian, who at the same time appears as if borne up on wings by his victory. The compositional joining of the two sculptures displays a fascinating static resolution: the figure floats in space with an airy lightness, presenting a bizarre apotheosis of the pleasurable victory. For Xu Zhen this is not about a subversive act; instead, he sees it as a visualisation of the breaking down of national borders. In these works, the 'Clash of Cultures' forms a visible hybrid. Produced from marble dust to the highest level of perfection, they contrive to meet the standards of

the Chinese tradition of craftsmanship, which has the reputation of being able to make incredibly exact copies. In their seriality, the constructed images of old traditions become a consumer item that combines symbols coveted all over the world into something completely new. With a playful wink, the value of the great cultural symbols in a collective Western writing of history is called into question, and released from its foundations of the unique original.

Xu Zhen
Eternity - The Soldier of Marathon Announcing Victory, A Wounded Galatian, 2014
Produced by MadeIn Company

Xu Zhen
Eternity - Sui Dynasty Gold Gilded and Painted Standing Bodhisattva, Venus de Vienne, 2014
Produced by MadeIn Company

'Arrogance' Set

The *'Arrogance' Set* is a collection for collectors—a personal museum in a big box, familiar in art history since Marcel Duchamp. With characteristic humour, Xu

Zhen arranges objects that have already been exhibited as individual sculptures, pictures or videos and which suggest potential syntheses of different cultures. He has included the video work *Physique of Consciousness*, the 'world's first set of cultural fitness exercises', combining movement sequences from dance and gymnastics with religious and traditional rituals. More than 200 different movements make up the flow which, over the course of 40 minutes, blends hundreds of ceremonies and traditions with one another. 'Serenity' is the name of the first task, a preparation for all of the other exercises, aimed at reducing stress and creating harmony with the universe. The aesthetic of the film is reminiscent of esoteric videos and encourages viewers to join in. At the centre of the box arrangement, however, stands the sea god Poseidon, with doves sitting on him. This work also follows the concept of fusing different cultural symbols. The Poseidon of Cape Artemision—whose task as a god was to secure safe passage across the sea—carries doves, which could symbolise both peace and the

Holy Ghost. On the other hand, the appearance of these doves clearly brings to mind that famous Chinese speciality, Peking duck. Is it arrogant to mix these religious symbols with such implicitness, stripping them of their original rites? How meaningless are religions in a globalised world? Does a hybrid universal religion lead to a harmonisation with the universe?

Xu Zhen
'*Arrogance*' Set, 2015
Produced by MadeIn Company

Rainbow

Rainbow is an early video from 1998, a work that helped bring about Xu Zhen's international breakthrough at the 49th Venice Biennale curated by Harald Szeemann in 2001. Someone is beating a bare back, yet the video is cut in such a way that the actual beating is not shown. All we perceive is the sound of the beating and the growing wounds on the body. The back does not wince, yet it clearly changes colour. The brutality of the action arises in the observer's imagina-

tion, augmented by their own experiences, associations and expectations. Xu Zhen uses the body, making it into a social instance and breaking down the boundaries between public and private spheres.

Xu Zhen
Rainbow, 1998
3 min 50 s

Twenty

The video *Twenty* gathers together various pictures by the artist from the recent series *20* from *Under Heaven*. Optically, the sculptural application of paint here is reminiscent of rich deserts, of fantastical whirls of sugar frosting from the land of Cockaigne. At the same time, their bright, garish execution is highly artificial. To a certain extent these pictures are making fun of abstract painting, of art that seems to be produced by machines and which bears no discernible personal signature. The picture has become a luxury product: flamboyant, loud and expensive. Also significant in this context is the old Chinese con-

cept of 'tian xia' ('all under heaven'), whose two characters 天下 refer to a complex and highly evolved notion of an inhabited world—in a religious, cosmological and also political sense. In everyday language it is simply used as an abbreviation for something like 'all of the world'. Resembling a large Chinese city seen from above, the shapes and patterns here jostle up against one another, reflecting the vivid hustle and bustle, the verve in the colour rush as *Love at 20* explodes.

Xu Zhen
Twenty, 2015
Produced by MadeIn Company
1 min

Shouting

In 1998, Xu Zhen filmed people streaming past him on the busy squares of Shanghai during the rush hour. The masses push their way past the camera, hurrying forwards with determination. Then in the middle of this throng there suddenly comes a loud shout, followed by a spiteful laugh. The crowd is startled and

steps back, irritated. In this work, Xu Zhen focuses on the role of art in breaking through the compliant behaviour of a mass of people, which has different connotations in China than in Europe. The subversive joke of public action strikes at the heart of social and political contexts in the metropolis of Shanghai, which since the 1990s has developed into a booming capitalist megacity.

Xu Zhen
Shouting, 1998
4 min

MadeIn Curved Vase

Porcelain is a key part of Chinese culture and has been exported for centuries. Great interest in Europe resulted early on in attempts to copy the production of this unique material, with success only being achieved after 1700. The MadeIn Company offers us a vase based on classic and traditional Chinese ceramics. Executed with perfect craftsmanship, it also refers to the significance of the object within Chinese art. The vase is of the *Vault-of-Heaven* type, yet it has been stripped of

its function due to the long neck being twisted round by 90°. It is finely decorated with magpies, which in China are said to promise joy and wedded bliss. The concept of the firmament was pertinent in early views of the world and played an important role spiritually. 'Vault of the Heavens' is, however, also an old and thoroughly romantic description of the sky, in which the planets, stars and signs of the zodiac are seen as reflections of one's own life, and are thought to make readings of one's fate possible.

Xu Zhen

MadeIn Curved Vase - Vault-of-Heaven Vase with Magpie Pattern, Qianlong Period, Qing Dynasty, 2014
Produced by MadeIn Company

Xu Zhen

Xu Zhen was born in 1977 in Shanghai, where—following an intense rebellious phase in Beijing at the end of the 1990s—he now lives and works again. He is an artist, curator, producer and director of the MadeIn Company, which has extended its activities in recent years from China to the whole world. Xu Zhen does not fly and rarely leaves Shanghai—thus demonstrating that long-distance travel is no longer necessary in order to discover the world and be active at a global level. The internet is for him an important channel of information and communication, and also plays a key role in his work. In various ways he makes use of the fact that information and goods are available at any time and any place on the worldwide web. Irony and sarcasm are typical of his works; they also display a certain radicality that allows him to pose critical and provocative questions about social 'truths', and also about art and the art market.

MadeIn Company

The name 'MadeIn Company' is ambiguous: on the one hand, it refers by analogy to the designation of origin 'Made in China'. At the same time, it also stands for the sounds "meiding gongsi", meaning 'Company without Borders' in Chinese. The members of the company generally remain in the background, the focus is much more—as the exhibition title *Corporate. Xu Zhen (Produced by MadeIn Company)* indicates—on the brand of Xu Zhen, who founded MadeIn Company as its boss and driving force in 2009. As an art enterprise it is not a normal company. Jointly with the MadeIn Company a website was set up, a gallery established, exhibitions were organised and publications marketed; for the future they have even planned their own museum, while close collaboration is sought with advertising companies. The MadeIn Company is active on conceptual, commercial, virtual and global levels. Its employees are made up of an international team who appear together in performances, design a broad palette of art products and take

care of their production. In this exhibition, the commercial character of the company is addressed as a theme for the first time in an art space. In this way, Xu Zhen directly questions the value of art and the meaning behind the uniqueness of a work. The artist is the brand, and the artwork a product—together they follow the laws of the art market, which becomes their artistic medium. Within this context, the company forms a very clear link with Pop Art, not least in flagging up mechanisms of a consumerist society by using humour and wit, so pulling off some very subtle trickery.

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